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B R E A K T H E S K Y

an exploration of ethics
with swords and superheroes

KRIS MIRANDA

Honors Thesis

Department of Philosophy

Colby College

May 2009

HONORS ADVISOR: Jill P. Gordon

READER: James C. Barrett

READER: Lydia L. Moland

For superheroes,
for the people who tell their stories,
for everyone who, like me, needs them,
and for everyone who ever has and ever will.

A version of this thesis, *Break the Sky*, was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Philosophy by Kris Miranda on May 17, 2009.

Advisor: Jill P. Gordon

BREAK THE SKY
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FOREWORD

I have children, I love children, and imaginations need food. The world is big. The world is wonderful. But it is also terrifying. It is an ocean full of paper boats. For many children, the only nobility, the only joy, the only strength and sacrifice that they see firsthand comes in fiction. Even when children have plenty of joy in their lives, good stories reinforce it. As long as I'm dealing in honesty, I may as well admit that I have been more influenced (as a person) by my childhood readings of Tolkien and Lewis than I have been by any philosophers I read in college and grad school. The events and characters in Narnia and Middle Earth shaped my ideals, my dreams, my goals. Kant just annoyed me.

— N.D. Wilson

I don't really know who N.D. Wilson is (and this is definitely not a story for the kiddies), and I didn't read *The Lord of the Rings* before the first movie came out (oh, get over it), nor have I read the books since, but Dan Cohen e-mailed this quotation to the Reuman Reading Group once, and I think Wilson's got it right. I don't offer his words as a guide to what's in the pages that follow, but they get across *why* what's in these pages isn't like any other honors thesis the department has seen. I don't mean to sound arrogant: if anything, there were a lot of moments when I wondered if writing a story, without doing much in the way of research, was somehow less honors-worthy than the work being done by Jason and Carlie (my fellow class-of-09-ers who wrote theses).

But I did it anyway—I did my thesis as a work of fantasy fiction—and I'm glad that my belief in it trumped my doubts and vague sense of guilt, because stories are the reason I became a philosophy major. Or rather, the complicated and compelling and often harrowing lives of the people in my favorite stories are the reason I first became interested in ethics as something more concrete than the Ten Commandments (or whatever), the reason I started to actually ask myself what kind of life I want to lead and what kind of person I want to be.

I'm not Thumos, or Valencia, or anyone else you'll meet in here. And they haven't quite given me an answer to those questions—how should I live, who should I be. But they've all helped me get a little closer. And maybe—just maybe, if I did this right—they'll help you, too.

Now don't get me wrong. If you're reading this and you're not one of my professors or my friends or someone in my family, then you're probably a philosophy student. And if you're a philosophy student, I don't want you to think that I'm trying to encourage you not to take ethics courses. You should definitely take ethics courses. But they won't be enough. You will not walk away from Lydia Moland's Moral Philosophy class having become a better person, at least not just because you read Kant and Mill and Aristotle. You will not walk away from one of Jim Behuniak's classes on East Asian philosophy having gotten any closer to enlightenment, at least not just because you read Confucius or Hakuin or an early Buddhist dialogue. You won't even walk away from Jill Gordon's Existentialism course having become authentic or free, at least not just because you read Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and Heidegger (especially not Heidegger, that dense and pretentious...).

Not that stories will do any of that for you, either, least of all the mess you're holding. But put ethical theory classes and good (or even just decent) stories together, and... well, OK, you still won't be a better person. Sorry. But to mildly oversimplify it, the stories will help you contextualize the theory, and the theory will give you a vocabulary to talk about the crises and decisions and—most importantly—personalities in the stories. And for me, at least, stories, and thinking hard about everything in them, came first. To be blunt, they're the reason I give a shit about ethical theory at all.

Mostly these were sword-and-sorcery novels by the likes of R.A. Salvatore, David Gemmell, Matthew Woodring Stover, and Paul S. Kemp. Their "anti-heroic" characters in particular, and their more dangerous and anger- and violence-prone protagonists, had a way of broadening the horizons of what I considered "moral" or worthy, even while maintaining the appeal of certain virtues that might be thought central or fundamental, namely courage, integrity, and loyalty.

Of course, I can't forget the most iconic figures of speculative fiction: superheroes. Written

well, whether in their home medium of the comic book/graphic novel or in television and film incarnations, they can do everything that other fictional characters can. And even more than the characters in sword-and-sorcery novels, they derive much of their appeal from the spectacular battles they tend to embroil themselves in. Some people hold this against them, but not me. In the 1993 winning essay of the Elie Wiesel Prize in Ethics, Jendi B. Reiter writes:

Heroes like Superman do not glorify violence; on the contrary, violence is always potentially glorified already, because violence involves danger and danger is an opportunity for courage. Super-heroes are an indispensable part of a child's ethical development because the image of the super-hero turns the appeal of violence into the appeal of strength in the service of righteousness, turning brute courage into moral courage.

— “Who Killed Superman?” (available at <http://www.eliewieselfoundation.org>)

I don't really like to talk about “righteousness,” and if I'm being honest, little of the violence in *Break the Sky* is about courage, but the basic point stands that flash and substance can go together, and produce a whole greater than the sum of its parts; that fantastical elements can actually amplify the serious stuff (as if fantasy—dreams—can't be “serious,” but I digress...). You can see this in the 2008 movies *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* and in 2009's *Star Trek* (not a superhero thing, I know, but the argument extends to all good genre fiction). For every WHOA moment created by special effects or kick-ass stunt work, there's a “smaller,” quieter character moment that makes the WHOA stuff matter. As jaw-dropping as the David vs. Goliath, all-phasers-blazing last stand of the U.S.S. *Kelvin* is, we only care because of the brave sacrifices of George Kirk and his captain, and because of the mingled joy and sorrow of Winona Kirk as, fleeing onboard a medical shuttle, she gives birth to her and George's son, James Tiberius. On the flip side, as wrenching as the angst of Bruce Wayne is when he wonders if his one-man war to save the soul of Gotham City costs more in blood and tears than his noble intentions are worth, his story isn't complete without his soaring glide through the Hong Kong night sky and his chasing down the Joker on that crazy, cannon-armed motorcycle.

Granted, this doesn't necessarily say anything about *Break the Sky*, but like the Wilson quotation, it tells you why I wrote it.

In early 2005 (I think), like many high school seniors desperate for money to pay for college, I read *The Fountainhead* for its essay contest. And because I hadn't yet figured out that despite a certain overlap, literature and theory do have distinct roles in ethical discourse, I wasn't quite sure why it bothered me that Ayn Rand used her characters not just to tell me what they thought, or even what *she* thought, but what she thought I should think. I wasn't quite sure why it bothered me that a lot of the dialogue was pretty explicit (and almost invariably heavy-handed) philosophical argument. *The Fountainhead* is in many ways theory masquerading as a story. “Masquerading” is a strong word, since Rand didn't intend it to be anything else than what it is, and since there is undeniable artistry in much of the book. But as well-crafted and powerful as it is, I don't think it can be considered a complete success as a piece of literature, partly because of those conversations that take you out of the narrative: out of the world Rand clearly put so much into crafting, and into the realm of exposition and explication, where the ideas themselves start to matter more than the story, more than the people.

And ideas, of course, only matter *because* of people.

It turns out, I think, that I have not succeeded entirely in keeping such conversations out of *Break the Sky*. But more than Rand did, I have tried to keep them rooted in relatively personal circumstances. I have tried to write this story in such a way that the ideas in play are seen to be at stake primarily for the characters, not for me. Because you already know that they're at stake for me. Even if I wasn't a philosophy major, you'd know, because why the hell else would I put in the time and effort to produce 30,000 words of something that isn't “real”? Why else than because to me it *is* real, and because I believe that anything that is said or done in these pages *does* matter.

So, yeah. You know that. You don't need Val and Thumos to tell it to you. And they're not

interested in telling *you* a damn thing. They have their own problems, and *that's* what I want you to care about. Not that I didn't care about the protagonists of *The Fountainhead*. Howard Roark is a total badass, and Dominique Francon's natural aristocracy complements him perfectly. And yet there is the other major reason *The Fountainhead*-as-story doesn't work as well as it might: it ends too happily. I know, I know, happy endings get a bad rap these days. But it ends happily because Rand says that "it must." And we all know that it's very rarely that easy, and certainly never when the stakes are as high as they are for Roark (and Rand). Martha Nussbaum gets at the importance of that idea, and its importance in stories, more eloquently than I ever could:

[A] whole tragic drama, unlike a schematic philosophical example making use of a similar story, is capable of tracing the history of a complex pattern of deliberation, showing its roots in a way of life and looking forward to its consequences in that life. As it does all of this, it lays open to view the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer difficulty of actual human deliberation.... A tragedy does not display the dilemmas of its characters as pre-articulated; it shows them searching for the morally salient; and it forces us, as interpreters, to be similarly active.

— *The Fragility of Goodness*

Like my favorite authors, and probably like almost all good ones (I'm not saying that I'm up there), I put my characters through the wringer, and it's no spoiler to tell you that no one comes out like they went in. Victory, especially moral victory, doesn't mean much if it's inevitable, and though no one likes victory to have too dear a cost, an easy victory doesn't usually mean much, either.

What I do still really like about *The Fountainhead* is Rand's uncompromising vision of an unpopular ethical worldview. Even if you don't agree with everything Howard Roark says, if you're reasonably open-minded you should be able to understand how a human being could hold such opinions, and even if *that's* hard, you can see how his holding such opinions informs and fuels his "objectively" impressive artistic genius, and how the centrality of those ideals to his personality makes him the almost superhuman figure Rand portrays him as. He is remarkable and magnificent *because* he sees people and the world in a way that most canonical figures in moral philosophy don't. In isolation from his story, the things he says would probably be a lot more abrasive and at least a little more off-putting than they already are, but because his life and world and the people in his orbit are so vividly realized, such ideas are easier to take seriously and to interrogate in earnest.

Though much of my project has changed since I first proposed it—originally it was going to be a "Nietzschean superhero story," then it was a more broadly "existentialist superhero story" because I hadn't read much Nietzsche, then it was Nietzschean again because those were the ideas coming into play after all (especially once I was in Conor Roddy's Nietzsche seminar), and now it just doesn't fit any easy label—two central aims have remained. One was, of course, to do ethics in a story instead of in a zillion-page academic paper. The other, because of my fondness for anti-heroes (and Nietzsche) and my interest in violence (mostly in personal combat but also in literally explosive phenomena like thunderstorms or, um, starship battles), was to present an alternative to what I somewhat lazily call "traditional" ethics, by which I mean Enlightenment-based systems like classical utilitarianism or Kantian duty-based ethics. I wanted to use the appeal of superheroic spectacle and the literary device of really getting into someone else's head to present an unconventional, even scary worldview that the hypothetical average reader might understand or even sympathize with despite herself—or maybe because, upon reflection, she did find something of value in it.

Wonder if it worked. Maybe you can tell me.

Lux Mentis Scientia, and all that.

- Kris Miranda

Mayflower Hill, Waterville, Maine

May 18, 2009

THANK YOU

...first and foremost to **Jill Gordon**, my advisor, and **James Barrett** and **Lydia Moland**, my “secondary” readers, for taking a chance on one hell of a long shot, for helping me stay focused enough on big ideas to actually make this thing work, for asking the questions that I didn’t know were staring me in the face, for teaching me in “regular” classes before I talked them into taking on this train wreck, for apparently liking it and giving me periodic ego shots to keep me going, for the enormous generosity of their time and their thoughts, and for being, I like to think, my friends.

- I met Jill as a classmate in Intermediate Greek. Before I realized she was one of the senior members of my intended major department, I was content to know that she was a smart grown-up sharing at least a little of the mind-numbing pain I was feeling over all those MFing conjugations. Much later, her understandable skepticism regarding the first pitch of this project would force me to clarify it to myself, and when I’d finally done that, she graciously took a leap of faith. By January 2009, stressed out from being in a play and really starting to feel my senior-dom, I was thinking about backing out. Jill, who by this point found herself enjoying the story more than I was enjoying writing it, gently encouraged me to persevere. I’m so glad she did, and I’m glad to have earned her confidence.
- James has technically been a part of my Colby journey longer than just about anyone, and a better traveling companion you’d be hard-pressed to find. There was the Ancient World cluster in fall 2005, a rec letter for an ill-fated CIA internship application when I was a sophomore, a trip to Greece in January 2008, and then this. Through it all, his enthusiasm for what he does has been infectious; his wit has simultaneously kept me entertained and kept me from taking myself *too* seriously; and his easy friendliness and pretty much always laid-back demeanor have always put me at ease.
- It would not be entirely accurate to say that Lydia came into my life like a lightning strike, if only because of the suddenness suggested by that image, but she’s without question left an appropriately *Holy Crap! Didn’t See That Coming* impression. I don’t think I ever told her “Welcome to Colby.” But now I can’t (and don’t want to) imagine Colby or my time here without her, two of the toughest but most rewarding classes I’ve ever taken, and the patience and moral support she’s never hesitated to offer, far beyond the calls of professorial duty, in this most harrowing of years—for the College as a whole, and for me personally, being both a senior and a pathological brooder.

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...to **Dan Cohen**, for five semesters of the companionship and idea-testing grounds of the Robert Reuman Reading (and Eating) Group, and for always keeping me on my toes—although I’m still not sure I appreciate that “I’m not voting for Obama (...because I already did)” scare.

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...to *The Colby Echo*, for Tuesday nights.

Suzanne Merkelson put up with my ramblings for a year. **Ben Herbst** hired me at the end of it, and thereby gave me a *place*, and one of the things I'll miss the very most about my life on the Hill. **Chelsea Eakin** and Suz eventually gave me a promotion. The news team I hold especially dear: to vastly simplify and understate what they mean to me, **Beth Ponsot** and **Alex Richards** always made me feel useful, and **Anna Kelemen** and **Allie Ehrenreich** always made me smile.

...to **Kathleen Fallon** and **Diana DelleChiaie**, who also always made me smile, and who put up with so much of my endless bitching during my junior year.

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...to **Jess Stern**, for commiserating and laughing and talking about everything else philosophy-related.

...to many others I don't have room to name, and everyone else who didn't just laugh at me when I answered "so what's your thesis about?" with "I'm trying to write an existentialist superhero story."

...and to **the Hush Sound**, for my title.

BREAK THE SKY

PART ONE

Chapter 1
A Reunion

THUMOS

Androkles has always been the best of us.

He stands there like a hero out of children's stories, right down to the lion's mane of hair, the eyes that pierce like blades of ice, and the archaic gold-chased armor, shining. He is massive in the chest, long of limb, with surprisingly nimble hands that can wield those battle-axes as if they weigh no more than knives. His every battle has ended in victory. His every step and leap and twirl and strike flows with the ease of inevitability. Here is a killer born who could just as easily have been a dancer, and very often is both. Sometimes, in his eyes you see death. Other times, joy. Occasionally you see them together, but not as often as you'd think. And he has a laugh that you might imagine a god would have, a laugh that can match thunder or defy it, as he so wills.

Not that he's laughing now, looming before us at the center of the bridge.

How could he, when he knows we're here to kill him?

"Thumos," he greets me.

"Androkles."

"Still bald, I see."

"I am." Part of me is glad for the familiar banter. But mostly he delays the inevitable—whatever that may be. "It suits me."

"If you say so." His gaze moves over my right shoulder. "Aeron."

Behind me, I only hear Aeron shift her weight from foot to foot. I wonder if her face betrays anything.

Androkles smirks the slightest bit. His eyes move across to my left. "Sefu."

"Big Man." Sefu doesn't bother hiding the sadness I know we all feel. And though we all feel it, that he is so unguarded throws me off balance. Aeron breathes in sharply. Even Androkles

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flinches, just a bit around the eyes.

It's a long moment.

"You'd think it'd have the decency to be dark and stormy out, for something like this," Sefu finally says, sounding embarrassed.

The look in Androkles's eyes says, *That's more like it*. More like the past, more like our days together at the Hall, when everything still made sense. Though it hasn't been so long, to think of us in those days is to think of children. And outside of royal families, what child expects to have to kill an elder sibling?

"Barely six years since the Hall. Four since we saw each other last," Androkles muses. He tilts his head. "Where is Valencia?"

"You know where she is," Aeron snaps.

Again he falters. This is unlike him. Aeron is perhaps being unfair. Androkles must know that Valencia commands the cohort behind us, on our end of the bridge. Still, it wouldn't be unreasonable for her to be up here with us. A contest of champions in the old way this may be, but whatever royal blood is in her veins Valencia is one of us: she is of the Hall of the Sword and Fist. She has every right to stand as a champion herself, not to mention the past we five share.

As matters stand, someone decided on Valencia's behalf that she is too important to risk in open battle against Androkles the Slayer.

"Maybe it's... better this way," Androkles says. His face brightens. "She never did take losing well."

"Shut up, man," Sefu sighs.

Androkles seems to straighten. "Sefu—"

"Shut *up!* Why, man? Why are you doing this?"

Androkles looks genuinely confused. "I don't understand."

"Let's just take last week," Aeron jumps in. "A hundred of Val's people killed in one battle.

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By you. By you! Somehow I don't think she'd care to see you."

"A hundred, yes," Androkles says. Again he seems to straighten, even though he's already standing at his full height. "All warriors. They died well."

"They didn't have to die at all," Aeron says, her voice strained. Now she's the one sounding confused. Confused like Valencia, confused like me. "This is a war of aggression."

"All wars are wars of aggression, Aer," Androkles replies. His eyes narrow.

"Don't patronize me." Aeron steps forward, into my peripheral vision. "You know what I mean. This was unprovoked."

"All relative," Androkles says. "And all unimportant."

Aeron stares. "What?"

"You think I care for the little prince's cause?" Androkles waves a hand dismissively. "Trifles, he fights over. Unprovoked or not, I could care little less."

"Then why?" Sefu asks again. "Why sign up for this? Why not Val? Us!"

"He promised me good fighting." Androkles shrugs. "I go where the sword bids me. You know this."

And so we do. Four years have brought tale after tale to our ears of mighty Androkles's exploits across the land. His has been an improbably active career. The Raid of the Sapphire Keep. Breaking the Siege of High Oak. And at this very spot, four years ago, the Holding of Thunder Bridge. Wherever there was blood and fire, it has seemed these years, there too was Androkles. His allegiances were fluid. Sometimes he would fight for one man directly after fighting for that man's sworn enemy. No one ever protested this, though. He'd be a fool who would refuse the blades of the Slayer.

We have been content before now to follow his adventures without concern, even to receive word of them with interest and occasional joy. How could we not be pleased at the glories of an old friend? His travels and battles have made for the grandest stories, and because we know Androkles,

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we can guess that the exaggerations of the bards are small indeed, perhaps smaller than they themselves sometimes think. But before now, he has never happened to harm the interests of the Family Corvus, save in indirect ways he could not have predicted, mostly involving Corvid's treasury in one obscure way or another. We had thought this deliberate, a concession from his battle-loving heart to a friend. It would seem, though, that it has all been a fortunate four-year coincidence. And now it comes to an end.

"So," I say. "To the death?" That is, of course, the agreement between our respective commanders: one side's champion falls—or champions fall, in our case—and that side walks away from Thunder Bridge. This war has taken a heavy toll on both sides in just a few months. A pitched battle here would do no one good. So with winter fast approaching, this is it. Each side's mercenaries from the Hall will decide how this season's campaign ends. But maybe we can play this differently. Maybe we can send Androkles into the river and he can fake his death. Maybe we can—

"We can do no less," Androkles says. "I owe you my fullest effort as a warrior. And I demand the same from you."

Damn.

Not that I should be surprised. Fighting is his life. It's not that it's all he knows; it's that it's all he cares about. The test. The thrill. If he doesn't fight to kill or die, he isn't... he isn't Androkles.

My hands find my side-sword and dirk. I hear Aeron's twin short swords rasp from their scabbards, and the heavy *swoosh* of Sefu taking warm-up swings with his long-hafted mace. The Big Man already holds those axes. I wonder how many limbs and heads they've severed over the years. They should be permanently stained red by now, if the world made any sense. But it doesn't. Because here I am, here we all are, up against Androkles. Up against the Slayer. Up against our friend.

No point dwelling on it now.

And so: *forward*.

B R E A K T H E S K Y

~

VALENCIA

I should be up there fighting with them, not sitting on a horse hundreds of feet back from the center of the bridge, fighting an urge to look away. Fight it I do, though: I owe them no less.

Thumos takes the lead, Aeron and Sefu a split second behind him. They surround Androkles, but he has already become a whirlwind. By the odd blend of berserker's abandon and acrobat's poise in their movements, I can tell that they've all fallen into the Dance, that most wondrous of skills we learned at the Hall of the Sword and Fist. It's why fighters such as us are so sought after. Most people—Thumos would say, *ordinary people*—simply can't move like that, can't fight like that. They can fight hot, or they can fight cold, but they can't do both. We can. I'm not sure how it works or what exactly happens to us when we do it, but whatever it is, after four years of the Hall, and another six since then honing the skills we learned there, it comes to us like breathing.

And *through* breathing, of course. One of the few things I do know about the Dance as a physical phenomenon is that we could not have mastered it without those countless hours of meditation, those breath control exercises our instructors swore made our minds sharper and our bodies stronger, and brought them into greater harmony with each other.

Something about the time we've trained and fought together, in and out of the Dance, has attuned us to each other's patterns of movement and breath almost as well as to our own. There, now: Thumos breathes in, quick-stepping—out, with a parry—in, as he takes another, more careful step—and out, striking. He misses.

Of course he misses.

Because Androkles... well, Androkles is the best of us in moments such as these. When a blow comes at him, he rarely needs to block, rarely needs to parry, because most of the time he is simply not there. And if he is not *there*, where your blade is, then chances are he is *here*, inside your reach, with his own blade ready to open your flesh as surely as most people open the doors to their

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own homes.

Thumos escapes such a fate, barely. He wisely dives to one side when his slash hits nothing but air, and Androkles's swing—from *behind* Thumos, he moved so fast—only shatters the bridge's stone instead of Thumos's skull.

It goes on thus for a bit longer, with no sign of the tempo changing.

And then, just like that, Sefu is tossed aside, Aeron is kicked sprawling. I barely have time to be surprised.

Androkles and Thumos both freeze; I can tell that Thumos is taking stock of the others. Aeron and Sefu are both still moving; they are, I think, fine. No, wait—Aer is trying to get up, but... I can't tell from here, but I think one of her legs is broken. And Sefu... he crawls over to Aeron clumsily, awkwardly, and one of his arms drags along limp and useless, broken like Aeron's leg, I would guess. It's hard for me to be sure, but I think that arm is bleeding. Androkles must have cleaved through to the bone with an ax. Lucky for Sefu, not through the bone itself.

There is a subtle—so subtle—shift in Thumos's stance. I'm not even entirely sure that it happens, except that Androkles clearly notices it, too. He has one tell: a twirl of one or both of his axes when he notices that *something* has changed. It has saved my life more than once, in moments too short for him to give voice to a warning, or when he simply doesn't know how.

He twirls one ax now, then the other.

Then both. Then one, the other, the first—the first again—both... he won't stop.

That's new.

THUMOS

Sefu takes a blow on his arm—Androkles shoulders him aside—

Aeron takes a kick to the knee—I hear something give—Androkles spins into another kick—

Aeron goes flying—

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They're down, both of them.

Androkles stops moving. Our eyes meet.

I am not pleased.

Sefu is crawling to Aeron. Aer can't get up, won't stop trying. Sefu makes a noise. Aeron makes a noise. Pain? Anger? Exertion? I can't tell.

I am not pleased.

He did that to them. *Androkles*. We were—we are?—*friends*. How many drills and wargames did we endure together? Some were truly life and death! And the few jobs we all took together after graduation and before Aeron, Sefu and I signed on with Corvid... this isn't right. None of this is right. We shouldn't be fighting each other at all. He shouldn't be *breaking* them...

I. Am. Not. Pleased.

He is twirling his axes. One, then the other, then the first—

Something in his eyes. Something... quiet.

I notice a pain in my hands. I'm gripping my weapons too tightly. I loosen up. I deepen my stance. I will myself further into the Dance.

Androkles opens his mouth—

—smiles, and—

“Alright.”

I wonder what he means.

But right now, with the others down and bleeding, I don't care. Once more, *forward*—

Into the storm.

VALENCIA

Around me, heralds and soldiers gasp.

Thumos is moving, fighting, as I've never seen him move and fight before. He still manages

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to fight both hot and cold, but if anything he's taking both extremes even further, and with him, so is Androkles. I have to ease myself a bit into the Dance just to keep track.

Even so doing, I can't rightly say that I see them in motion. I see them in one pair of stances, then another, then another, no wasted movements, not even really the blur of speed. Just one exchange, an image before me, then the next, as if I've jumped forward in time. That inhuman economy, that superhuman efficiency is the cold, the *cold*.

And the stances themselves, the fullness of each extension, the ringing and screeching of steel on steel as every other sound fades into nothing, the way every exchange seems to take both of them closer and closer to being off-balance until it I think they must have long ago crossed that line, yet they clearly haven't—that pushing beyond all reasonable, all imaginable limitation, is the hot, the *hot*.

No ground seems to be given or taken. They just circle and traverse from one railing to the other, throwing flashes of light from their weapons, Thumos's black cloak flaring out like wings every few moments, Androkles's breastplate catching the sun just so and gleaming with a golden fire.

For this brief moment, I can almost believe that they are equals.

But Androkles, being Androkles, finally ends this dance, and again I don't even see how: I just see Thumos over a dozen feet away, wrenching himself out of a tumble to crouch like a runner before a race, both blades held in close guard positions.

And suddenly, a bellow, from neither of the combatants—

“*Thumos!*”

THUMOS

I feel something slam into my chest as I whip around, trying to catch Androkles on a backswing—

He isn't there—I think he's crouching—no, he's kicking me, uncharacteristically off-balance, his torso a straight line with his leg, one hand brushing the wood—

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The blow sends me through the air—I spin once just from the momentum—

I land. I bring my weapons in close.

I hear Sefu snarl out his agony, and my vision seems to *narrow*.

I must end this.

Deeper into the Dance—I can, I must, I *will*—

And then, out of the corner of my eye—Sefu—sitting up, taking his heavy mace in both hands—

“*Thumos!*”

He throws it.

VALENCIA

I find that I am fully in the Dance, and the world slows to a crawl.

Sefu explodes into motion, tossing his mace into the air.

Thumos’s left arm shoots forward, and from it, his dirk.

Sefu’s mace arcs over Androkles’s head.

Androkles easily twists, his right shoulder going back, and Thumos’s dirk flies harmlessly by.

Thumos is coming forward, left arm still extended as he leans—recklessly—into a crouch.

Androkles’s waist comes back to neutral, and he keeps twisting, and he throws his hips behind the motion, bringing his right arm around with the momentum and sending his left arm back to counterbalance.

Sefu’s mace lands in Thumos’s outstretched hand, inches from the wood of the bridge.

Androkles’s right-hand ax sweeps in at Thumos, certain to be in his range soon—

—and Thumos snaps upright, with Sefu’s mace leading the way.

Androkles’s ax and Sefu’s mace meet, and suddenly fragments of steel fill the air.

Thumos keeps coming forward, through the slivers of metal, and red appears in a dozen spots

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on his chest and face, as his right arm pumps forward and both of his feet leave the ground, and he is parallel to the bridge, a human spear.

Androkles's left arm snaps around—

Too late.

Thumos's sword goes through Androkles's chest, and Androkles's left arm spasms so that it is the flat of his ax and not the blade's edge that smacks Thumos, sending him sprawling.

For a few seconds, no one is standing.

Then Sefu gets up, slowly, painstakingly, first to one knee, with Aeron's arm around his shoulders. He straightens, slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly, and both of them are on their feet.

Thumos pushes himself up to his knees. He looks to the others, and then at Androkles. They seem to follow his gaze.

Androkles isn't moving.

Thumos moves to one knee, and keeps staring at Androkles, but nothing changes. Finally he rises to his full height.

They all just stand and stare for a few moments. No one seems to be saying anything. Prince Leandro's force on the other side of the bridge stands still as an army of statues and just as silent.

"Is he dead?" one of my heralds asks.

Hardly. He'll live forever now. I can see it in the set of Thumos's shoulders. I can feel it in my own chest. It's not just the slaughter of Corvian citizens; our historians will take care of that. But every soldier I train, every battalion I lead, every strike I land, every battle I win—all will bear his mark. Even now, whether they know it or not, the men and women around and behind me have been touched by everything I learned at his side and on the wrong ends of his weapons through four years at the Hall. Having seen what I've seen today, that will only become more true: when the final, finest hour of the greatest warrior ever to step on the field of battle is burned into my vision even when I close my eyes—when everything I do, he could have done better, he *did* do better at some

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point in the last ten years, and when I know now that I can never do anything without wondering how he would have done it had he lived—how can anything I do *not* carry his magic?

Is he dead?

I want to tell my herald what a stupid question this is. Instead, I say:

“Yes.”

He wastes no time. “He’s dead!” the herald cries. “The Slayer is slain! Androkles is dead!”

A roaring cheer erupts from my troops, and trumpets, flutes and drums sound an impromptu fanfare.

Thumos and the others are still just standing there. As the cheers go on, they seem to notice. Thumos turns and begins to walk in our direction. Aeron and Sefu stay with Androkles’s body, but I see their lips moving, I vaguely hear their voices. They’re calling to Thumos. I can’t make out what they’re saying, but oh, I can guess. For my part, I won’t waste time making the same request.

I dismount and take a few steps forward, beckoning to my honor guard and heralds to assume the appropriate formation around me: we will have to speak with the prince about the terms of his retreat, among other things.

The cheers die down as Thumos reaches grass and stone again. He looks much the same as he did this morning—stern, strong, sad—before he went to meet Androkles. Except for the blood on his clothing and blades, of course, the latter of which he plunges into the dirt now. He doesn’t clean his hands on the grass, as he usually does, before continuing to approach.

Cheers again, less deafening, from the soldiers immediately surrounding us.

“Who announced that Androkles fell?” Thumos asks.

Oh, dear.

The herald steps forward, beaming like a boy meeting a knight for the first time. “I, sir. A magnificent feat you’ve accomplished, and I’m honored to have seen it. I will tell this day’s story to my—”

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He is interrupted by Thumos's fist.

I half expect the noise of the punch to echo like the first time Androkles struck my training club with his, breaking them both and sending a numbing shock up my arm, but instead there is only a crunching that makes me wince, accompanied by a spray of blood. My herald makes a sound that is half grunt, half gurgle, and then he falls.

Thumos says nothing more before turning around and walking back the way he came.

"Get him up," I say to one of my bodyguards. "We go to meet the prince."

THUMOS

When it is over—when the *elsewhere* of the Dance leaves me—I am vaguely surprised to find myself standing. I think, maybe, this disbelief is my way of distracting myself from the sight of him there, his blood pooling, that archaic breastplate punctured all the way through for the first and last time, an ax shattered, shattered, shattered...

"Thumos," comes Aeron's voice. "Snap out of it."

"Thank you," I think I say, but I can't tell if I'm just imagining the words; she doesn't seem to react to them.

I know that heroes aren't real, but this was a man to make you believe in stories again. To make you believe in glory. To make you believe that there are dragons out there that need slaying, and that a single strong warrior could do the job, save the day, win well-deserved honor and love.

He killed hundreds with little or no thought, yes. He gloried in devastation, thrived on havoc. There are many who would—who *will*—thank us for what we have done, and not without understandable cause. And yet...

"This is fucked up," Sefu says. Suddenly he convulses, gags—swallows hard, grimacing. I want to retch, too, but my stomach just feels heavy, like I might never want to eat again. I keep a hand on his shoulder to steady him.

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And then I hear one of Valencia's men shouting something. I only catch the last bit:

Androkles is dead!

The cohort's cheer almost matches an Androklean laugh.

The next thing I know I'm halfway between the center of the bridge and the end Valencia is waiting on, and Aeron and Sefu are shouting at me not to do what they think I'm about to do, which I certainly am.

Valencia is standing there with her honor guard, all shadow-black uniforms with silver trim, and polished breastplates more streamlined than the one on Androkles, with helmets, forearm bracers and greaves to match. For her part Valencia's face is a study in neutrality, but her tawny eyes tell another story.

I halt once I'm off the bridge, to stab my blades into the dirt. Blades that have just pierced the flesh of a god are, for the moment at least, too *worthy* for what I'm about to do. Besides, Valencia would probably prefer that I not kill one of her people. I will agree with her, at least, that there has been enough death today.

Another round of cheers when I reach the entourage. I have patience enough to wait for them to stop. It is said that delays make the eventual gratification that much sweeter.

"Who announced that Androkles fell?" I ask.

A herald steps forward and starts blabbering but I don't care what words are coming out of his mouth. The only things in the world right now are his face and my fist, and there's a satisfying crunch I both feel and hear as they meet. When the rest of the world comes back into my field of vision everyone else is inching away from the herald, on his back in the grass, moaning. I hope he's still fairly conscious; anything less would be too good for him.

I return to the others, retrieving, cleaning, and sheathing my weapons on the way.

Androkles did not see the world as most see it.

He feared nothing and no one. He held his happiness in his own hands. He knew who he

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was. He was mighty, glorious, until now unconquerable—the strongest man I’ve ever known, in every way that matters.

How could that be wrong?

Chapter 2
First Day

10 years before the fall of Androkles

On the day he turned eighteen years old, Sefu Tau looked around, striding into the courtyard roughly in the middle of his class of twenty, all looking to be about his age. He hadn't expected that almost half of the others would be women. This was a strange part of the world, he decided, where women could be warriors. But as he appraised his company, he decided, too, that he wasn't going to complain. A pale, thin blonde dressed all in black, radiating poise; a brunette moving with a strikingly easy grace but also looking entirely too soft for the battlefield; a tall woman even darker of skin than Sefu, and, he had a hunch, almost as tough; standing next to him, a shorter girl with scary eyes and thighs thick with muscle... and all of them impressive enough in various ways for Sefu to be pretty sure he wouldn't be bored these next four years away from the city.

But the men—what men? All Sefu could see were boys.

Except for that one.

The one with unkempt hair like a lion's mane, the one who towered over even the hard-looking fucker who was apparently their teacher on this first day. The one who was smiling like there was a joke he'd heard yesterday and hadn't forgotten and kind of wanted to tell everyone else but figured maybe they weren't interested. The one with such massive muscles around his neck that he didn't seem to actually have a neck, the one with hands that Sefu was pretty sure could crush his head without any trouble. Shit, those hands...

The big man noticed Sefu staring at him.

And then he winked.

Sefu blinked, and then quickly looked back at the Hard-Looking Fuckler, who had started talking.

“Welcome to the Hall of the Sword and Fist,” Hard-Looking Fuckler said. “You already know that our graduates are finest fighters in the world. That is why you're here. You are not yet among the finest, but you want to be, and we have permitted you to attend this institution because we believe you just might have the balls to get there.”

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Sefu glanced at the girl with scary eyes. “Tough luck for you, huh?” he joked.

She didn’t look at him. “I can always rip off yours,” she said flatly. Sefu was vaguely surprised to realize that he had no ready response.

“...groups of five for most of the time you’re here,” Hard-Looking Fucker was saying. “You two!” Sefu realized that Hard-Looking Fucker was pointing at him, and at Scary Eyes. “Tau and Brava.”

“Huh?” Sefu said.

“Sir!” Scary Eyes Brava said.

“You’re both in group one. The Lions. So are you, Corvus.” Hard-Looking Fucker pointed at the blonde in black. “And you two, from the islands.” He pointed at Big Man, and at another male student, entirely average-looking. Boring, even. Blank.

The five of them walked off to one side of the courtyard as Hard-Looking Fucker scratched his chin.

“Well,” he said, turning to face them again. “Since we have some island boys here... your people are not much for family names, am I right?”

Big Man shrugged. Blank shook his head.

“Something about glory attaching to the names of individual men, I’m given to understand,” Hard-Looking Fucker said. “Well, I like that.” He turned to face the rest of the class. “Yes, I like that. So we’ll use given names only. All four years you are at this school. No family names. The Hall doesn’t care what’s in your blood. Steel doesn’t care what’s in your blood. It’s all red, and it all flows the same, in you or out of you.”

Hard-Looking Fucker glanced back at the Lions once more—Corvus seemed to shift her weight a bit—then went back to giving out group assignments.

Sefu cleared his throat, and gave a little bow to the four who stood with him. “My name is Sefu,” he said. “I’m from Hadar. In the south.”

Scary Eyes looked hard at him, glanced around at the others, and finally said, “Aeron. From the Lakes. In the north.”

“Valencia,” the blonde chimed in quietly, but not quite timidly. “From Corvid.”

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Aeron narrowed her eyes. *“Valencia Corvus from Corvid. Wait. Doesn’t your family... isn’t your mother... a queen?”*

Valencia just looked at her feet for awhile, and finally said, “My aunt.”

“Oh,” Aeron said.

“Not that it matters,” Valencia said.

“Right,” Aeron said. There was an awkward silence.

Sefu cleared his throat and looked away from the women. “Your turn, Big Man.”

“I am Androkles,” Big Man announced, clapping a hand on Sefu’s shoulder. It hurt. A lot. Hoping that this didn’t show on his face, Sefu looked to the last of their little band.

“Thumos,” the entirely average-looking boy said.

Seriously. Average. It wasn’t just his face. He was neither tall nor short, neither powerfully built like Androkles and Sefu nor whipcord lean like Valencia. Even the length of his arms and legs said average. Even the tone of his voice said average. It wasn’t dull, or empty, or anything like that. Just... well, it could have been a lot more.

“From the islands, right?” Aeron was saying to Androkles and Thumos. “Different ones?”

“Leonis,” Androkles said, looking at Thumos.

Thumos did something weird with his head; it started as a nod to Aeron and ended as a shake facing Androkles. “I’m from Kalon.”

“Alright, then,” Sefu said. “So—”

Aeron elbowed him, and nodded at Hard-Looking Fucker, who had finished splitting up the class into four groups.

“And, children,” Hard-Looking Fucker said, “my name is Sturm. For the next six months, you belong to me, body and soul. I will break them.”

“Cheery,” Sefu muttered. He thought that maybe Aeron smirked.

“I will break them,” Sturm said again, “melt the pieces down, filter out the impurities, and re-forge

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them, with edges that will be able to cut through steel as easily as through wheat.”

“What?” Sefu wondered, and Aeron definitely did smirk this time.

“It’s not a perfect metaphor,” Valencia said in a tone that suggested general agreement.

Sefu noticed that the faces of Androkles and Thumos remained still as Sturm went on.

“But the shape you take, the balance of your hardness and your grace, the manner in which you will cut—whether you are savage like an ax or elegant like a side-sword—is up to you. I will see to your forging, but you must provide the plan. The vision.”

For the first time, something like interest sparked in Thumos’s eyes.

Chapter 3
The Best of Us

VALENCIA

It's good to be home, though the journey back from Thunder Bridge was somewhat uncomfortable. I haven't spoken to the others alone since the morning before... the morning before. Aeron and Sefu aren't avoiding me, but I think Thumos is. And ever since he struck my herald, the rest of my honor guard has been distant. I have heard the occasional whisper about our relationship. Some suspect I've been bedding him. Others say that we are now at war, personally. A few think it's both. I'm inclined to believe that the second is close to the truth. But I hope not.

Thumos relayed a request this morning to meet me privately, here in the war room. I've been waiting for a few minutes. He's late. Strange, that.

Gives me time to think, I suppose. About how Corvid will recover from this fool's war, for one, but mostly about Androkles. We were friends. I'm sure of it. At some point, we were friends. Should I have been surprised at what happened? Should I have been surprised that because all the aggression, all the energy, all the *movement* was with Prince Leandro, Androkles would willingly—cheerfully, even, if this was like any other job to him—take up arms against me?

In hindsight, no. No, I shouldn't have been surprised.

But I was.

So what's the real question here? Is it *Why was I friends with a man whom I knew would do such things?*, or perhaps *Why didn't I see this coming?* Did I believe he would make an exception to his simple rule of favoring the sword swung with the most fervor? Did it simply not occur to me that something like this would happen?

No, no—I think it must be the first question: why were we friends? Four years training and bleeding together will do that to people, I suppose. And though he was clearly the strongest, the most skilled student in our class, it turned out that for a long while, the rest of us in the Lions were

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somewhere below average—oh, how Sefu burned when he realized it—so that balanced things out, a bit. It was not so much that Androkles came to rely on us. More, I think, that he found us the amusing variety of endearing.

And only recently have I recalled that we actually did quite a job of closing the gap between ourselves and Androkles in the first three years. He was already so capable that perhaps it was difficult for him to learn as much as we did.

But also, I think he didn't care to. Improvement was never much on his mind, when there was simply so much fun to be had in smashing us mere mortals.

And from such smashing, *we* learned much indeed. So there is that: it would seem that I feel indebted to him. I would not be half the knight I am had I not benefited from the devastations that were sparring sessions with Androkles. And never was he malicious, never was he arrogant, never did he grow impatient with my inferiority. It seemed impossible to anger him. He just didn't take it seriously enough.

That never changed, I suppose.

Ah, the door. There is Thumos.

I'm given a moment's pause by the palpable frustration radiating from him as he enters. His posture is perfect, as befitting a soldier addressing his commander, but it is also so, so tense. And in his eyes, the color of steel, there is something... something.

I will have to tread carefully.

I put on what I hope is an open expression. "You wanted to speak with me?"

THUMOS

I pace outside the war room.

I know Valencia is inside. I requested that she meet with me at this hour. I told Sefu and Aeron that I would be doing this, but I didn't ask them to come with me. I don't think they would

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have. I'm still not entirely sure what I'm going to say, myself.

But I know I'm angry.

Very. Angry. And at Valencia, at least in part.

I'm not sure that's fair.

But neither was what I had to do to Androkles.

"...tried talking to him," I hear Aeron snap: she and Sefu are coming this way. I don't want to have that conversation again. I turn to the door, and enter before I can change my mind.

The wooden walls of the room reflect the warm glow of large lanterns as the sun sets outside. Valencia sits at the far side of the round table. I remain standing.

"You wanted to speak with me?" she says calmly.

I feel myself bristle. The commander and her formalities.

"I assume this is about Androkles," Valencia says. "Thumos... I didn't want this to happen any more than you."

"I know." But is that good enough? We were yours to command, and you sent us out there against him. Say what you like, but it was my blade did the killing.

...It was my blade did the killing.

Valencia looks at her hands, folded in front of her. "And I realize that this may be... easier for me to say than I perhaps deserve."

Indeed.

"But it was not easy to watch," she says, and fury surges up from my gut.

I pound my fist on the table like an idiot. "Easier than the deed, I wager!"

"Thumos, please, hear me."

"Enough!" I shout. "Androkles is ashes in the wind by my hand, and by your command. He was the best of us. He was *always* the best of us. And we *killed* him, because he happened to be on the other side of an imaginary line."

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Valencia sits up straighter. “We killed him because he fought for my people’s enemy.”

“We are no strangers to that way of life,” I snap. “We know the rules of it. He hadn’t broken any of them.” I know I’m not making enough sense. Did any of Valencia’s soldiers break any of *their* rules when they cheered the fall of their deadliest foe?

But—but *we* should know better. Valencia should know better. I should...

“What would you have had me do?” Valencia’s voice is suddenly sharp, her tone flinty. “What? No one else could have stood against him, and he would have continued his rampage for the enemy. He would have continued to kill my people, to burn their homes, to—”

“Your people?” I interrupt. A small part of me thinks I might regret what I’m saying. Small enough not to matter. “How many of them do you know as well as you knew Androkles? Your people aren’t farmers and artisans. Your people are my people, *his* people. Your people are—”

“Warriors?” she says, her voice laden with frost. “Is that really what you were going to say? When did Thumos begin to use the words of bards? The bards who sing to those farmers and artisans.”

I—well—

I try a scowl. “You skirt the issue at hand.” I know that I’m a hypocrite even as the words leave my tongue. “Call us whatever you like. Warriors, soldiers, assassins. We’ve been guardians and guarded against in equal measure.” Back on solid ground. These things are true. “But whatever you call us, we are people of the sword. We are made of different stuff than—”

“Have a care, friend,” Valencia says, still icy. “I will not have you slight *my people*.”

“*Your people* cheered when Androkles fell. His bleeding corpse had more *warrior* in it than any dozen of your soldiers whole and hale.”

“He had slaughtered their countrymen!” She has traded ice for fire. “Their brothers and sisters in arms! The soldiers who fell to his axes were to my troops as Androkles was to you.”

I grant that. Citizen soldiers and soldiers of fortune—in some ways we are not so unlike.

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Every soldier has comrades. And heroes. And most soldiers lose them. But, something she said...

“To me,” I say, trying out the words. “You said to *me*.”

“What—”

I feel anger rising again. “Not to *us*?”

“Why do you insist on questioning my sense of fidelity?” Valencia snaps. “He was my friend as much as yours, yes. And I will miss him, if I allow myself to dwell on that day.” Something in her eyes grows distant. “Even if I don’t...” And her voice, now, too. “Even if I don’t, everything I do on a battlefield will bear his touch. I haven’t forgotten the Hall, whatever you may think. I would learn more in a single thrashing from him than I ever learned in any full week of training with the master at arms here.” She shakes her head, suddenly, as if to clear it. “I have forgotten nothing,” she says, sharp again, “and I have not forsaken his memory. But I...”

She breathes in, deeply, and out, slowly, and then she is silent.

I blink. In that breath she seems to have become a different woman. She looks... tired. More tired than even the past few days would have made her.

“I have greater responsibilities,” she finally murmurs.

I know. I do. And yet...

“Greater than friendship?” I dare.

“Where was Androkles’s friendship when he chose war against my city?” There is no bitterness when she asks. Only sadness.

“Androkles... Androkles played by different rules.” But didn’t I just say that I knew the rules of that way of life?

“Didn’t you just say that we knew the rules of that way of life?” Valencia asks.

Some days, I think, ten years of friendship, of closeness, of learning the spirits of those beside whom you fight for life and limb... that familiarity can bear an irritating cost.

I sit. “I said we knew the rules of the mercenary’s life, yes,” I say slowly. “But Androkles

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was..." Was what, exactly?

"More," Valencia says quietly, and I think I see the barest beginnings of a smile, though certainly not one directed at me.

"Words are inadequate," I say.

"Yet they are all we have."

"He was..."

"More a stranger than you think," she says. "If he were otherwise, would things have happened this way? Before you pulled steel, had you come to an understanding?"

"Only the understanding that there was nothing to be understood," I admit. "Not by us."

Valencia nods. "His rules *were* different, different even from the most flexible rules *we* have ever lived by. Different from the rules I choose to live by now, here."

I can only say, "Yes."

"I am a knight and a steward," she says. "I have given myself—willingly—to something greater than myself."

"Haven't I done the same, in fighting for you?"

She doesn't quite smile. "Would you be so angry if you had?"

"Would you not be angry if it had been your sword through his chest?"

"I like to think I would have been able to put aside my anger in acceptance of the cause I had chosen," she says evenly.

"I chose to fight for a friend, not to kill one."

I know it's not that simple.

"You know it's not that simple," Valencia says.

This is getting a little out of hand.

Valencia looks hard at me. "No choice can be made in isolation from events we do not will."

"But when I make a choice, must I believe that I will all that comes of it?"

B R E A K T H E S K Y

“What does belief have to do with it?” she retorts, gently. “The choice is made, the consequences unfold. If we are strong enough we take them. We accept responsibility for them.” She pauses. “They are ours.”

Perhaps. “I’m willing to argue the point, but even if I grant it, can I not renounce a choice?”
Would I renounce this one? Would I renounce serving Valencia, for the memory of Androkles?

“I would call that rash,” she says softly, “but I suppose you could.”

For awhile I can think of nothing to say. When I finally do, it is nothing new.

“Androkles was the best of us.”

Valencia says nothing.

“I can’t just let him go,” I add, floundering.

“Nor I.”

What? “What?”

She isn’t looking at me anymore. “How well did we really know him, Thumos? We’ve just said he was beyond our understanding. And yet you rage. And yet I sulk.” She pauses. “Why? Why were we so drawn to him?”

Ah. That much, I think, is easy. “As you said,” I offer, “he was beyond our understanding.”

Well... was he? Really? Was there really so much to understand about his battle-lust? Maybe he was simple.

And maybe that’s fine.

“He was beyond *us*,” I go on. “He was... he was *mighty*. I’ve never known anyone stronger, or anyone as fearless, or anyone who could *move* like that. Remember during our last week at the Hall, when he—”

Valencia’s eyes light up. “Yes! And our first job together, that time he—”

“How could I forget?”

I smile. So does she.

THE BEST OF US

After awhile, I say, “But the one that will always define him for me, the one that made men call him the Slayer...”

“Thunder Bridge,” she says softly. “The first time.”

I nod.

She looks tired again. “That was...”

A massacre. Weapons and bodies lying everywhere, all broken. Aeron, Sefu, Valencia and I—we were all slipping on rainwater and blood, and only Androkles could keep steady, more than steady, tearing into anyone who came at us. He was a force of nature, devastating, terrifying, inhuman. And yet, like a storm, in a way he was...

“Glorious,” Valencia finally says, sounding somewhat surprised.

Yes, glorious. And how, I wonder again, how could that be wrong?

“Well, then,” Valencia says. “I understand that, at least.” She straightens in her seat, and a bit of that fatigue leaves her. “I almost wish it changed things.”

She has clearly reached some sort of peace.

So have I.

“For me it does,” I say. “Change things.”

“You’re leaving.” It isn’t a question.

“Yes.”

She regards me silently for a moment, her gaze soft. “Be sure you know why.”

Indeed. “I...” I want to choose these words well. “I don’t think I’ll find the answer to my question here.”

“How... *what he was...* could be wrong?”

“Yes.”

Valencia looks out the eastern window, apparently at nothing in particular, but my guess is that her mind’s eye is out beyond Thunder Bridge, out at the border village Androkles helped burn to

B R E A K T H E S K Y

the ground after decimating the troops she sent to defend it. “Can you doubt that what he did to my people was wrong?”

“I can doubt that *wrong* is as simple as I may have thought before all this.”

I can tell she doesn’t like that answer. Even so, she doesn’t seem to have expected another.

“And you can’t think about that here?” she asks.

“No. Because you’re right. If you are to be steward to these people—if *they* are to thrive”—and I know she loves this land and these people dearly, in a way I cannot understand but do not care to challenge—“there are certain choices you must make. There is a... way of things, here, that cannot serve me.”

Valencia stands. “Very well,” she says, and I stand, too.

“You have stayed these years by your will,” she goes on, “and you have served me well.”

Again with the formalities.

“I can demand nothing of you,” she says. “But I must ask of you one thing.”

I know what it is. I can do that much. “Whatever happens, I will not stand with your enemies.”

She doesn’t quite nod. “That is...” she stares at her feet. She’s never quite lost that habit—at least, not around Aeron, Sefu and myself. “...all I require.”

“Recent events aside, Valencia,” I say lamely, “I have enjoyed my time here.”

“You will be missed.”

“By the right people, I hope.”

If a sad smirk is possible, she wears one. “Only by people of the sword.”

I bow. “Good enough.”

No it isn’t. If I leave here without properly saying to her what I never got the chance to properly say to him...

Valencia bows. “You may take your leave, captain.”

THE BEST OF US

I turn to go. But I can't quite bring myself to walk away from her. Not with this sudden feeling that once I do, it might be for the last time.

"Thumos?"

I turn back around. "I never said goodbye to Androkles."

She stares at me. "Neither did I."

"And even if I never stand with your enemies..." I lift my hands in a meaningless gesture. "If even Androkles can fall"—if everything I know can be turned upside down—"you never know."

She nods at that, and begins walking around the table, toward me. "You never know."

I struggle for words. I wonder if it would be quite right to embrace her. I would rather not kiss her hand, as those subservient to her do.

She seems to know that I don't have any idea what to do, because she laughs softly and leans in to brush her lips lightly against my cheek.

My turn to stare at my feet.

Valencia laughs again. "When did Thumos become maudlin, like the bards who sing to farmers and artisans?"

I think on that. "When he decided that just in case the bards someday sing to the farmers and artisans about *his* last stand, he didn't want the song to end in cheers."

Would Androkles have cared?

Valencia's smile fades. "You are not the Slayer."

"I suppose not." I stare at her face for awhile, committing every detail to memory. I have never loved her as anything more than a friend, but I know beauty, especially the kind that most men—like Sefu—seem too impatient to notice, the kind that comes through the eyes. Valencia overflows with it, sometimes. Like when she is sad. Like now.

It doesn't seem fair.

I clear my throat. "I go, then."

B R E A K T H E S K Y

And so I do.

SEFU

“Would you stop that?” Aeron snaps.

I realize that I’m pacing. “Sorry.”

Aeron, leaning on her crutches—stubborn bitch refuses to sit unless there’s more than one person around to make her—just sighs.

I sit down, across the corridor, and stare at the door to the war room. Thumos went in about a quarter hour ago. We know why. We even thought about going in with him. But when it comes down to it, the Big Man stabbed us in the back.

“What do you think’ll happen?” I ask.

Aer shrugs.

“D’you think *she’ll* get mad?”

“I don’t know,” Aer says.

Me either. I don’t know if I’ve ever even seen Val mad. But even if she doesn’t get *mad*...

“D’you think she’ll assume we’re on his side?”

“I don’t *know*.”

I look back at the door. Maybe we should’ve gone in there after all. But Thumos... If you’d told me ten years ago that I would ever be afraid of him, of that boring-looking kid from the islands—Blank, that’s what I used to call him—I would’ve laughed in your face. But here I am sitting on the floor, and all I can think about is that look on his face after he punched in that herald’s nose.

Blank, my ass.

I’m starting to get a little worried. I look at Aer. “D’you think—”

“*Sefu*.”

“Sorry.”

THE BEST OF US

She just sighs.

And then the door opens.

I jump to my feet. Aer's already there. Thumos stares at us and lets the door slam shut.

I sure hope somebody says something soon.

Really. Anyone. Even me.

Come on.

...Well, this is awkward.

"I'm leaving," Thumos finally says.

What?

"What?" Aeron says.

"I'm leaving," Thumos says again. "Corvid is not a place for me anymore."

"When?" Aer demands.

"Not tomorrow, but as soon as I can."

"What?" Aer shakes her head. "Why?"

Thumos frowns.

"Fine," Aer says. "I know. But—"

"Aeron..." Thumos stares at her for awhile, then at me. "Sefu..." He sighs. "I'm sorry."

Aeron snarls—no words—and starts to hobble herself back down the hall.

"I have to do this," Thumos says.

What the fuck, man? "Thumos," I say, "that's Val in there."

"And that was Androkles out there!" he roars, waving his arm at the east.

"Was," Aer snaps. I hear her crutches click sharply as she comes back, passes me and gets up in his face. Thumos is shorter than me, but Aer still has to crane her head up a little. And she's only got one working leg.

And she still seems to be the one more in control.

B R E A K T H E S K Y

“Valencia lives,” she says. “Which of our friends is more worth your sword now?”

Thumos doesn’t say anything.

“Well,” Aeron sighs, “we won’t go with you.”

“I understand,” Thumos says.

I *want* to say: You stubborn fucking bastard.

All that comes out is, “But...” And neither of the others seems to hear me anyway. Aer’s too busy glaring. Thumos is too busy brooding.

Some things never change.

The three of us just stand there for a really, *really* long time. The sun was setting when we got here, but now the sky is black. I don’t know when that happened.

“Goodbye,” Thumos finally says. He looks at me, and puts out his hand.

We clasp forearms. I realize that we haven’t done this since the first day at the Hall. It’s how we’ve greeted and said farewell to any other fighting man and woman we’ve ever come across, but we’ve never really been apart for the past ten years, so we’ve never had to do it again.

For a second I think he’s going to pull me into a hug. He doesn’t.

For a second I think about pulling him into a hug. I don’t.

He lets go, looks at Aer, and puts out his hand again, but she won’t even look at it. Or at his face. She stares out the window instead. Don’t think I’d be able to make her face out anyway, in this light—the lamps in the wall sconces are down to just flickering at this hour.

“Aeron,” Thumos practically whispers.

“Fuck off,” she says, and throws one of her crutches at him. As he goes in to give it back to her, she mutters something that sounds like *dammit* and throws her free arm around his neck. They stand there awkwardly half-hugging. Eventually Aer takes the crutch back, but she still won’t look Thumos in the eye anymore.

Thumos looks back at me. The only thing I can think of to do is shrug. He looks at the floor,

THE BEST OF US

and then, just like that, he walks away.

After awhile, so does Aer.

What a shitty week.

VALENCIA

I can't sleep, so in the middle of the night I find myself in the small officers' mess. Someone is already here, nursing a mug, his face not quite lit by the dance of the candles on the table. By the size of the pitcher beside him, I think I can guess who it is.

"Sefu?"

He doesn't look at me. "Hey Val."

"We haven't really spoken since—"

"Yeah."

"How are you?"

"Been better." He gestures at his broken arm with his mug, and takes a sip of whatever is in it. "Aeron's pissed."

"Her too," I sigh.

"About Thumos."

Really? "Oh."

"Val, what happened to us?"

I don't know, in truth. There only seems to be the one answer. "Androkles."

He tenses and for an instant I think he's going to throw that mug at me. It passes.

"Can't blame Androkles for everything," he mutters.

"No one's *blaming* him."

"Well, everyone keeps saying 'Androkles' like it's some kind of explanation. It's not. I know you and Thumos are supposed to be the smart ones, but I see things too."

B R E A K T H E S K Y

I sit. I can't really think of anything to say, so I wait.

"You know Val," Sefu says after a moment, "you've always been the best of us."

"Really?"

"Yeah." He shrugs with his good shoulder. "I know Thumos thinks Androkles was—I think Aeron does too—but... I don't know. Androkles... I'll miss him, yeah. And yeah, he inspired. But you—you love. Maybe it's just me, but I think there's something to that."

Oh. Sefu...

"You've changed quite a bit since we met, haven't you?" I finally say.

He smiles a little at that. "Guess so."

"When did that happen?"

"Hard to say. But if I had to guess? Probably the first time. You know."

"Mm."

"Want a drink?"

"And I thought you'd never ask."

He refills his mug, slides it across the table to me, and hefts the pitcher. "To better days?"

"As Thumos would say: indeed."

Chapter 4
Lessons

8 years before the fall of Androkles

Aeron loved these free-for-all exercises, with all twenty members of the class throwing aside their group affiliations—the Lions, the Stags, the Falcons, and the Hounds—for however long it would take for just one person to be left standing in the great arena. Not that it was ever her. This was, like everything else at the Hall, a race for second.

Androkles always won.

He was almost done for the day. Only three others were still standing: Aeron and Sefu, plus Locke, the startlingly graceful brunette Sefu had dubbed “Softy” because she had struck him as out of place at a school of combat. He hadn’t been far wrong; Locke was from an itinerant troupe of musicians, dancers, and actors, and had no battlefield experience. But she was strong and quick and a terrifically fast learner.

She was also brash. Sturm had apparently been present at a tavern brawl involving several members of the troupe, in which a plucky—probably to the point of stupidity—Locke had acquitted herself surprisingly well, and he’d approached her about attending the Hall. Little more than two years later, she was consistently in serious competition for being considered the class’ second best student.

Aeron could only offer a quick half-smile as she dashed past Thumos, who was slowly picking himself up after taking a devastating jumping kick from Locke. Those two were both as dangerous unarmed as they were with swords, the one because he’d trained in such skills for years, the other because, not unlike Androkles, she just had it. It irritated Thumos a bit, Aeron knew, but it also made him train harder, and he and the Lions were better for it.

“Be my vengeance,” Thumos called dryly as Aeron sped on toward the others, who were now engaged in an awkward three-way dance as Sefu and Locke found their repeated attempts to eliminate each other thwarted by deceptively simple maneuvers of Androkles: half-steps and shuffles and oddly lazy swings with those axes, never quite aimed at anyone but always too close for comfort, always throwing the others off-balance.

LESSONS

Aeron seized the moment, running in at Locke from behind. At the last moment Locke spun and crouched, extending a leg intended to sweep Aeron from her feet, but Aeron was already in the air, using one practice short sword—their training weapons were made of padded wood shaped to roughly resemble their real weapons of choice—to bat Locke’s scimitar wide. With her other sword Aeron chopped down, but Locke swayed at the waist and Aeron’s leaping attack ended with an unceremonious half-fall, half-shoulder roll.

She jumped to her feet, noticed out of the corner of her eye that Locke was already up, twirled to block whatever might have been coming in—

—and then something thundered into the back of her helmet, and as she fell, all limbs suddenly limp, Aeron was distantly aware of a wooden ax flying into Locke’s stomach.

As she hit the ground she heard two other thuds, and then, unmistakably Sefu:

“Ow.”

Androkles’s sandaled feet came into her field of vision, and then the Big Man’s knees as he crouched, and then his head as he bent at the waist and craned his neck. He was smiling.

“Almost,” he said.

“Not really,” Aeron managed.

“No,” Androkles laughed. “Not really.”

~

After every one of these exercises, the floor of the arena was transformed into an open-air mess with broad tables—four round ones set at the compass points for the teams, one long one in the center where Sturm and other Masters also laid out baskets of bread and cheese, and clay pitchers of water.

The students had all regrouped into their respective quintets, except for Sefu, who was doing his customary rounds of the other teams to exchange insults. Androkles was already well on his way through his second chunk of cheese and second loaf of bread. Thumos had finished half a loaf quickly enough, but was now picking at what was left. Valencia was eating briskly, if not quite mechanically. Aeron ate as she always did, neither quickly nor slowly, and watched as Sefu finally limped over to their table and sat beside Androkles.

B R E A K T H E S K Y

He cleared his throat. "Can I ask you something?"

Androkles regarded him, chewing loudly. He swallowed, also loudly. "Of course."

"How do you do it?"

"Ah," Androkles said with a smile. "It's simple, really." He didn't say anything else for awhile, as he emptied his cup of water and refilled it. Then he drank that one down, too.

Aeron noticed that like herself, Thumos and Valencia had stopped doing anything besides stare intently at Androkles.

He eventually seemed to notice, and looked as if he'd actually been caught off-guard.

"What?" he asked.

Sefu blinked. "That's it?"

"What?" Comprehension dawned on Androkles's face. "Oh." He reached for another piece of bread.

"Well, yes. Why?"

"It's simple, really doesn't tell us anything," Aeron said.

"But it is," Androkles said. "I just... I just fight. It's what I do. Always has been."

"Yeah," Sefu said, "but why? I needed the money. Val's gotta be an officer in her aunt's army.

Thumos learned it at that temple with all that hokey self-perfection shit. No offense."

Thumos shrugged.

"And Aer," Sefu went on, "Aer's people are just cranky fuckers who need something better to do than sit around, so they raid each other's cattle. No offense," he added again. "But you—your parents were nobody. No one would've noticed or cared if you never picked up a sword. Or ax. Whatever. You came from out of nowhere. Why?"

"I suppose it's..." Androkles scratched his chin. "Fun. That feeling. Hitting something, hard, making it give. Breaking it. Lets me know I'm strong." He bit into the bread, and was silent.

Aeron assumed the conversation was over, and started to stand to get another pitcher of water from the central table.

LESSONS

“Won’t be forever, though,” Androkles said suddenly, and Aeron sat back down. The Big Man swallowed. “Should enjoy it while it lasts. That feeling. I want it to be as intense as I can make it, as often as I can make it.”

Aeron noticed Thumos frown slightly. She considered trying to guess why, but decided it wouldn’t be worth the effort. Sefu liked to call Thumos “Blank,” but Aeron had heard others refer to him as “the Brooding Lion.” Sometimes they meant it teasingly, but more often not. For her part, she still hadn’t quite figured Thumos out.

Sefu drummed his fingers on the table, bringing Aeron back to the moment.

They all waited a little longer. But Androkles didn’t say anything else.

Chapter 5
Empowered

1 month after the fall of Androkles

THUMOS

As the boatman nears the high dock, I search the face of the sunset-lit mountain, trying to find the spot of that last training game. The watchtower-flanked ledge on which we Lions fought each against all, high over a pit filled with sharpened stakes, while dodging projectiles from our classmates. We were given the more-than-somewhat conflicting imperatives to do our utmost to overwhelm each other with attacks, never letting anyone rest—and to make sure no one fell into the pit. It was simultaneously a free-for-all and an exercise in watching out for each other.

I feel as if some moral lesson from that day should suddenly be clear to me, after what's happened. But if there is anything, I do not know what. This irritates me.

“Six years.” A rich, deep voice jars me from my reverie.

“Six years,” I echo, still standing in the boat, and looking up into the always-scowling face of Sturm, who squats at the edge of the dock. Sefu nicknamed him “Hard-Looking Fucker” on day one. It is true. Sturm seems to embody *hardness* as completely as Androkles did vitality. I have no idea how old he is. I *do* know that if he, and not I, had punched that herald in the face, the little idiot's skull would have exploded. If someone told me that Sturm was the very spirit of the mountain behind him, I would probably take it on faith.

“I'm surprised you found a willing ship, this time of year,” he says.

“The winds were tamer than I expected,” I admit. I can't quite bring myself to add, just yet, that knowing your prospective passenger to be the killer of Androkles can apparently be fairly motivating. Not that I'd planned to tell the captain. News travels fast.

“When was it I saw you last, boy, elsewhere than here?” Sturm asks.

“After the Holding of Thunder Bridge.”

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“Ah.” He didn’t actually need me to tell him that. “And tell me. Where are the others?” His eyes narrow. “What brings Thumos of Kalon back to the Hall of the Sword and Fist alone?”

I hang my head.

“Surely you do not think ill news so rare at a school of killing that I need time to brace myself,” Sturm says.

“Perhaps *he* needs that time.” Another familiar voice, and one just as firm and strong, but reassuring where Sturm’s is daunting. I look up, and coming down the pier, it is she: Sunna, the second instructor we met at the Hall, after those first six months of conditioning and meditation training. We called her Lady Steel, I remember. Sturm, like Locke and myself, prefers to fight without weapons, and our early combat training was all unarmed. But then Sunna entered our lives, and we all decided that she must be the reason for the adage that a weapon can and should be an extension of the arm.

Some of us learned it better than others.

A lot of good that did.

“Perhaps he does not yet regard loss with disdain as you do,” Sunna adds. She remains standing as she reaches Sturm’s shoulder. She regards me not unkindly, but does not smile.

“Perhaps he must learn,” Sturm says quietly.

“Perhaps,” Sunna says. “But for now; pray tell, Thumos. Why the shadows in your eyes?”

I stare at my feet again, still hoping that some insight will strike. But of course, it doesn’t.

“There is much to say,” I finally offer.

“Then say it, boy,” Sturm says.

I take a deep breath. “Alright.”

AERON

“Sounds creepy, if you ask me,” Sefu says.

B R E A K T H E S K Y

Valencia looks at me across the war room table. “And you? Do you think it’s... creepy?”

I shrug. “Little bit.”

“Lady of the Crows,” she says again, frowning to herself. “Is it that bad?”

“Not *bad*,” Sefu says. “Creepy.”

And I guess I have to admit, having to call myself a Crow now feels like a step down from being a Lion.

“But congratulations,” I add before I forget. She deserves the promotion—and we deserve whatever perks will come with it, I don’t mind saying.

Valencia gives us a small smile.

“Yeah,” Sefu says. “But what does it mean for us?”

Valencia takes a breath. “Not unlike the first years after we graduated. More small-group work than we’ve been doing recently.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Good to hear. That’s what we know best.”

“Yes, well, silver linings,” Valencia says dryly. “In truth, it’s unlikely that we would have decided to form the Crows had we not lost so many soldiers fighting Prince Leandro.”

Yeah, it’s been ugly. Out of ten thousand fighters Corvid could field before the mess with the prince, what do we have left? Half of that?

At least we bloodied Leandro’s nose pretty well, too.

Still, I have to point out, “I know we’re good, but assassinations and guerilla raids aren’t a replacement for a strong standing army.”

Val nods. “Which is why they won’t be our only responsibility,” she says. “The Crows will be taking over most of the advanced weapons and tactical training for our regular forces. I expect that there will also be training missions to allied cities, and certainly to smaller towns in Corvid’s territory. Not every garrison can afford to hire from the Hall. Hopefully this will help us to increase the size and strength of citizen militias.” She pauses. “Again, I realize that this is not a replacement

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for the army we had several months ago. But with luck we will not face similar tribulations for some time. And perhaps by the time we do need a great force again, the army we field will be superior to its predecessor.”

There’s a step missing here. “Which means that *we* have to train the Crows?”

Sefu looks vaguely startled. “I, uh—Val, I hit things.” He mimes swinging his mace. “I don’t know how much good I’ll be as a teacher.”

“You are much loved among the soldiers, Sefu,” Valencia assures him.

“That won’t keep them from noticing that he’s a dolt,” I can’t resist adding.

“Fuck you too,” Sefu says without looking away from Valencia. “And I still have a broken arm. And Aer’s still a cripple.”

“It hadn’t escaped my notice,” Valencia says with a smile. “For now, the two of you will go among the troops and hand-pick the best candidates for the Crows. My honor guard will be among them, obviously, but that still leaves close to ninety for you to recruit: my aunt desires the Crows to be a full century.” She pauses again. “I will want to know all of their names. And I will want you to know all of their names. When both of you are fully recovered, we can worry about your suitability for teaching.”

“Or lack thereof,” Sefu mutters.

“You know the word *thereof*?” I ask.

“Keep it up, Scary Eyes, and you won’t be able to use that other leg, either.”

THUMOS

We reach the entry courtyard of the Hall proper. I concluded my tale quite some time ago, and Sunna and Sturm have both been silent all along, though for some reason they did not seem surprised about Androkles’s fall. News travels fast, indeed. To what I had to say about my conversation with Valencia, I sensed mixed reactions, but still, not a word was spoken aloud.

B R E A K T H E S K Y

“Tell me, boy,” Sturm says now, as we walk under the great stone archway, “what you think set Androkles apart.” He moves to a bench carved into the western wall, sits lengthwise on it, his legs straight, leans against the stone, and closes his eyes. “What, besides the obvious, made him so different from the rest of you?”

Sunna moves to the great oak that dominates the eastern side of the courtyard and sits against its trunk. I remain standing.

Sturm opens his eyes to give me an expectant look.

“Androkles gave no thought to rules,” I finally say. “Of any kind.”

“Hm,” Sturm says. “Because he was stronger than any rules?”

“So I would have said,” I sigh, “before I killed him.”

“But what if he had been, I wonder,” Sturm muses.

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Do you wonder what it would be like to be so powerful, in whatever way mattered, as to truly act with impunity upon any desire?” He’s still leaning casually against the wall, yet he seems to lean forward. Like Androkles, he has a way of somehow shifting his *presence*, the sense of his intent and attention, without actually moving. “Do you wonder what such power in one sufficiently willful might mean for codes and rules like those of Valencia?” he adds in a tone I’m not entirely certain I like. Valencia’s path and mine have parted, but she is still dear to me.

I’m probably making too much of this. Sturm has never *not* sounded vaguely condescending.

“Well?” he presses.

I like to think that I have always been honest. “Yes.”

“What if I told you that there might be a way to make you so?”

I frown, but cannot think of any suitable answer.

Sunna clears her throat gently. “Let us try a different tack,” she says to Sturm, who shrugs. Then she returns her gaze to me. “The fall of one such as Androkles—”

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“And the cheers that greeted it,” Sturm interrupts.

Sunna gives him a look. “These things give us pause,” she says. “But so does the... *character* that one might with fairness say led to Androkles’s demise.”

“Isn’t it that character that made him the things we admired?” I ask.

“He is a complicated knot to untangle,” she answers, nodding. “His zeal for life I do not think I’ve seen anyone match. That sheer joy in his power... Yet I cannot help but feel that he lacked, shall I say, direction.”

“A vision,” Sturm adds.

I suppose you could say that. How did he put it? *I suppose it’s... fun.*

Lets me know I’m strong.

“You find fault in the... simplicity of his motives?” I ask.

“Fault is a strong word,” Sunna says.

Sturm snorts lightly. “I would say he wasted his potential,” he says, “but no,” he adds with a sigh, “I fault him not.”

Again, I’m not sure I understand.

“That he lacked a clear sense of purpose,” Sunna says, her tone making clear that my face reveals my uncertainty, “made him too unpredictable for the tastes of any noble or warlord who was not his paymaster at any given moment.”

“And this unpredictability made the masses fear him more than they honored his prowess,” Sturm says. “They are, of course, fools. But even Androkles, as you know, could not after a certain point stand against the force of plebeian outrage.” His permanent scowl deepens. “The matter does not please me. But that makes it no less a fact. There is a level of strength that is too great not to be feared by small souls, and yet not great enough to fend them off when they decide to act on their fear.”

This is, I think, true. But...

B R E A K T H E S K Y

“But small souls didn’t kill Androkles,” I say. I find that I can’t make eye contact with either of them. “I did.”

“Indeed,” Sturm says softly. “But you have not lived these last six years among great souls. You have fought for one beholden to the small. Your fealty to your friend is admirable, boy, but Valencia is not—”

“Valencia,” I interrupt, feeling myself tense, “should have nothing to do with this.”

“Oh?” Sturm cocks an eyebrow.

“The killing stroke was mine, and that is all that matters.”

Sunna shakes her head. “Not so.”

Why do they insist on this? “Then it is all that matters to *me*.”

They are both silent. I half expect them to exchange glances, but they do not shift their eyes from me.

“Be that as it may,” Sturm finally says, “we have digressed.”

Sunna nods once. “So we have.”

“You are not Androkles,” Sturm says.

“So I’ve been told.” And what of it?

“You have a vision,” he adds. “Do you not?”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

Now they do look at each other. And then they both stand, and step forward. If I were not already on my feet I would feel the need to get to rise myself.

“You see things that Androkles did not,” Sunna says. “You *think* more than he did. And you *care* more than he did.”

“You desire more than the mere sensation of exerting your strength,” Sturm says. “More than simply the knowledge of your power.”

“And you feel, now, that you must be worthy of it,” Sunna says.

EMPOWERED

Again, they both step forward. I sense that there is something of ceremony at work here. It is not the words—they are not rehearsed; they are truly meant for me. And it is not how they say what they say—their tone remains as it has always been, as teachers to an ever-student. It is something in their eyes, which burrow into me now as they never did in my previous time here. They do not merely appraise, but *search*.

I am not afraid that they might find something I would rather they did not. And I am not afraid that they will find me lacking.

But I am afraid.

Of what, I wonder?

“Is all this not so?” Sturm asks.

They speak of a vision. If I have a vision, then what is it that I see?

I close my eyes.

And I remember, again, Androkles immersed in the Dance, six years ago, one man against scores, not merely holding his ground but *advancing*, with impossible strength and impossible grace. And I remember wondering why I couldn’t do it like that. And I remember wondering, for just a moment, what a world full of people like Androkles would be like.

Ah.

“It is so,” I finally say.

Sturm makes an approving noise, and turns away from me. “Then come.”

AERON

We seem to spend a lot of nights in the officers’ mess now. Wine and ale stores are running low. Food, too. And I never see anyone else here but us, anymore. I wonder if we’ve scared the other officers off from this part of the keep.

Whatever.

B R E A K T H E S K Y

“Do you ever wonder what he’s up to?” Sefu asks, staring into the depths of his pitcher.

“Fuck him,” I say. Valencia gives me a look. “What?” I ask. “He never even told us where he was going.”

“Maybe he didn’t know yet,” Sefu says.

“He knew,” I say. “Thumos always knows.”

“Fuck *that*,” Sefu snaps, and I flinch despite myself. Sefu doesn’t snap. “Sorry,” he mutters. “But I’m sick of hearing any of us pretend that any of the others is simpler than they really are.”

Valencia reaches across the table to pat his hand. “You’re probably right,” she says. “When he spoke to me, he didn’t seem to be sure of anything anymore.”

“Except that he couldn’t be here,” I say. “With us.”

“Except that,” Valencia says, nodding once.

It’s only been a month. I don’t think it’s strange that I’m still bitter. The others seem to have come closer to getting over... all of it. I wonder why.

“Do you think he went home?” Sefu considers his pitcher again as he speaks, then takes a few big gulps from it.

“Kalon?” I ask.

“No, that monastery.”

“The monastery is *on* Kalon.”

“Oh,” Sefu says. “Right. You know what I mean, though. Kalon is mostly fishermen and sellswords. Thumos isn’t really like them.”

True enough. His parents were typical of Kalon, but they died when he was young. The local monks raised him. Taught him how to read, which most of the rest of Kalon couldn’t. Taught him how to fight, which most of the rest of Kalon could, but not with just their fists and feet. And elbows. And—

“I don’t think he went back to the monastery, either,” Valencia says. “It is my understanding

EMPOWERED

that the way of things at such places demands a serenity that our Brooding Lion no longer has.”

I suddenly realize that I also haven't been back home for years. Not since just before the Holding of Thunder Bridge.

Home was serene. Simple. I miss it.

I wonder if I could just go back, just take up that way of life again. I'm not the same as I was before, either. But how much of that is just because the past few months have been such a strain?

Now isn't a good time to go back, even if this damn leg of mine was as it should be. But I should visit, sometime soon. Maybe when the spring comes. To remind myself where I came from. What I love. Who I am...

Wait...

...Huh.

Who's the Brooding Lion now?

THUMOS

I fall to my knees, disoriented by the blinding flash, the clash of—thunder?

But the sky was clear.

The sky *is* clear. I can still see the stars, the moon.

Except now it isn't the same sky.

Sturm and Sunna still stand in front of me, but we are no longer in the courtyard of the Hall of the Sword and Fist. Beneath my feet is not grass but stone. Around me are not solid walls but high columns. Beyond them not a view of the Hall's dock and training arena, but more mountains, though none higher than the one upon which we stand. And unless my eyes fool me, we are twice as high as the Hall's mountain is.

Yet there is no wind. Well—there *is* wind, there must be, because I can hear it. But its chill does not touch me, and judging by the stillness of their garments—and the conspicuous amount of

B R E A K T H E S K Y

skin each has always bared—neither does it touch Sturm and Sunna.

“Uh” is the only thing that comes out of my mouth.

“Welcome to the Temple of the Sky,” Sunna says lightly.

“How...”

Sturm, still facing away from me, raises his arm, hand open, then makes a fist.

From nowhere, a lance of lightning pierces the evening sky.

The *cloudless* evening sky.

“Did you—” I stammer.

“I did,” Sturm answers.

“But how—”

“Wherever there is open sky, I can ride the lightning,” he says.

“Ride the—”

“And more,” Sturm adds, an uncharacteristic laugh booming out. “The lightning is mine to command. As is the wind. As is the rain, though I will spare you that tonight.” He finally turns to face me again. “This is what we offer you.”

What if you could be strong enough, he said before, in any way that mattered...

“It will not be an easy path,” Sunna says. “And it will require more patience than your time at the Hall. But you have the basic tools.”

“The Dance,” Sturm says, still wearing that decidedly un-Sturm-like grin. Frankly, it scares me a little. “Not idly did I make meditation fully half of your training in the first six months.”

“From that state of mind,” Sunna adds, “we have learned to reach others. Deeper states, I suppose you might say, yet higher seems somehow more appropriate.”

“States that attune us,” Sturm says, raising his arms, “to the power of the storm.”

“And the power of the sun.”

Sunna closes her eyes. When she opens them again, they blaze white and gold, and the glow

EMPOWERED

spreads to her face, and down her bare arms, suffusing her skin with a still and silent fire.

“Welcome to the Temple of the Sky,” she says again, and the glow leaves her, though her eyes seem yet to shine.

I realize that my jaw is hanging open, and that despite this I have not drawn breath for many moments. I do so now, and close my mouth.

“What say you?” Sturm asks, the stern-lipped, Hard-Looking Fucker again.

In my mind’s eye, I see yet again the Holding of Thunder Bridge. I see, and hear, and feel what raged around and above us, that freak storm, the howling wind and lashing rain and constantly flashing lightning that rendered most of us useless children. Terrible and terrifying, and yet... beautiful.

This power, this beauty, can be mine?

“Teach me,” I say.

And I notice that above me—by Sturm’s will or not I cannot tell—dark and heavy clouds have begun to gather.

Knowing what can be unleashed from them, and with memories of such still swimming before my eyes, I cannot help but smile.

Chapter 6
Graduation

6 years before the fall of Androkles

Locke had always rather liked the Lions.

She liked throwing things at them more, sure, but in between the commands from Sturm to bombard them with stones and darts and pieces of driftwood, she decided that they were a joy to watch.

It was a strange exercise, she decided. She wasn't particularly looking forward to it. Twenty feet over a wide, deep filled with sharpened stakes, the Lions were in an everyone-against-everyone brawl, on a gently sloped ledge jutting perhaps seventy, perhaps eighty feet out from the mountain, no more than thirty feet across at its widest. On wooden watchtowers to either side, Locke and several others from the class stood ready with their piles of projectiles. Sturm perched on another, much smaller ledge above them all, his back to a wide cavern that Locke assumed was one mouth of a tunnel that led somewhere else, wherever Sturm had come from. She'd never been up there. She'd never found the way.

The Lions had been told to show no mercy, to never let anyone have the space or time to breathe, and inevitably this led to someone being driven to the edge of the outcropping.

Like now: while Thumos and Valencia engaged Androkles, Sefu had nearly overwhelmed Aeron with an unsubtle but furious barrage of wide swings from that heavy mace. But Aeron had managed to evade him until Sturm commanded a volley to be launched—"Commence!"—at which point a rock clipped Sefu in the knee and he briefly lost his balance. Ignoring the bombardment, Aeron had driven forward with short cuts and rapid thrusts, keeping Sefu stumbling. Now the darts and stones and wood stopped coming—"Enough!"—and she had him a mere step from falling, and she hesitated.

Valencia's buckler crashed into Aeron's arm, hurled from the far side of Androkles dozens of feet away. That was the odd part of the exercise: even though they had to keep each other from ever having a moment's pause, they were also supposed to keep each other from falling off the ledge. As Aeron reeled Sefu grabbed her arm and pulled, throwing his weight forward at the same time. Aeron let her knees buckle, and scissored her

GRADUATION

legs around Sefu's ankle, so they both went down in an awkward tangle.

"Commence!"

Locke hurled a long, massive plank with everything she had, aiming for Androkles, who was facing the opposite direction, fending off attacks from Thumos and Valencia. All three moved with an elegance and precision that might have been choreographed but for the desperation Locke's Hall-trained eye noted in every move that Thumos and Valencia made in answer to Androkles's counterattacks.

As the plank left her hands, Androkles jumped forward, both feet coming high to kick Thumos and Valencia—

—and then he threw his head and torso back, his body becoming entirely parallel to the ground—

—and as he fell, Locke's projectile sailed over him and crashed into the others.

"Wow," Locke heard a neighbor mutter.

"Enough!" Sturm shouted, and the barrage stopped once more. Locke glanced his way just as he cocked his head to one side, as if listening to something far away. She thought he nodded.

Locke turned her eye back to the Lions. Now it was Sefu and Aeron against Androkles, with Thumos and Valencia sword-to-sword. All five were clustered fairly close together, and to even Locke's eye their movements were starting to blur together, no longer the movements of five discrete bodies but of one unity—

—and then Androkles twirled his axes, one, then the other—

—and everyone froze, glancing all about.

Boulders rained on them from out of nowhere, and they scattered and leapt.

No, not from nowhere—Locke looked up to Sturm's ledge. No Sturm, but the boulders were pouring out of that tunnel.

If they had kept fighting for just another few seconds, at least one of them would have been crushed to a bloody pulp.

"What the fuck?" Locke heard Sefu shout.

"Shut up and move!" Aeron snapped, shoving him toward the side of the ledge that met the rest of the

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mountain and diving into a forward roll just fast enough to avoid getting smashed.

And there was someone laughing. Who? Aeron and Sefu had made it to the face of the mountain, directly under the ledge the boulders were dropping from and so out of their path. Thumos and Valencia were weaving among the boulders as those rolled from the exercise ledge into the pit of stakes. So that left—

Androkles. Leaping, yes, but not between boulders. Onto them, from one to the next, with the grace of a cat. A very, very large cat. As he landed on massive rock he would shuffle and hop atop it as it rolled down the slight slope, then he'd jump for another just as it fell upon the ledge.

And as Thumos and Valencia finally made it to Sefu and Aeron, panting and muttering, Locke could still hear, above the crashing of the boulders both on the ledge and in the pit, above the snapping of stakes, the laughter of Androkles.

“Wow,” Locke heard her neighbor say again. “He’s... he’s fucking nuts.”

“Yes,” she agreed. Wow indeed. Lots of wow. But even more, she decided out loud, “Fucking nuts.”

BREAK THE SKY

PART TWO

Chapter 7
Ends and Means

3 years after the fall of Androkles

SEFU

“Bored yet?” Aeron asks as they come at us through the trees, one more time.

Five of them. Two of us.

I ease myself into the Dance, just a little, give my club a twirl for the hell of it, and *forward...*

It’s over quickly.

“I don’t know,” I say, helping one of the trainees—the one I call Cheery—back to her feet.

“It’s not so bad.”

“Why didn’t that work?” Valencia calls out from the high branch she’s sitting on. She seems to like playing teacher.

“They’re too fast,” one of the trainees—Hairy—mutters.

“And you know it,” Valencia says. “But you aren’t changing your methods. You’re throwing yourselves onto their attacks, every time. You’re panicking, even though you outnumber them more than two to one. You can afford some patience. Try. Just two of you, against Aeron.”

I pull myself up to a branch near Val as the three trainees not fighting this round ease themselves to the earth, groaning and swearing.

“They’re good kids,” I say.

“Yes,” Val says, smiling. A little. “Go ahead!” she calls to Aer and the others below. Aer looks up and raises an eyebrow. Val shakes her head. Aer smirks. No Dancing this time.

Cheery and Hairy spread out, making a triangle with Aeron. Aer takes a step toward Cheery, on her right, and stabs out—lazily, for her—with one wooden sword. Hairy leaps in with a wild swing, and takes a spinning back kick for it. Aer lets the momentum take her all the way around and her right hand comes across in a horizontal cut that Cheery manages to duck under.

ENDS AND MEANS

Aer could knee her in the face, but instead she takes a couple of easy steps back.

Hairy closes distance more carefully this time. Cheery hangs back. Aeron relaxes her stance.

Suddenly Cheery throws her sword at Aer, who bats it aside as Hairy comes in. She tries for a chop to his helmet but he isn't there—"Good," Val murmurs, because the reason he isn't there is that for once, he waited—and as she recovers, bringing that sword up to block, Hairy finishes his forward movement, and almost lands a cut on her wrist.

Aer disengages from her block, whipping her arm up, back, and all the way around, ending with a stab that catches Hairy on the chin.

In comes Cheery, shield first—and Aer pivots around Hairy, and Cheery keeps moving through the space Aer was in, and Aer pushes Hairy at her, and down they go.

"Almost," Aer says.

"Not really," Hairy mutters.

Aer laughs, but stops abruptly. As Hairy and Cheery start to move away, she steps in fast and grabs Hairy's wrist.

"Really," she says to both of them, and I can tell she means it.

Which probably means a rough sparring session for me later. Great.

Cheery grins. Hairy stares at Aeron for a while, then does a little shrug. "Maybe next time, then," he says.

"Maybe next time," Aer says.

Hairy narrows his eyes. "But... probably not. Not really."

This time Aeron lets the laugh come out, and this time, the others join in. "No," she says. "Probably not. Not really."

LOCKE

Strange weather we're having. Lionheart rarely sees such clouds this early in the spring. And

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just an hour ago the sun was shining in an otherwise empty sky.

How unfortunate for Prince Leandro. He was so looking forward to the festival. Ten years to the day he's worn the crown. There was to be a parade of his army, though it is still far from the strength it had before that business with Corvid a few years ago. There were to be fire dancers in the royal garden, though that, I'm certain, would have been idiocy. There was to be a grand banquet of exotic dishes. There were to be the dog and horse and chariot races. All of these things depended on the sun. It is, I grant, a stroke of the worst luck for the prince that this of all days would see rain.

Not that I actually *care*.

I am still at a loss to understand why Sturm suggested I offer my services to Leandro. Two months I've been here, and nothing out of the ordinary yet. I've spent most of my time training Leandro's honor guard, the so-called Pride. They are slower learners than the students I was helping Sturm with at the Hall. This would concern me less if only they and their liege had the patience for the breathing exercises. But they do not. I am increasingly suspicious that my skills are entirely wasted here. And yet Sturm seemed so certain that *something* of note would be happening in the near future. I have not paid much attention to news of the wider world since I started teaching at the Hall, and so I assumed he knew something I didn't about political currents between Lionheart and the other city-states.

But I have learned a good deal since arriving here, and no one expects either Leandro or his neighbors to be interested in war, or much of anything else, anytime soon. For my part, I have seen nothing in Leandro himself that would compel me to serve him had a Master of the Hall not insisted that it would be a good idea. He is a strong enough man, yes, in body and in will, and a shrewd one. But he is also petty. And he makes bad jokes.

And, of course, there is the fact that the last of us to serve him was the Slayer. I think we all believed that one would live forever.

So what am I doing here?

ENDS AND MEANS

When I could be teaching gifted youths to Dance—and learning more for my own benefit in the process—I am bid stand sentinel here before the garden’s gates, with half of the prince’s guard, ostensibly to await, and open the gates for, the army as it finishes marching the Royal Way from the entrance of the city to the grounds of the palace. Now we’re all just staring down the Way in the opposite direction, at the palace itself half a mile distant—with the view entirely unobstructed from there to here—waiting for the silly man to acknowledge that the rain is coming. He should send a messenger out soon. The bulk of the army still is outside the city walls preparing for the parade. They would not be pleased to be caught in the weather. Has Leandro not simply looked *up* today, and seen the—

Sun? Shining?

What? How can this—just *minutes* ago the clouds were passing above me, moving over the Way, toward the...

Oh, my. This *is* strange weather.

The clouds *were* passing over me, moving over the Way, toward the palace.

And over the palace, they have stopped. A thickening mass of black and grey casts an obvious shadow from the palace to, I would guess, a quarter of a mile from its walls.

“Is it just me,” the guardsman beside me wonders aloud, “or is that... um... not normal?”

From what we can see of the cloud—it’s just one, now—it seems to form a perfect circle, and one darker by the second.

Right over our heads, the sun is as golden and lovely as ever.

I glance over at my neighbor. “I will dare to guess, friend Carlos,” I say slowly, “that it is not, in fact, just you.”

“Oh,” Carlos says. “That’s...” He coughs. “Well, not as reassuring as I had hoped.”

“I imagine not.” I consider the cloud. “I wonder what Prince Leandro is think—”

A bolt of lightning roars down from the cloud—

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—and even from here, we can hear the rumble and crash of stonework sundered.

I watch dust from the rubble—can't tell of what—rise. “Maybe we should go ask him.”

“Do we have to?” someone else asks.

Another bolt of lightning.

“Maybe we could, uh, go get the men waiting outside the walls,” Carlos adds.

And another.

And then thunder again, but—am I going insane?—*behind* us.

I whirl to see another gathering mass of clouds far down the Royal Way... and my guess is that beneath it is that portion of the army—almost all of it—preparing for the parade.

Lightning dances *in* those clouds, and the thunder rumbles like a never-ending avalanche, but nothing comes *out*.

No, wait—

Rain. Plenty of it. From here—how very *odd* this weather is!—it's like watching a grey curtain drop from the clouds, and wave, wave, wave in the wind. A wind I do not feel, which doesn't seem like it should be possible.

Though the lightning keeps flashing within the dragon's belly, still it *stays* there...

“Damn,” I finally say, and several *real* curses fill the air around me.

And again thunder spins us back around to take stock of the first cloud. In rapid succession, three lightning bolts lance down.

Carlos clears his throat. “So...”

“So,” I echo.

The score-and-five of us look around at each other. Eyes are rolled. Shoulders are shrugged. Sighs are heaved. And finally, heads are nodded.

Against all sane judgment, we start running *toward* the palace.

~

ENDS AND MEANS

THUMOS

After I blast the palace gate to rubble, I unleash two more bolts—not at anything in particular—and leave these clouds behind—

—to materialize with a flash and a roar—I’ll never tire of that—in the clouds above the bulk of Leandro’s army, in a parade formation just outside the city walls.

These men and women of the sword will not die today, if all goes as I plan. Not one. With several moments’ concentration, I call forth the rain, heavy and cold, to distract them as my own forces approach under cover of the fog I have summoned.

I have never maintained three events at once. It’s starting to hurt.

But this is it. My first appearance as my new self. It has to *astonish*.

I am confident that the rain will continue as I desire. I rise up out of this cloud mass to see how far my army is from the walls. Not very, now. So I ride the lightning back to the cloud above Leandro’s palace. It is time.

I know where he sleeps, where he will now be preparing for the ceremonies.

I send down a bolt to draw attention here that may have been diverted by the rains.

Another to break the domed roof of the prince’s chambers.

And one to carry me to his side.

He is hurled against the wall by the force of my entrance. I let sparks dance around the room, setting tapestries and rugs aflame. I let Leandro sputter and rant madly, his eyes wide, for a few moments before I call down more lightning. The blast turns this chamber, already in disarray, into a hopeless, smoldering wreck.

Because I have willed it so, while the thunder is devastatingly loud, it does not deafen Leandro. I want him to hear my words.

The prince is, to his credit, still standing, still defiant. He has his back to the wall, and in one hand, stubbornly clutches what used to be part of a bedpost. I walk toward him and grab him by the

B R E A K T H E S K Y

throat. He swings the piece of bedpost at my head. I send a pulse of Power up my spine and through the surface of my skull, blasting the makeshift club to pieces. And I say to Leandro:

“You are a waste.”

He doesn't answer.

I unleash another stormy blast of Power, this time from my free hand, turning what is left of one wall into a gaping hole. Armed guards and servants stand frozen in the hall beyond.

“Be gone,” I tell them, and they obey.

I drag Leandro through the corridors of his palace, blasting walls and doors down as I must, until we reach his throne room, where many of his ministers and lieutenants and attendants are already gathered. They came to celebrate this useless man's coronation, but they will see something different.

They are silent as I enter, some out of fear, some out of courage. I throw Leandro at the foot of his throne, and he surprises me with how quickly he gets to his feet. He lunges for one of his armrests, and whirls back around—

Ah.

I raise a forearm and the short sword that was hidden in the arm of the throne, its hilt disguised as the decorative neck and head of a griffin, shatters against my block. Leandro's already-wide eyes take on a different quality. The blind rage is still there, but it is slowly sinking in that I am not what I was when we last stood against each other.

“Are you quite finished?” I ask. I don't need to wait for an answer. “Sit.”

He doesn't.

Good.

I punch upward, more for theatricality than anything else, and lightning answers, crashing through the ceiling once, twice, thrice, four and five times. I look up, and the gazes of those around me follow. The cloud we can see through the holes in the roof is black and thick enough that it may

ENDS AND MEANS

as well be night. I focus. It has been some time since I've used this trick.

SIT! the cloud quite literally thunders, and when I lower my gaze not one person is still on his or her feet.

I focus still harder, so that what I say next will be spoken by the cloud at the walls, too.

I AM THUMOS. I HAVE SUMMONED THESE STORMS. AND THIS CITY BELONGS TO ME.

SEFU

"Their maneuvers are getting better, yes?" Valencia asks us as we watch the two centuries drill, supervised by a decury of Crows. "They've come a long way in a month."

"Sure," Aeron says. "But are two hundred enough to cover this region?"

Val presses her lips together. "Leandro doesn't seem likely to move against these towns again anytime soon," she says. "His army has not recovered as quickly as ours."

Not really what Aer asked. I look at her. I think she'll let it go.

"So about earlier," I say, nudging Aer. "That wasn't *really* an almost, was it?"

"Out of the Dance?" Aer says. "That time it was." She frowns. "Doesn't take much, does it?"

I think I know what she means. Sometimes it doesn't matter how good you are. Sometimes it just isn't your day. Or your hour, or your minute. Or your half-second.

But the Dance makes your chances a lot better.

"You ever think about teaching the Crows how to Dance?" I ask.

Val turns a bit, looks at me out of the corner of her eye.

"I mean, if I had the patience for it," I add, "they probably do." We've been working on meditation techniques with them for a couple of years now, and it shows. They're healthier, happier. And better at what they do.

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“Perhaps,” Val says. She doesn’t sound like she means it.

Aer gives me a look and a shrug. I guess I get it.

Yeah, the Dance makes your chances a lot better. But when the other guy knows how to do it, too...

“It’s not something to teach lightly,” Val finally says. “Even if I were sure I could.”

“I think we could,” I say. “Just a thought. I mean, it probably wouldn’t be as hard as teaching them, I don’t know, the Sleep.” That’d be handy, too, though. Don’t know how long my arm would’ve stayed fucked up after Thunder Bridge if I couldn’t Sleep.

Val stares at her feet. Aer gives me another look, different from the last one.

“Just a thought,” I say again.

“Leave the thinking to Val, huh?” Aer jokes, quietly.

“Fuck you too,” I say, nudging her a little with my elbow.

“Maybe later.”

“Really?”

“No!”

LOCKE

I AM THUMOS, the cloud—the *cloud!*—says. For a second we all come to a stumbling stop. **I HAVE SUMMONED THESE STORMS. AND THIS CITY BELONGS TO ME.**

Sturm, you clever old man.

Can it really be Thumos? No one has seen or heard from him since that whole mess at Thunder Bridge.

“Come on,” I snap. “It’s just a cloud.”

“Right,” Carlos says as we start moving again, faster. “Just a cloud. A cloud that fucking *talks.*”

ENDS AND MEANS

“Shut up and run.”

TODAY IS THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE CORONATION OF YOUR PRINCE, the cloud—Thumos? *Thumos?*—is saying. IT HAS BEEN TEN YEARS TOO LONG. LEANDRO IS STRONG IN BODY AND STRONG IN MIND, BUT WEAK AND STALE IN SOUL. I HAVE STUDIED THE HISTORY OF THIS CITY, WITH ITS NAME TOO GRAND FOR ITS PRINCE. LIONHEART HAS SEEN BETTER DAYS. DAYS WITH FULLER COFFERS, DAYS WITH GRANDER ARMIES.

BUT THIS IS NOT BECAUSE ITS PEOPLE DO NOT WORK HARD ENOUGH. IT IS NOT BECAUSE ITS SOLDIERS DO NOT FIGHT HARD ENOUGH. IT IS BECAUSE LEANDRO HAS WASTED YOU. YOU KNOW THIS TO BE TRUE. THREE YEARS AGO LIONHEART FOUGHT A COSTLY WAR WITH CORVID. BOTH CITIES SUFFERED DEARLY, BUT CORVID WON, AND CORVID IS NOW CLOSER TO ITS OLD STRENGTH.

BUT THE STRENGTH OF LIONHEART IS NOT, I CONFESS, MY FIRST CONCERN. YOU ARE NOT MY FIRST CONCERN.

WHEN LEANDRO FOUGHT HIS FOOL'S WAR, A MAN I KNEW LED HIS FORCES. A MAN AS MIGHTY AND AS AWESOME AS THE POWER I WIELD IN YOUR SKIES TODAY. A MAN WITH WHOM I LEARNED MUCH, A MAN FROM WHOM I LEARNED MUCH. A MAN WHO WAS DEAR TO ME, AND WHOSE MEMORY WILL NEVER LEAVE ME.

HE IS DEAD.

HE DIED AT MY HAND.

HE DIED AT MY HAND BECAUSE LEANDRO PROMISED HIM GOOD FIGHTING, AND THIS FIGHTING LED TO ME.

AND FOR WHAT DID HE DIE? FOR THIS ONCE RESPECTED CITY, STILL LITTLE MORE THAN HALF AS GREAT AS IT WAS WHEN THE WAR BEGAN? NOTHING OF WORTH CAME FROM THE WAR, FROM HIS DEATH.

B R E A K T H E S K Y

BUT I WILL CHANGE THAT. STARTING TODAY.

Have to keep moving. Have to make it to Leandro.

If only to see what the *hell* is going on. If only to see Thumos, if it's really him.

AN ARMY UNDER MY COMMAND IS NEARLY AT THE GATES OF THE CITY, the cloud is saying. **IT IS AS LARGE AS THE FORCE THAT STANDS READY FOR A PARADE. AND IT IS STRONGER. WORSHIPPERS OF THE STORM, MOUNTAIN NOMADS, THEY HAVE LITTLE UNDERSTANDING OF MERCY IN BATTLE. SO IF BATTLE IS JOINED, IT WILL NOT END WITHOUT GREAT COST FOR LIONHEART.**

I DO NOT WANT SUCH A COST. I HONOR PEOPLE OF THE SWORD. AND SO DO THEY. MY ARMY AND YOURS CAN LEARN MUCH FROM EACH OTHER.

AND THAT IS ONLY THE BEGINNING OF THE PATH I CAN LEAD YOU ON. THE POWER AND BEAUTY OF THIS THUNDER, THIS LIGHTNING, CAN BE MATCHED BY A DIFFERENT SORT OF POWER AND BEAUTY IN HUMAN HEARTS AND MINDS, AND BODIES. I CAN MAKE THIS CITY THE GREATEST THAT HAS EVER BEEN.

BUT IT MUST FIRST SUBMIT TO ME.

IF YOU WOULD SEE WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THOSE WHO DO NOT, LOOK TO THE SKY ABOVE YOUR PRINCE'S PALACE.

What?

We've scrambled over the debris of the main gate, we've already made it inside, we're pounding our way to the throne room—

There he is.

Thumos.

Wow.

He doesn't see us yet, or if he does he's ignoring us. He moves to Leandro, sitting on the throne, and grasps him by the collar and belt, hoisting the prince into the air.

ENDS AND MEANS

“Should we—” Carlos starts to say.

“Like it would make a difference,” someone else cuts him off.

“Locke?” Carlos asks.

“Wait,” I say. Everyone gives me a look. *Wait for what?* Hell if I know.

Thumos *throws* Leandro straight up, *way* up, through a hole that’s been blasted in the ceiling.

SEE YOUR PRINCE, the cloud rumbles.

AND SEE HIM NO MORE.

THUMOS

I gather all my strength, the strength augmented many times over by the power of the storm coursing through me, and I hurl him into the air, through the roof, far higher than the palace’s tallest spire. No other building in this city is as high, so I know that hundreds, if not thousands, can see the man-shaped speck rising, rising. I watch him, too, and through my connection to the wind and to the latent energy charging the air, I can sense his ascent slow.

SEE YOUR PRINCE.

He reaches the apex of my throw and seems to hover for an instant.

AND SEE HIM NO MORE.

I call down one last bolt of lightning, the greatest I have yet summoned this day.

Blue and white light bathes the throne room for one impossibly long fraction of a second. As it strikes me I revel in the surge of power, and in the sensation of the thunder’s crashing roar as the wall of sound passes through me.

When the moment passes, nothing comes back down through the hole in the ceiling. Leandro has been completely incinerated. But for his influence on this city, which I will soon reshape according to my will, it is as if he had never been.

“Well. If it isn’t the Brooding Lion.”

B R E A K T H E S K Y

I whirl at the voice, distantly familiar.

And... well, then.

“Locke,” I greet her.

“Still bald, I see.”

“I am. It suits me.”

“If you say so. Now do you want to tell me what the *hell* is going on?”

Chapter 8
Stormhammer

13 months after the fall of Androkles

Sturm reveled in the Power he could feel charging the air all around him, as he floated high above the Temple of the Sky and darkened the afternoon with great black clouds.

When he was satisfied, he returned to Thumos, who sat cross-legged at the center of the crest that made up most of the open-air training area. At this moment it was emblazoned with the outlines of a stormcloud and thunderbolt.

“Are you sure I’m ready?” Thumos asked.

“Sure enough,” Sturm said, looking up at the clouds. “But even if you are not, you cannot stay here for much longer. We must prepare the Temple for another.”

“Another?” Thumos echoed. “In the past six years I have never seen or heard of another like you, but suddenly there are to be two of us?”

Sturm turned his gaze to Thumos and cocked an eyebrow, deliberately arching it higher than he felt was necessary. “The world is not limited to what you see and hear, boy. You are not the first to be taught in this place, and you will not be the last.”

Thumos lowered his gaze. “Of course.”

“Now. Tell me again of this... I hesitate to use the word plan.”

“Leandro dies,” Thumos answered with only a moment’s hesitation. “He is a waste of breath.”

“And the city?”

“Becomes mine. I will transform it into a place worthy of beings like Androkles.”

“And how do you intend to do this,” Sturm wondered, “without an army?”

Thumos was silent for a long moment. Then: “I had not thought a large force necessary, given what I will—what I hope I will be able to do, after...” He looked up at the clouds. “After this.” He coughed lightly. “I had planned to seek out others from the Hall, maybe others from my class. Leandro has regained some of the

S T O R M H A M M E R

wealth he lost in the war. It might prove a sufficient lure.”

“Hm.” Sturm scratched his chin. “That might have promise. But I believe I have a better idea.”

“What?”

“In the mountains to the north of the Nine Cities—you know the range of which I speak?”

“The Dragon’s Back.”

“Yes. Such a colorful name. In the Dragon’s Back are a great many tribes of... most people would call them barbarians.”

“And what would you call them?” Thumos asked.

“Useful,” Sturm said. “Potentially. And strong, without question. And proud, not without reason. But more to the point, they worship the Storm. The lightning and the thunder, the wind and the rain. One who commanded these things would, perhaps, be to them a god.”

“Ah,” Thumos said.

“That is not to say that they will be docile.”

Thumos seemed to consider that. “Good.”

“Indeed,” Sturm murmured. “And that is all there is to your plan? Take over a city and reform it?”

“For a start,” Thumos said. “There are... pictures in my head.” He frowned. “Ideas. But they will depend on my success with Lionheart. Maybe they’re only...” He shrugged. “Maybe they’re only dreams.”

Rain began to fall. The breeze that had been blowing became something more.

Sturm looked up. “Do you think you are ready?”

“I don’t know.”

“You have already learned to do what is required for your survival and transformation. You have already done what is required.”

“The light and warmth of the sun are not the same as—”

“But your body is capable of storing the energy. You eat half as much as you used to, yes? This will be little different, at bottom, from what you already know.”

B R E A K T H E S K Y

Thumos looked skeptical. "If you say so."

"Not that it won't hurt. The limits of your body to store Power must be expanded, and so they must be overcome. They must be broken." Sturm willed the rain to fall a little harder. "But you are strong enough."

Thumos said nothing, and closed his eyes.

Sturm listened for his breath. It began to slow, and to deepen.

"Good," he said. "Breathe in the Power that is in the air, the Power the clouds cannot contain. Forget the rain." He willed it to fall harder still, willed the clouds to grow thicker and heavier. "Forget the wind." He willed it to howl. "Forget the cold."

Thunder rumbled.

Sturm closed his own eyes and reached out with his greater senses.

Thumos was focused. Focused by a great many things, a sort of deliberate fury among them. Fury enough to match any mere thunderstorm.

Oh, yes, he was ready.

"It comes," Sturm said, and called the lightning bolt, the first of... who knew how many?

Right down on Thumos.

Chapter 9
Vision

7 months after the takeover of Lionheart

AERON

“He’s *what*?”

Valencia spreads her hands. “I know it sounds—”

“Don’t even fucking *finish* that sentence,” I snap. “No word could possibly—” Possibly what?

I can’t even come up with *that* much.

Thumos? Trying to *wed*?

“Shit,” Sefu breathes.

“I will confess, for my part,” Valencia says mildly, “that I would not have expected him to enter a marriage of convenience.”

“It’s better than blasting a city half to hell, I guess,” I say.

“Wish I’d seen that,” Sefu says for about the thousandth time since we learned of Thumos’s takeover of Lionheart.

“He didn’t blast it half to hell,” Valencia says.

“Well, he didn’t exactly play nice,” I mutter.

Valencia shrugs. “I doubt he’s playing this round ‘nice,’ either,” she says. “What do you think he could do to Falco if Prosperus refuses his offer?”

“How far do you really think he’d go?” Sefu wonders out loud. “They say he didn’t kill anyone when he stormed Lionheart. Besides Leandro. And fuck him anyway.”

“I don’t know,” Val says quietly.

Sefu starts laughing.

“What?” Val asks.

“Stormed Lionheart. Get it? Stormed? I didn’t even do that on purpose.”

VISION

“Shut the fuck up,” I say. Sefu throws something at me. Don’t know what. Don’t care.

Thumos. Wife. *What?*

“Do you know her at all?” I ask. “Isabelle?”

“Not well,” Val says. “We have met, more than once, but Prosperus and my aunt are... not friends. Isabelle is a decent sort, I think. Quiet.” She furrows her brow a little. “I do not think Thumos would mistreat her.”

Sefu and I exchange looks. “No one said that he would,” I point out.

“No,” she murmurs. Then she shakes her head, as if to clear it. “And whether he would is, I’m afraid, less important than where he goes from here.” She turns to the war room’s map of the Nine Cities. Corvid, Lionheart, Falco, Ursa, Wolfshead, and the rest.

Thumos is in Lionheart. We are in Corvid.

Falco is just about exactly between us. And every other city is further away from him than we are. If he’s doing what we think he’s doing, we’re the next obvious target.

Valencia said that Thumos promised not to stand with her enemies.

Of course, he also took an oath to serve the Crown of Corvid for as long as it treated him with honor, and we all know how that turned out.

“Why?” Sefu asks no one in particular. He doesn’t need to elaborate. “I just... I don’t understand.”

“I do,” Val says.

We both look at her. But she doesn’t say anything else.

THUMOS

Thunder and lightning.

Locke ignores my reappearance in the courtyard of the palace—she is, I can tell, in the Dance—and continues drilling.

B R E A K T H E S K Y

Physically, she has at first glance next to nothing in common with Androkles. She is slender where he was massive, delicate-looking where he was every inch a *force*, dark-haired where his mane seemed to glow.

But when she moves...

Like Androkles, she seems born to it. Like Androkles, she possesses capacities her appearance does not suggest—for him, it was that somehow incongruous surety of each step and jump; for her, it's the sense of sheer power behind every movement. Like Androkles, she possesses to a superlative degree those traits one *would* expect—for him, strength and toughness; for her, an unearthly grace, a catlike agility.

Unlike Androkles, she's not quite so close to being truly superhuman. Her inborn physical capacities, and most of all her *instincts* for movement and for combat—her sense of timing and distance and the space around her—surpass mine or Valencia's or Sefu's or Aeron's, but not so much that on a good day one of us might not feel fairly confident fighting her.

Still, did I not wield Power I would be less than certain of my chances. She just... *has it*.

And unlike Androkles, Locke *cares* about how well she's doing what she's doing. She is training. Androkles might have done something that looked the same in his idle hours, but he wouldn't have been *training*; he would have been *playing*.

Not that she doesn't seem to enjoy it. When she leaps through the air, spinning herself in a tight circle four times before she lands, then goes right into another leap, this one becoming a diving roll out of which she comes in a low pounce, cutting arrow-straight through the air mere inches off the ground, before planting her feet again and ending with a jumping uppercut that takes her at least as high as she is tall—

When she does all of that and flows right into another, harder, faster sequence without stopping to catch her breath, when I see how she pushes herself further than is necessary to merely stay in condition or even to strengthen her muscles, it's impossible to think that some part of her isn't

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having at least a little too much fun.

Nevertheless, it is the obvious *effort* that distinguishes her from the Big Man. It just as obviously comes naturally to her, yes, but for her that isn't enough.

In this I am reassured that my path is the right one.

When she finishes, she turns to me as if she's known I was here all along, and she probably has.

"Well?" she asks.

"Prosperus has agreed. I will marry Isabelle, and our cities will be allies."

An eyebrow goes up. "Our," she repeats flatly.

"Perhaps I spent too much time among statesmen in Corvid," I say. "I seem to have absorbed some understanding of language that is indirect and imprecise for the sake of sparing egos."

"Which is to say?"

"Prosperus understands that Falco is now mine."

Locke makes a noncommittal sound.

"How have things been here?" I ask, and beckon her to walk with me to the Royal Garden half a mile from here. Leandro did have at least one thing I don't in his apparent knowledge of flora from all across the continent and beyond.

"Surprisingly quiet," Locke says. "I think the people were expecting more dramatic changes."

"Those will come, when the schools are finished."

"Well, you have more patience than some of your lieutenants," she mutters. "I expect it will surprise you little to hear that what trouble we *have* had has been in territorial pissings between the armies. There was a pretty big tavern fight yesterday."

"Indeed," I sigh. "That, I think I can deal with easily enough. Anything else?"

She hesitates. "You know they call you the Thunder Tyrant, don't you?"

"They?"

B R E A K T H E S K Y

“Well... everyone. I think Carlos coined it.” She pauses. “He’s harmless. Really.”

“I have no need to punish anyone,” I assure her. “So long as my vision is seen through.”

“Your vision,” she repeats. “And what is that, exactly? Thumos, what is it we’re—you’re—doing? What makes this campaign any different from Leandro’s four years ago?”

“It is as I said when I first came here. We are making a civilization of greater strength and beauty than any that has come before. A finer world.”

“I remember what you said. But how do you intend to *do* that?”

“By making a culture in which people like Androkles”—and people like *you*—“are not accidents. And in which their potential is harnessed and guided and fed, not wasted as Leandro wasted Androkles.”

“Mm.” She is silent for a moment. “And how will you make more like Androkles, who are not... accidents?”

“I will teach these people to value what he was.” What *you* are. “Strength and beauty and joy.”

“You don’t think people value strength and beauty and joy?” Locke asks mildly.

“Not as they should.”

She looks at me expectantly.

“They think they do,” I say. “They value those things when they possess them, personally. But they are not *committed* to them as they are committed to some... some misguided sense of the greater good. They will sacrifice the strongest, the most beautiful, the most joyful, if they believe it will be better for the masses. And in so doing they hold themselves—they hold everyone—back.”

“Fine,” she says, frowning. “So you make a world with more people like Androkles. And what will these strong and joyful people do?”

I open my mouth before I realize that I don’t have a ready answer for that.

“Fight?” Locke presses. “Make enemies where there were none?” *As you’ve done?*, her eyes

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seem to add—even if her tone doesn't.

She's good at that.

"To what end?" she asks when I still don't reply. "What does your finer world look like beyond the walls of your cities?"

That I can answer.

"My vision will not be realized until all cities are my cities."

Locke's eyes go just a little wide at that.

"So..." she drawls, "you *do* intend to spill more blood for this?"

"If I must."

"Then a *lot* of people might die."

"Yes."

For once, she is at a loss.

And for some reason, that bothers me.

"But no one has died yet," I say. "Besides Leandro."

"Fuck him anyway," she says, halfheartedly.

For awhile we walk in silence. I understand her reservation. I do not like to think of how much life might be lost in what I have planned. And in truth, sometimes it surprises me that I am ready and willing—I think—to be responsible for such... tragedy.

I am, of course, no stranger to death and killing. But that part of what I do, what I am, has never been something I have taken great pride in. My pride comes from knowing that I *can* do the things I can do, from my *capacity* for dealing death and not the death-dealing itself. But something that feels very much like forgetting that capacity becomes easier than I would like, if it is not tested. And it is most severely tested in battle, so it has for many years been battle that defines me. If it could have done so without death, such is the road I would have chosen.

I dwell on this to remind myself that I am not callous, that I haven't gone mad.

B R E A K T H E S K Y

I'm not. I haven't.

People will die. Maybe many.

But others will live, will *live* so fully and so powerfully that the death will be worth it.

Someday.

This is a vision that seized me three years past and hasn't let go.

This is something I must do.

"And where is *your* joy, Thumos?" Locke suddenly asks.

That is... a good question. "My joy," I start to say, uncertain. "My joy," I start again, "is less important than—"

"The greater good?" she asks, finally letting her sarcasm come through her voice.

Inside, I sigh.

"The *greatest* good," I say.

"Your vision." She purses her lips. "And what does all of this really even have to do with Androkles? Would he have done this?"

"This has become about much more than Androkles."

"Oh?"

"You're right. Androkles would not have thought to *teach* these things. And Androkles was content to stand alone. But I want to make a world where he wouldn't have to."

"Where *he* wouldn't have to stand alone, or where *you* wouldn't have had to—" She stops.

I probably deserved that.

Locke sighs. "I'm sorry."

I shrug. "So am I."

She gives me a look. "For what?"

For what I've done? For what I will do? For something else entirely?

"I'm not sure."

VISION

~

VALENCIA

As Sefu and Aeron lead the cohort from Wolfshead in the last portion of this drill, one of the senior sergeants breaks off from observing and joins me on the knoll I'm watching from.

"May I?" he points to the grass beside me.

"Please."

"Not that we don't appreciate it," the sergeant says as he sits, "but it's a strange thing, a queen looking to make her neighbors stronger."

I smile. "Not so strange," I say. "My aunt trusts my judgment that if her allies are made stronger, so is she. Indeed, she knows from experience that who she walks with makes her who she is. That if those close to her have power, it can be hers, too, if she opens her hand to them. If she proves that she values what they can offer and hopes to learn from it. Which is why, I think, I lead the Crows."

"But we're not family, Wolfshead and Corvid," the sergeant points out. "Why not seek to rule us? If she's putting all this effort into making us stronger, why not make our strength her own?"

"That would not be the same kind of strength." Why doesn't Thumos see it? Why doesn't he see that the sort of strength he admires can't be of his own making, in such a controlling manner? Or maybe he does see it. And maybe he simply doesn't care. Or maybe he sees something else.

Maybe.

"And besides. My aunt loves Corvid," I say. "She does not desire anything more than its flourishing."

The sergeant grunts what sounds like approval. "And what do you desire?"

"A finer world."

He frowns.

"If the Crows can give others the means to their own greater strength," I explain, "and that

B R E A K T H E S K Y

strength is used wisely and well, I am satisfied. It pleases me to see others learn, and grow.”

“And your aunt—”

“Trusts my judgment.”

He gives me a look. “...Right.”

“She does. She values what those who serve her have to say. As I said, she knows that it can strengthen her, and strengthen our city, if she is not afraid to share her duty to protect and serve and lead it. And she understands that what I want is good for Corvid.”

The drill has ended, and the Wolfshead soldiers are preparing to retire. Aeron and Sefu are coming this way.

“I should go,” the sergeant says, and after offering a casual salute, he does.

I wait for the others to join me.

“What’d you think?” Sefu asks as he and Aeron sit.

“I wasn’t watching most of it.”

“What?” Sefu frowns. “But you were right here. What else could you have been—oh.”

“Yes.”

“What is it now?” Aeron asks.

“Nothing new,” I assure them. “And no troop movements. I just thought it wise to look in.”

“And you’re sure Thumos can’t tell that you can do this... this whole *seeing wherever the sun shines* thing?” Aeron prods.

I certainly hope he can’t, but I can’t be certain. Sunna warned me never to look *too* closely with this ability, never to let my mind’s eye see him in any more detail than might a bird flying at the height of an average tree, for fear that he might sense the flow of Power around him, and worse, sense that it’s *me*. Others, not Empowered as we are, need not be a source of such concern, which is how I learned as much as I did of his marriage to Isabelle.

“Val?” Aeron again.

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“He doesn’t seem to have noticed so far,” I say.

Aeron narrows her eyes. “Not what I asked.”

I spread my hands. “It is impossible to tell.”

“Can I ask something?” Sefu interjects. “How do we know he can’t do the same thing?”

“Sunna said that his particular... *affinity* does not grant him the same sort of far-seeing.”

“Sunna said,” Aeron echoes.

“Why would she have come to me, given me this Power, told me to keep an eye on Thumos lest he go too far, if she did not intend me to be able to succeed?”

Aeron shrugs. “I don’t know. But how do *we* know *she* knows everything?”

“We can’t,” I admit, “but we have to trust her.”

They exchange looks. I know they trust *me*, but they have been understandably nervous about this... development... for the past several months.

“I must practice,” I finally say. “And meditate.” The far-seeing is tiring. I have always liked to sit in the sun for longer than is responsible for someone of my responsibilities, but that it is now so *needful*, that I need to soak in the sun’s rays as I am told plants do, somehow takes away from the pleasure.

“Yeah. Do your thing,” Sefu says, and he and Aeron go to attend to more mundane matters.

We have spoken at length about the fact that I have... am... whatever this is. And that they have not, are not, *cannot* have or be... whatever this is.

They don’t, in Sefu’s words, give a shit. They’re not even jealous.

All Sefu really wants is to be happy and well fed. All Aeron really wants is a sense of family, of unbreakable trust, wherever she is and whomever she’s with. They seem to agree that having Power would be too much of a burden for them to ever have those things, at least in the way that they want—and, I like to think, have—they now. And that they feel this way, according to Sunna, is the very reason that even in spite of what they learned at the Hall—the basic skills of meditation that

B R E A K T H E S K Y

were the foundation of what I learned to become attuned to the sun at the Temple of the Sky—they are not of the particular *character* to become Empowered.

They don't *want* it, as Thumos does.

And they don't feel a sense of commitment to the rest of the world that Thumos may threaten, as I do.

I do not hold this against them. Indeed, I find it somehow comforting to know that they cannot bring themselves to care *so* much about anything. I would not sacrifice my own capacity for such caring no matter the offer in return, but I confess that it is tiring at times. And in Thumos, it can be dangerous.

I find it comforting to know that people who have the capacity to do such great and terrible things as this Power makes possible do not necessarily have the *will*, do not feel a need to so impose themselves upon the world. It gives me hope that those who become Empowered in any way will remain few in the annals of history, and that those who are asked to shoulder the burden that Power really is—to hold a vigil against those who believe that Power is a gift—will be even fewer.

Chapter 10
Sunbringer

14 months after the fall of Androkles

Sunna watched Valencia's eyes go wide, watched her blink, rub her eyes, blink some more.

"Welcome to the Temple of the Sky," Sunna said, looking out over the mountains herself.

"Why have you brought me here?"

"Do you know where Thumos has been since he left you?"

Valencia went very still, then drew herself into one of those cultivated aristocratic poses. Someone else striking the same pose might seem to be looking down her nose at some social inferior, but in Valencia the same way of carrying herself somehow inspired something like confidence. Trust. Not any feeling-small.

"No," Valencia said.

"He has been here," Sunna replied, "learning to do this."

She extended an arm, pointed at a target that had been set up a few hours before, and sent forth a blast of golden-glowing Power. The target was blasted to pieces, and the pieces smoldered and smoked upon the stones of the giant sun crest on which they were standing.

"Or something like it," Sunna added as Valencia gaped. "His particular sensitivity runs more toward the storm than the sun." She looked sidelong at Valencia. "I suspect that yours will be otherwise."

Valencia took a few steps back and looked around, apparently for someplace to sit, because she eventually just went to her knees and stared at her hands.

"Mine," she said.

"Yes."

For a very long time, Valencia didn't say anything. Sunna waited.

"What else did he learn to do?" Valencia finally asked, still just staring at her hands as if they were on fire. Little did she know. "Can he do whatever it is that you did to get us here from Corvid?"

"Something like it," Sunna said again. "And some things I cannot do. But you will learn things he

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cannot do.”

“Why?” Valencia looked up at Sunna.

Sunna waited for a more specific question. She knew Valencia had at least two.

“Why will I learn things he cannot do? Why am I to learn anything here?” That was one.

“Because with the Power we have given him,” Sunna said, “Thumos may become a danger to more people, including himself, than his ambitions are worth.”

“And why,” Valencia said slowly, her eyes narrowing, “did he learn these things from you?” That was the other.

“The answer is a name, child,” Sunna said. “I trust you hardly need to hear it.”

Valencia sighed, and it was a heavy, pregnant sound, as if she felt that something about this, something terrible, was her fault. She looked at her hands again.

“You gave him... whatever it is, for the same reason that he left Corvid,” she said. “Because what happened at Thunder Bridge displeased you.”

“It disturbed me,” Sunna corrected. “It displeased Sturm. But yes, that is why we Empowered Thumos.”

“But you worry that Thumos will make his own Thunder Bridge.”

“I do,” Sunna said.

“And Sturm?”

“Sturm does not worry. But he agreed that it would not be a bad thing to Empower you as well.”

“What makes you think I can do this?” Valencia asked.

“The fact that you care.”

“What? Everyone—”

“Don’t be stupid, child. You know what I mean. You care, very deeply, about everything you touch and everything you see. You believe in your people as few nobles do. You believe in all people more than almost anyone does. You believe in your friends more than they believe in themselves. You believe that you have the

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capacity to make a great and beautiful difference in the world, and you believe that because you can, you must."

"And Thumos?" Valencia interrupted. "What does he care about? What does he believe?"

"He believes in strength and beauty and joy," Sunna said. "And he, too, cares for his friends. And that, I think, is all."

"He's not that simple."

"I didn't say he was simple," Sunna said.

Valencia opened her mouth as if to object further, but nothing came out.

"And you believe," Sunna went on, "that when a great threat comes to people who cannot face it alone, it is the responsibility of the strong and the noble to face it for them."

Valencia was silent.

"You and Thumos both care so much more than most people care," Sunna said. "About anything. That, together with what we taught you a decade ago, are what will enable you to become as I am."

"You truly believe that Thumos will become something like Androkles."

"No," Sunna said. "I fear he will become something much worse."

Valencia looked back up at her.

"Androkles," Sunna said, "was only human."

Chapter 11
To Stand with Her Enemies

1 year after the takeover of Lionheart

THUMOS

“So how many in all did we lose against Vulpes?” Carlos asks, rubbing his eyes. “I hate math.”

“That makes a full century in the first engagement,” Locke says, tossing aside the reports from individual cohorts. “At least another hundred on the plain before the walls.”

“Sloppy,” I mutter. “I could have ended it faster.” I *should* have. People died needlessly. “I don’t know why—”

“You’re one man,” Locke says. Not as strongly as she might, if she actually meant it. If she actually thought it mattered. I don’t blame her.

I knew sacrifices would have to be made. I knew many would die. But I am one of the three most powerful beings alive! No one else comes close to what I can do. But the Vulpines fought harder than I expected. Not that I can blame *them*, either. At no point has this plan required that all parties “agree” with me. Indeed, I haven’t expected complete agreement from anyone. Relatively few people could even fully comprehend what it is I mean to do, what it is I aim to build, why this is a path worth taking. And what the vast majority thinks hardly matters. How often can they be said to know what is even in their own interest? They cannot see far or wide enough.

So I was prepared for resistance. I was prepared to take losses facing it.

Nevertheless, the setback—the sheer *waste* of lives, of potential, of strength coursing through limbs—is... disheartening. I refuse to believe that I could not have waged the battle at Vulpes better.

“Thumos?” Locke’s voice has softened. As I focus again on my surroundings I see that she is frowning slightly. “Are you—can you pull it together?”

“I am the Stormhammer.”

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Locke sighs.

Carlos looks at her. “I... think I have... things. To... uh... do.” He rises slowly from his seat and backs away from the table a few steps before bowing hurriedly and leaving the room.

“And?” Locke prods.

“And a man who can summon lightning and thunder at will should not find it difficult to pacify an army of—”

“Mere mortals?” Locke says with a smirk.

“Yes!”

“Thumos,” Locke sighs, leaning back, “you’re not beyond limits. And—if I may speak frankly?”

“Do.”

“The fact that you seem to think you *are* beyond them is the problem. It’s not that you didn’t do better at Vulpes. How many did you kill on your own? Did you count how many bodies on that field had burns from lightning? I did. Well, I started to, but it was too—” She waves a hand. “Never mind. That’s beside the point. The problem isn’t your limits. The problem is that because you can’t see them clearly, you’re making choices you shouldn’t make. I don’t pretend to understand everything about your ‘vision,’ but I think I understand enough to say that you needn’t push as fast and as far as you have been. You don’t need to become overlord of the Nine Cities before you hit middle age.”

Or do I? How long before I become as Androkles became? There are still enough players on this field that should they unite against me, I may indeed fail.

I have the mountain tribesmen—more of them every few weeks. I have won over the people of Lionheart. Lord Prosperus and I have even, slowly, become something resembling friends—he is, like me, something of a reader—which is why I was able to have a contingent from Falco march with my army to Vulpes. I have *momentum*. I cannot afford to lose it.

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No. I cannot pay heed to my limits. Not yet.

“Wolfshead is next,” I say. “We convene the war council tomorrow.”

Locke opens her mouth, but seems to decide against saying anything.

She does sigh.

Then she stands and walks to the door.

She stops just as she places her hand against it to push it open.

“Thumos?” she says without turning. “Doesn’t Corvid trade with Wolfshead?”

I feel muscles tensing against my will. “Yes. Corvid’s steel for Wolfshead’s grain, mostly.”

“And those Crows have been doing a good deal of training other cities’ armies,” Locke says.

“So don’t you think it likely that Corvid will come to Wolfshead’s defense?”

“It is likely.”

Now she does turn around. “Corvid’s army is significantly more competent than Wolfshead’s. Especially those Crows. They can move quickly.”

“Yes.”

“And Corvid is closer to us,” she says, narrowing her eyes. “So... shouldn’t we be worried about *Corvid*? Shouldn’t we be doing something about *Corvid*?”

There is no need for a complicated answer. “No.”

“But—”

“No.” I stand. “This is not something we will debate.”

Locke’s face goes placid, but her eyes go cold and dagger-sharp. “Sentimentality doesn’t become you,” she says evenly. “You’ll endanger our army needlessly.”

“Locke—”

“If we move against Corvid now, we can take it. Claude lacks the queen’s valor—and her niece. If we move against Wolfshead, Corvid will learn of it and she will have time to send soldiers to support Claude. We’ll be caught between two forces. Even if we can defeat Wolfshead’s army, we

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won't be able to occupy the city before Corvid's forces arrive. They will be the hammer, and Wolfshead's walls the anvil."

"Locke—"

"And Valencia will probably lead whoever marches against us! She's the best there is on the open field, Thumos, and you know it. Better than me, better than you."

"Locke. We are finished."

"No, we're not. We—" She glances out the window.

She has noticed that the sky is darkening.

"Do you honestly think gathering clouds will frighten me, Thumos?" She laughs humorlessly. "Call your lightning and your thunder. I'll still—"

She stares out the window some more. And she sighs. Again.

"Locke..."

"Never mind," she says, and then she leaves.

I am alone with my thoughts and with my memories of a promise, and I let the sky return to normal. Little changes. The clouds go from black to grey, but they are still thick and low, and they don't need me to make rain fall.

No, I cannot lose what momentum I have. I must press on.

But making that easier is not worth breaking my word.

VALENCIA

"What the fuck does it say?" Sefu asks impatiently.

Aeron looks up from the message relayed by pigeon from Vulpes, and scowls at Sefu.

"Aeron," I say. In fairness I could have decided to know first-hand, but I couldn't bring myself to just *watch* it, unable to do anything of worth, and now I can't bring myself to go seeking the piles of dead.

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Sefu clears his throat theatrically.

Aeron makes a crude gesture in his direction. “Lionheart lost maybe two hundred in all,” she says. “Maybe a little more. Maybe a little less.”

“And Vulpes?”

Aeron glances back at the paper in her hands. “Lots,” she says.

“Lots?” Sefu repeats.

“Lots,” Aeron says. “Mostly from, um, burns. Lightning burns.” She hands Sefu the message and suddenly seems to find the chandelier very interesting.

It is as Sunna—and, if I’m being honest, as I—feared.

Thumos has gone too far. And now, I must...

Do what, exactly?

Must I...

...No. At least, not if I can help it.

But one way or another, this must end.

“Val,” Sefu says after awhile. “Are we really going to...”

Do we have any other choice?

Well... yes. After a fashion. I do not. *They* do.

“I am going to end this.”

“By yourself,” Aeron says.

If I must.

“Yes.”

Sefu and Aeron exchange glances, and Aer—Aer rolls her eyes, and I cannot help smiling.

“No,” she says, in the tone of a bored, exasperated schoolmaster who has far too often had to correct her students, “you’re not.”

“The Crows will be useless,” I say, more to see what they say next than because I actually

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think it will deter them.

Certainly I would rather they stayed out of harm's way. But what they do—especially what they do for me—is out of my hands. These are my dearest friends, and they will follow me anywhere. I cannot stop this. And though I fear for their lives, there is a part of me that does not *want* to stop it. If I am to face danger, it is always easier to do it in good company.

And if I am to face an old friend...

I wonder if this is how he felt during the march to Thunder Bridge.

“Val?” Sefu is saying.

I must have missed something. “Yes?”

“Don't worry about it,” Aeron says dryly. “Just another stupid joke. But *you* were saying?”

I smile. “Why, nothing at all.”

“Sefu,” Aer says thoughtfully, “I think I just heard her say, ‘The Crows will go in full force to Lionheart.’ Is that what you heard?”

Sefu sticks a finger in his ear, as if trying to clean it. “Yeah, yeah, I think it is.” His hand drops and his eyes grow entirely serious. “He's got Locke, after all.”

Aeron grimaces.

“I always liked her,” Sefu adds, sadly.

“Yeah, well,” Aer says, “I always liked Androkles. *That* went well.”

Androkles, she mentions. Not Thumos. Because that is to be taken for granted?

Or because she doesn't want to use the past tense?

“Val,” Sefu says, “are you sure you're ready?”

A fair question. I have tested my Power in the wilderness and in the sky. There is much I can do. I cannot, like Thumos, summon storms, but I can release the power that I store within me as fire, the way Sunna showed me when she first brought me to the Temple. And I have no reason to believe that I'm not every bit as strong and fast as he is. Even at the Hall, we were always as close to

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equal as people in our particular vocation can be.

But I often got the feeling that he could push himself even further, or rather, that *something* from outside might be able to push him. I think I saw something like that at Thunder Bridge four years ago. And I wonder if it might happen again. I wonder if he could—

But for now, all I say to Sefu and Aeron is:

“Sure enough.”

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Chapter 12 Break the Sky

A few days later

There is a barracks within the walls of the palace in Lionheart, but not a great many soldiers are quartered there. Only the honor guard of the prince—or the Stormhammer, as is the case now. Thumos of Kalon has not changed the number of the guard from three hundred, nor their name from the Pride. They are fine fighters, at least as good as Corvid's Crows on the open field.

But the Crows do not intend to fight on the open field.

It is a cloudless noon when the sky *opens* without warning above the palace, like a great glowing hole rent in the very fabric of existence. Golden light streams from this hole, more a wide line of fire, really, traced over the walls and matching their lines exactly.

Men and women clad in black and silver drop the ten feet or so from the rip in space and land lightly on the stones. They too number three hundred—the Crows have grown since Aeron Brava and Sefu Tau hand-picked the first century.

They, Aeron and Sefu, are the last to drop from the blazing portal. There is a blinding flash, and when the Crows—and any others who may be watching—regain their sight, what they see is a tall, lean woman dressed much like those who preceded her through the gate of fire: black leggings, a black tunic, and a knee-length black cloak over silvery-shining greaves and bracers and breastplate. But she wears no helmet, instead letting her long hair, golden like the light that wreathes her, stream out and back.

Her eyes are like little suns.

And she is hovering high above them, perhaps fifty feet over the walls, arms held out wide.

Until a few moments ago she was merely Valencia Corvus, commander of the Crows, a knight and a steward, a noblewoman of Corvid.

Now, she is the Sunbringer.

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She cannot quite let go of her name, however, and so the Sunbringer who calls herself Valencia announces herself not unlike an old friend once introduced himself to this city and its people. Where he used dark clouds and heavy thunder to rage and roar, though, she uses the wind to whisper and to carry images and sensations. She is not quite sure how it works. But whatever the case, this is what she says:

I am Valencia Corvus. I serve the Queen of Corvid, and I command her Crows.

I have watched your leader, Thumos who calls himself the Stormhammer, since shortly after he killed your former prince.

He was my friend, once. And when last we spoke, he promised never to stand with my enemies.

*He has not, to his credit, broken that promise. But I do not believe either of us foresaw the possibility of his **becoming** my enemy, **becoming** the very sort of person I have sworn all of my adult life to oppose with sword and spirit.*

I opposed Prince Leandro because he was a warmonger, a bringer of death and oppression and chaos and fear. Thumos opposed Leandro with me—although, I have come to recognize, for very different reasons.

But his reasons for fighting Leandro do not matter to me. His reasons for becoming what he is do not matter to me, because what he has become is what he once fought, what I once fought, what I will always fight: a bringer of death and oppression and chaos and fear.

Perhaps some forgotten or hidden part of your Stormhammer is still my friend. I hope so.

But if not, or if that part cannot rise above the rest of him, then I will fight. With sadness, but without regret. With disappointment, but without hesitation. In pain, but in the knowledge that I do what is right.

As I speak, my Crows move through the halls of the palace. They will seal off and barricade entrances, to keep the Pride from getting anywhere near Thumos. Should these defenses fail, they will meet the Pride steel for steel. And while on the open battlefield no one can match your warriors, in corridors and shadows none can match mine.

I know that a woman called Locke leads the Pride. I know that she is one of the finest fighters to come

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from the Hall of the Sword and Fist, because I was in her class. But two others of that class, Sefu Tau and Aeron Brava, lead the Crows, and it is my conviction that as marvelously skilled as she is, Locke cannot stand against them both.

If we can help it, our quarrel will not leave the walls of the palace. If you would preserve as much life as possible, then whether you be people of the sword or people of the mill or people of the loom or people of the field or people of the potter's wheel, I beseech you to stay where you are. I beseech you to mind your own corner of the world for the hours to come, and let your leader and myself—and those who follow us willingly—finish what we must.

I am Valencia Corvus.

I am the Sunbringer.

And I will give this city back to you, or die trying.

~

Thumos realizes everything he needs to know in the first few seconds that Valencia's portal is open. He senses the manifestation of Power, he recognizes the soul wielding it, and he understands why she has come. He doesn't have time to be surprised, so he wills himself not to be, and all he does is start moving.

He leaves his quarters, and goes to find Locke.

When he does, he can immediately tell that she is not as she has been.

She is laughing.

She is laughing because she no longer has to wonder if Thumos is a visionary or a lunatic. She no longer has to worry if she is sacrificing the lives of her soldiers for a beautiful cause or if she is simply throwing them away for the vanity of her damaged friend. She no longer has to feel torn between her love of the Dance, of the fight, and her vague hunch that *what* she fights for matters just as much as the joy that fighting brings her.

All she has to worry about right now is surviving.

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And that means Dancing the finest Dance she's ever Danced.

Thumos doesn't quite realize all of this, but he gets the gist of it when their eyes meet.

"I'll do what I can," Locke says lightly, her mouth quirked in a half-grin, her eyes twinkling.

Thumos nods, and she is gone.

In this moment, Thumos is alone, as he has been alone since the day he killed Androkles.

This is the first time, however, that the realization doesn't bother him.

He makes his way to the roof of the highest tower, which he has taken to using as a place of meditation. It is a circle, perhaps forty feet in diameter, with the simple lion rampant crest of the city carved into its flagstones. When he first took over the city, Thumos considered changing the crest to be like that at the Temple of the Sky, displaying either sun or storm depending on the weather. But he decided that he appreciated the reminder of being a Lion at the Hall of the Sword and Fist.

When he gets to the top of the tower now, he is not surprised to see Valencia there, waiting.

"I kept my word," he says.

"I know," she says. "And yet..."

"I know."

A ray of sunlight the length of a sword fills her hand.

Silver-blue arcs of crackling Power wreath his fists and forearms.

Both Sunbringer and Stormhammer glow white from within. Her eyes blaze, his smolder.

And they take to the skies.

~

Aeron and Sefu don't like this. Not one bit.

They wish Val had sent them through first, and not the rest of the Crows. Because then they wouldn't be watching the Crows throw themselves at Locke, wave after wave. Having sealed and barricaded entrances to this part of the palace, dozens of the black-clad warriors—those not left to guard against the Pride—have caught the Stormhammer's right hand in an open space, a great hall

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with corridors beyond its far door, leading to Thumos's private suite. Merely by weight of numbers in a room that enables them to surround their single foe, the soldiers from Corvid should have overwhelmed her in moments.

But she is just too—damn—good.

“Look Ma,” Sefu mutters, “no swords.”

Indeed, Locke wields no weapons but wears gauntlets that must be custom-forged, as closely as they seem to fit. Much like the Crows, she also wears a light breastplate and shining greaves. Unlike the Crows, she uses those greaves themselves as weapons along with her steel-hugged hands. Punches and hammerfists and chops, and blows with forearm or elbow, crush throats and break arms; front and side and spinning kicks shatter kneecaps and noses and teeth, and roundhouses crash those greaves against skulls, some of which have lost their helmets and therefore cave in.

And she never stops moving. The Crows swarm her but she ever leads the way—twirling, somersaulting, cartwheeling, kicking off against the walls, or simply stepping *just* far enough in this or that direction for someone to stumble past her and into a comrade—and she does it so masterfully that Sefu and Aeron can never orient themselves properly to charge in before their lines of sight are crossed by desperately maneuvering Crows.

Locke seems, also, to scorn the stones beneath her feet, to stay on them only as long as it takes to get off them again. One moment she is a spear, perfectly parallel to the floor, all forward motion; the next she is a wheel, every limb out and striking as she spins through the air; the next she is a whip, with the perfect balance between looseness and tension, delicacy and hardness, lancing unerringly for one tiny, carefully chosen spot.

And in the next—

Aeron Brava and Sefu Tau look at each other, and decide that this is the stupidest fucking thing they've ever had to do.

While there are still Crows standing, Sefu and Aeron fall into the Dance, and finally join the

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fray. But they do not do their utmost to put down Locke; indeed, they don't even try.

Instead, they start grabbing Crows and tossing or driving them away from their onetime classmate. Everyone is at first thoroughly confused, but the Crows are disciplined enough not to just lash out when they see their commanders attacking their comrades.

Within less than a minute, all is still.

Locke stays in a deep fighting crouch, her eyes wide and wild, but her muscles tight and taut.

"We don't have to do this," Sefu says.

Locke's eyes begin to narrow.

"This is bigger than us," Aeron adds, looking up.

Locke's eyes are slits.

"And whatever happens up *there*," Aeron continues, "decides what happens down here. We're good, and you're better, but even all three of us together couldn't last a minute against either of *them*. So why should we do anything but wait?"

Locke rises slowly. "Can't say that any reason comes immediately to mind," she says at last. "So. We wait?"

Sefu nods. "We wait."

They wait.

~

The Empowered ones hurtle through the air, over the city, a black speck with hints of silver—Valencia in her dark Crow uniform and its steel armor—and a white speck with hints of gold—Thumos in flowing robes not unlike those he wore growing up at a faraway monastery, embroidered with the crest of Lionheart as well as lightning bolts and sunbursts.

As they fly, as they fight—they talk.

And because they use their Power to do it, because they convey their meaning through the energy swelling around them, their communication is almost instantaneous; full sentences' worth of

“speech” take only fractions of a second.

Must we? Thumos asks.

I would rather we didn't, she replies.

And yet—

You leave me no choice.

Don't talk like them. You know better.

Them. Always “them,” always “the mob,” always “the small,” always “ordinary people.” Why is it that you have always had such a problem with “them”?

He has no easy answer. In truth, he doesn't feel that he needs one.

She catches him on the cheek with an upward cut. In the instant that he recoils, she drives a kick into his chest, and they crash into the wall that rings the city.

Lightning strikes. Thunder rolls. Great pieces of stone tumble to the earth. There is another bolt of lightning, answered by a tongue of flame that emanates from the Sunbringer, and they are in the air again, streaking heavenward, leaving trails of gold and silver and blue in their wake.

Answer me!

Why? What answer could possibly satisfy you? What answer could make you let go of your conviction that the good of the greatest number is what one who would lead must always aim to achieve? What answer could convince you that sometimes one man or woman can matter more than a dozen, if those dozen—or those hundred, those thousand!—are simply lesser beings?

What is a lesser being, Thumos? What gives you the authority to judge that?

He answers—as he seems to answer most difficult questions of late, he realizes all too well—with lightning.

I asked you about authority. Valencia does not seem much affected by the blast. You have shown me power. They are not the same. You know this. Where is wisdom in all of this? Insight? Knowledge? Truth? Can you judge without recourse to these things?

Where were wisdom and insight and knowledge and truth—

When Androkles fell?

Before Thumos can offer anything by way of reply, she releases another burst of golden fire, and for a moment the blast throws them apart, and Thumos begins to plummet back down toward the city. Valencia follows, still wreathed in flame, and her sword of light plunges through his stomach.

He grabs her wrist and keeps it there, and a blast of stormy Power emanates from him to envelope them both as Thumos wills himself once more to fly. Valencia answers his attack by pouring more of herself into the sword that still impales him, and she sees pain mingle with rage in the furnaces of his eyes.

Androkles is the past.

She gives the sword of fire still more.

Grow up.

Thumos cannot master his pain, so his flight is erratic, and Valencia cannot break his grip, so her own attempts at flight only make things worse. They spiral into one of the palace's lower towers, their fire and lightning blast its walls to pieces, and their spiral takes them right through, and down, down, toward a courtyard.

They are exactly one second from hitting the ground when finally she extinguishes the sword. He releases her immediately, but wrenches himself with impossible speed through a full spinning backfist even before she can begin to pull away.

The impact of his knuckles against her jaw is a relatively quiet report, but still it echoes harshly from the walls around them. They hover now inches above grass and stone.

“What will it take to end this?” Thumos asks, out loud.

“What will it take for you to move past Androkles?”

“I *have* moved past Androkles. Would he have done the things that I have done?”

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“Would you have done them if not for him?”

“Can you truly ask me not to react to his death at all?” he demands. “Because that idiocy is where these questions will lead you.”

Valencia’s lips form a hard line. “This is not the way to a finer world,” she finally says.

“Not for you, perhaps.”

“Not for anyone!” she snaps, and lets herself touch the ground. She strides up to Thumos—who does not yet lower himself—and locks gazes with him. Now her eyes are merely tawny again, and his merely the color of steel. “You’re not making this world better or more beautiful, Thumos. You’re making it what you want it to be.”

“Can they not be the same thing?”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“That is not what leaders do!”

“Why *not*?” Thumos thunders. “Is it not working? If you have watched me then you have seen the new schools I have built in this city and the learned ones whose scholarship I have supported in exchange for their services as teachers. You have seen my mountain warriors push these city soldiers to new limits, and you have seen the discipline of the army prove instructive to the tribesmen. You have seen that Prosperus and I have made possible grand performances, performances that can inspire as Androkles did. These people could not have done any of these things on their own.”

“How can you *know*?” Valencia demands. “You’ve not given them the chance!”

“If they have not done it yet, why should I let them grope about in the dark when I can drag them into the light?”

“Because they deserve the opportunity to find their own way.”

“I don’t care about what they *deserve*,” Thumos half-snarls. “I care about what will make

them stronger, and if I fail in that, then I care about what will enable their children to surpass them.”

He considers something. “Suppose that I ask for permission. Does that change the end result?”

“Yes!” Valencia says. “It changes the path, and the path determines the destination.”

“Two paths can lead to the same destination.”

“Not truly. Even if they look like they do, the traveler of one will experience something different from the traveler of the other.”

Even as she says it, Valencia fears he is not listening. She can see his eyes darkening, she can feel the air itself changing, growing more pregnant with possibility, more *dangerous*.

She knows that she cannot let him go on as he intends. It is not merely for the sake of his victims, past and present and future. It is not merely for the sake of those he might call his friends, like Locke, whom Valencia knows to be less than entirely certain about... all of this.

It is Thumos himself for whom Valencia is also afraid. The Thumos who killed Androkles, who walked away from her years ago, who worried and cared and felt burdened not only by what he had done but by what he might do in answer to that. She does not want this Thumos to be lost forever, and she fears that Thumos Stormhammer, the Thunder Tyrant, may just make her fears come true.

Thumos. Hear me.

I have heard enough.

It saddens him that she will clearly never understand. He is certain that if anyone in the world besides Sturm and Sunna could have fully comprehended his vision, it would have been Valencia, and in truth her understanding would have meant more to Thumos than theirs. That he will not have it is a realization that weighs on his heart more heavily than he expected it might. That one way or another, the finer world he envisions and this once dear friend will not be able to coexist... this too burdens him. And because he lets himself carry this thought to its logical end, it also frightens him.

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Then—before it can break him—it enrages him.

He looks around at the rubble their personal combat has strewn about, and he frowns.

If you would stop me, then do it above the clouds, where those who fight for our sakes will not have their lives wasted by our carelessness.

And with a flash of lightning and a crash of thunder, he is gone, a flare of blue and white high above Valencia like a fallen star returning to the skies.

And she catches herself smiling, because what he just said makes her think that perhaps she can save her friend after all. The Thumos who cared—cares—so deeply for “people of the sword” yet lives, and if she can draw him forth, she might make further use of his empathy.

With an explosion of fire and a rush of wind, she goes after him, a ray of light cutting through the sky like a golden arrow.

~

The weather is stranger than ever, Locke notes as she, Sefu and Aeron reach the top of the tower.

“Always like this around here?” Sefu asks dryly.

“No.”

Streams of colored light hang in the air all about, as far out as the city walls and higher, probably, than they can clearly see. Black clouds—strange, small ones—are scattered across the sky, dense and heavy, utterly out of place amid the brilliant blue and beneath a sun that seems to shine as it has never shone before.

For a good, long while, they simply marvel.

And then they hear it.

~

He thinks his anger saved him from breaking.

But what it really did was blind him to the cracks.

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Cracks in his spirit that are growing, that are being made longer and wider by sheer strain.

She thinks his moment of empathy is what can save him.

But it is, in this moment, what poses the greatest threat to him.

They fly. Higher, faster. To what end, neither of them knows.

Thumos, she calls.

He hears her, too well. And he answers the only way he now knows how.

~

They do not think it is thunder.

This sound is not that tame.

~

It comes from within him, this last lightning.

But unlike the other blasts of Power that have come from within him, this one is not limited by his choice, his intent. And this is more than merely *from* him. It is *of* him.

For Thumos, nothing is bigger than the personal. Even his vision of a finer world matters mostly because it is *his* vision, and he cannot help but chase it.

But because for Thumos, nothing is bigger than the personal, when his vision collides with his friend he cannot steel himself by thinking of the greater good. For Thumos, there is no greater good. And for Thumos, who believes that one person can be worth a dozen, a hundred, a thousand... when one such person collides with his vision, what then?

He had never considered it.

He thinks, now, that it cannot possibly be that this never occurred to him. It must be, rather that he never allowed himself to stay with the thought for long. After Androkles, no time seemed like a good time for such brooding.

So it is that when the thought simply seizes him, as it did below, something inside him that was already cracked crumbles. And the cracks spread.

B R E A K T H E S K Y

And the thought doesn't let him go. Its grip tightens, and sends up the fires of fury, in whose wrath mere distress can safely hide.

But hiding is not going away, and hiding is not healing, and hiding is not standing firm.

So the cracks spread.

And when the friend worth a dozen, a hundred, a thousand lesser beings calls his name, and he is full of cracks he cannot see through his rage, he has only a moment. Only a moment to be vaguely surprised that his intended reply—just another bolt of lightning, a plea for her silence, a plea to shut up and fight and *finish* this—is far surpassed by what actually happens. Only a moment to understand why this is so. Only a moment to realize that he contains more Power than he knew, and that when he is in this state it is too much for him.

Only a moment to decide that he will try to make one last point, and only a moment to gather a little more Power under his conscious control to shout into Valencia's mind—

DOWN.

—before he does break.

And break the sky.

~

“Sonofabitch!” the three who wait blurt at once.

~

She has reversed direction before she realizes it, and only then does she fully understand the echoes of a psychic shout: **DOWN.**

There is a sound like a hundred stormcloud-sized lions, a sound like a mountain collapsing in on itself as it is struck by a massive rock from beyond the sky, a sound like an earthquake birthing a hurricane, and all around her the air itself ripples with the explosion of pure destructive force.

She senses that only her own prodigious channeling of Power is what preserves her, in this moment, from obliteration. As matters are, the blast spins her around and around and around in the

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air, and in the moments when she faces the ground she sees the towers and ramparts of the palace below, and other particularly high buildings, shake and crumble, savaged by what Thumos has unleashed. Even birds—or whatever is left of them—fall from the sky, fall past her, trailing droplets of their blood.

The blast and the sound don't stop, and her dive becomes a fall as she loses concentration—
—and realizes that she doesn't even want it back.

Because as she plummets earthward, face up, she takes in Thumos's parting gift.

Most of the Power released in the blast can only be felt, not seen, unable as Thumos was to will it into the form of lightning. But what he *was* able to command takes shape like water rushing into the grooves of a picture drawn in the sand.

It is a great lion rampant, but not the crest of Lionheart. It is somehow wilder, yet somehow nobler, its stride greater, its posture prouder, with a sword in one forepaw and an ax in the other—

—and it is rendered not in violently crackling blue but in steadily blazing gold, the Power of the sun. The lion is practically a second sun itself, so bright and yes, so beautiful as it is.

And Valencia understands—she *does*—what it is Thumos wanted, toward what end he strove.

But it is not *her* vision, not of *her* values, and so for now, at least, it only makes her sad.

BREAK THE SKY

EPILOGUE

Locke sat in the Royal Garden with Aeron and Sefu.

Two weeks had passed since the Crows had come to Lionheart. They had all stayed to help with repairing the damage done by Thumos's clash with Valencia, especially his final act of Power. There was much more to be done, too, especially between Lionheart and the various cities Thumos had imposed his will upon. But Locke hadn't the first idea how to go about addressing any of this.

Luckily, Valencia did. She had called for a meeting of lords and ladies from all of the Nine Cities, to be held in the throne room of Lionheart Bastion. That was where she was now. She'd wanted Locke there, but Locke wanted nothing to do with lords and ladies. Carlos was there. That was worth something, probably. And in truth, Valencia very likely understood Thumos and what he'd been doing at least as well as Locke did.

Isabelle was there, too.

Poor Isabelle.

"Yeah," Sefu said, and only then did Locke realize that *Poor Isabelle* had been out loud.

"Did she... like him?" Aeron asked, tossing a small stone into the stream they sat beside.

"I think so," Locke said. "He was never unkind."

"Did he like her?" Sefu asked.

"I think so."

"Hm." Sefu slumped lower against the massive, ancient tree his back was against. "What's she like?"

"Quiet," Locke said. "Reads a lot. They had that in common."

"Pretty?"

"Damn it, Sefu," Aeron sighed.

"What?"

"The way most women are," Locke said, "if you know what to look for."

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“So... not so much,” Sefu said.

“Damn it, Sefu!” Aeron threw a rock at him.

Locke smiled. “Well, I think she’s pretty.”

Sefu shrugged. “If you say so.”

Aeron sighed.

And then they heard it.

Sefu sat up straight and blinked. “Was that—”

“Thunder,” Aeron said.

They all looked up. It was a day like the day the Crows had come, cloudless, blue, and bright.

They looked at each other. There was only one other person—at least, one other person they knew of—who could make a clear sky rumble like that.

“Oh, fucking...” Sefu muttered. “You really think it’s him?”

Sturm.

“I really think it’s him,” Aeron muttered.

“I haven’t seen him in ten years,” Locke said.

“We saw him after Thunder Bridge,” Aeron said. “Not when we fought Androkles. The first time. When we fought *with* Androkles, against those southerners who sailed up the river.” She paused. “I guess only two years’ difference.” She frowned. “I’m not sure how I feel about this,” she added, her tone belatedly worried.

A small ball of fire appeared in the air before them, hovering at about Sefu’s height, and they all scrambled to their feet, backs against the tree, weapons drawn.

The ball became a vertical line, and the line became two, and they became a golden rectangle about the size of a door.

Sefu and Aeron relaxed.

“Val,” Sefu said.

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But the person who stepped through the gateway wasn't Valencia, but the woman they'd all called Lady Steel, tall and graceful and ageless—and glowing from within.

"Uh... Sunna?" Locke stammered.

Then another shadow appeared in the gateway, and out came Sturm after all, every inch the Hard-Looking Fucker who had indeed very nearly broken them during their first months at the Hall, and Sefu started swearing under his breath and wouldn't stop.

Sturm smirked at Sunna, and they stepped to either side of the blazing door, and finally, Valencia did emerge, apparently unharmed and looking no more disturbed or irritated than she had for the past two weeks. She stepped past the two Hall Masters and beckoned the others forward.

"It's fine," she said, perfectly calm.

"What do *they* want?" Aeron asked, stepping forward and glaring daggers.

"To set all back on its feet," Sunna said.

Just like that? "Things can't ever be like they were," Locke said. "You know that, right? Have you seen *Vulpes*?"

"Of course we have, child," Sunna replied. "And you are right, of course. Things can't ever be like they were. That is not our intent. We mean merely to smoothen what we have wrought."

"Merely," Locke repeated flatly.

Sturm cocked an eyebrow. Everyone but Valencia took a reflexive step back. Sturm snorted at that, and Sunna gave him a look. He cleared his throat.

"It is not our place to step into the void that Thumos has left," he said, "but now that Lionheart has become what it has become, and because we have decided that what it has become is of value to us, we will remain here for a time—until a new ruler is in place—and see to it that the schools and such continue to move in the direction that Thumos set them in."

"And who is *us*?" Valencia asked.

"Just us," Sturm said, tilting his head at Sunna. "The caretakers of the Temple of the Sky.

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You need know nothing else, unless you have a particular interest in eventually taking up that mantle. Which I doubt, somehow.” He shrugged. “But we will find others. And I think that you have, after all, proven yourself worthy of the Power. So. All in all, I would say that these few years have been... heartening.”

Locke felt herself tense, and felt the air change. She glanced at Valencia, whose eyes were glowing gold again. But they returned to normal quickly, and Valencia opened her mouth, then closed it. Locke glanced back at Sturm, and was surprised to see that he suddenly looked a little smaller.

He was looking to the side, at the stream, his face no longer stony but merely placid, his gaze no longer stormy but merely dark, his stance no less firm and erect but maybe less proud.

“Obvious losses aside,” he said quietly, as if finishing his last sentence, and Locke began to suspect that maybe he had feelings after all.

“We want to speak with all of you,” Sunna said, stepping forward and placing a gentle hand on Sturm’s arm. “About everything that has transpired since Androkles fell. Perhaps about the Temple. But mostly about Thumos.”

Locke and the others looked at each other.

Sefu shrugged.

Aeron sighed. And shrugged.

Locke shrugged.

Valencia smiled—maybe a little sadly, Locke thought—and turned to the Masters.

“I think we have a consensus,” she said.

“Good,” Sturm said, and turned to the gateway of sunfire that still hung open in the air.

“Oh,” Valencia said as soon as Sturm had one foot through. “There is one other thing.”

Sturm stepped back and turned around. He and Sunna looked at each other, then at Valencia. So did everyone else.

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When she didn't say anything, Sunna prodded, "Yes?"

Valencia looked at her feet. "Um..."

"Um?" Aeron echoed. "You don't say *um*. What is it?"

Valencia cleared her throat. "It's Isabelle."

"Is she alright?" Locke asked. "She'd taken ill a little before... a little you came. But then after a day or two she seemed to be herself again." When no answer came, Locke asked once more, putting a little more force into her voice, "Is she alright?"

"She's fine," Valencia said, and finally looked up. "And... with child."

Locke blinked.

"Oh," Aeron said.

"Yes," Valencia said.

"Well... shit," Sefu said.

"Yes," Valencia said again.

Sefu slowly sat down. So did Aeron. And then Locke.

And Sunna, saying, "Oh, my."

And Sturm, his mouth hanging open a little.

And finally, Valencia, dismissing the golden door with a small wave of her hand, and seeming to find her thumbs the most interesting things in all the world.

"So," Locke drawled. "What does this mean?"

"I haven't the first idea," Sturm said.

"I know one thing it means," Sefu said. Everyone looked at him, and he added, "It means Thumos finally got some. That whole monastery upbringing was starting to worry me."

"Just for the record," Aeron groaned, "I fucking hate you." She threw another rock at him.

Valencia laughed, long and clear.

When clouds began to roll in, and a drizzle began to fall, no one minded.

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And when they heard the thunder, they all looked around at each other, and all thought, Locke guessed, about Thumos, and smiled.

T H E E N D

RECOMMENDED READING

There are a lot of little things I tried to do with this story in addition to the stuff I mentioned in my foreword. Foremost among said little things was a stab at incorporating Nietzschean perspectivism by using multiple point of view characters with a pretty wide range of worldviews and voices, which is a big part of where Scott Lynch and *Firefly* come in. But that's not the only reason. Anyway, here's a list of lots of the work that influenced *Break the Sky*, however slightly.

Homer's *Iliad*
Nietzsche
Susan Wolf's "Moral Saints"

pretty much anything by:
Matthew Woodring Stover
David Gemmell
R. A. Salvatore
Scott Lynch

Note: I mention Paul S. Kemp in my foreword; the only reason I don't include him on this list is that the novels in question start as part of a bigger series written with several other writers, and while the Kemp series that branches off from this bigger series is really, really good, full appreciation of it depends on the bigger series, which frankly isn't as good. Can't hurt to give it a shot, I guess, especially if you like fantasy fiction anyway, so if you're thus inclined, check out *The Halls of Stormweather* and the rest of the Sembia series, then go on to the Erevis Cale and Twilight War trilogies. At the very least, know that I got the line "nothing is bigger than the personal" from Kemp's novel *Midnight's Mask*.

novels
Frank Herbert's *Dune* saga, at least through *God Emperor of Dune*
David Anthony Durham's *Pride of Carthage* and *Acacia*
Austin Grossman's *Soon I Will Be Invincible*
Steven Pressfield's *Gates of Fire*

comics
Warren Ellis's *Stormwatch* (with various artists) & *The Authority, Vol. 1: Relentless* (w/ Bryan Hitch)
Neil Gaiman's *Marvel 1602* (w/ Andy Kubert)
Mark Millar's *The Ultimates* (w/ Bryan Hitch)
Grant Morrison's *All Star Superman* (w/ Frank Quitely)
Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One* (w/ David Mazzuchelli)
Mark Waid's *Kingdom Come* (w/ Alex Ross)

RECOMMENDED VIEWING

Batman Begins and *The Dark Knight*
Superman Returns

Firefly and *Serenity*

APPENDIX I: “*The Rearing of Exceptional Men: Toward an Ethics of the Badass and the Beautiful*”

Originally submitted for: PL 378, *Contemporary Continental Philosophy*; William Edelglass; spring 2008

Special thanks to: Jim Kelly, for going over it with me in the Writers’ Center to produce a draft that would win the department’s annual \$200 Clark Essay Prize.

Thomas Hobbes observed in *The Leviathan* that morality as we tend to think of it—a set of rules for how we ought to live among others—is grounded in fear. We all of us have certain desires we wish to pursue, plus the desire not to be frustrated in these pursuits by being injured in any number of ways, or even killed. We also have the capacity to carry out just this sort of frustration against others, or at least to think about how we might do so. But we are ever aware that there are probably others who can frustrate us with impunity, and for the most part we would willingly forgo injuring or killing others if it meant not being injured or killed ourselves. So normative morality was born, in its various consequentialist and deontological incarnations.

I think, too, that most traditional moral philosophers are afraid, but not just in the way that all of us are. Since *The Leviathan*, their theories have found apparent grounding in reason, not “just” fear and prudence. They have argued that it is *incoherent*, hypocritical, not to act morally. But incoherence does not constitute a metaphysical restriction on action; that a mighty tyrant is a hypocrite does not prevent him from doing all sorts of things classified as immoral, so are the moral laws he breaks *really* laws the way gravity is? He is not ultimately stopped by appeal to these principles, but by force of arms (or some other kind of force, like economic sanction). What accounts for theories with such holes is, I think, an extra fear in traditional moralists that there really is no ground for their systems besides prudence. They are afraid that morality is in fact reducible to Hobbesian relations of power, and so they make their normative accounts because to meet the supposed hypocrite on his own terms is to surrender the only control they think we have over the worst in ourselves.

But these holes can be seen clearly by the light of Michel Foucault’s genealogical and historical project. On a level before any foray into morality and ethics, Foucault sees events and the greater tapestry into which they are woven as a network of forces. “History has no ‘meaning,’ though

this is not to say that is absurd... it is intelligible and should be susceptible to analysis down to the smallest detail—but this in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies and tactics” (*The Foucault Reader* 56). I am not so concerned in this paper with truth and meaning, but this basic understanding of the world’s underlying structure informs Foucault’s work on normativity and ethics. Under the umbrella of the former he illustrates that institutions for the custody of those deemed mentally unstable, and evaluations of what is natural or normal generally, are ultimately supported and held together by force, whether of arms or juridical authority or public opinion. It seems blindingly obvious—once put into so many words. Not all of the implications of this are as disheartening as someone attached to traditional moral theory might initially suppose, however. Progressing from this understanding of the world as a web of power relations, and drawing on Foucault’s discussion of training and the “technologies of the self,” I intend to outline a possible ethics of self-cultivation for its own sake, and more specifically an ethics (*not* a morality) of prowess, better able to fit the Foucauldian worldview than traditional ethics of benevolence or duty.

I will first briefly discuss parts of Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*, which provides concrete historical examples of how morality is shaped by power. This framework will then be useful in going through parts of *Discipline and Punish* in which we begin to see how the same sort of coercion can be applied not only to the ordering of a city (for instance), but also to the education and upbringing of individuals. I will also discuss his notion of the technologies of the self, which points to an ancient precedent for thinking of ethics as self-centered. What many who subscribe to traditional morality (moralities?) sometimes lose sight of is the distinction between morality and ethics, the fact that classical moral theory, Hobbesian and otherwise, is grounded in an *ethical* concern: that is, in living a personally good and fulfilling life. Susan Wolf’s criticism of the hypothetical moral saint points us toward a non-classical yet “common sense” picture addressing that concern, and is at least partly compatible with the Nietzschean idea Foucault takes up of treating one’s life as something to be made aesthetically pleasing.

Foucault on Power, Normativity, and their Roles in Ethics

Institutions whose existence we generally take for granted without thinking too much about how they ordinarily do what they do, like prisons and schools, provide a lens through which we might examine our larger sociopolitical structure. They are the tools by which societies shape and enforce their values, in addition to simply operating, as one might suppose was in fact the case, on the basis of already-established values.

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault recounts the trend of confinement in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, which made a vice out of idleness, and by extension, eventually made homelessness and poverty objects of disdain. “What made it necessary was an imperative of labor” (FR 128), and furthermore, crowding in cities like Paris due to war (129) and perhaps a Spanish economic crisis (131). Whatever the reason, the presence of so many beggars and unemployed was a burden and an inconvenience, so as they were forced out of cities or pressed into labor or confined to poorhouses, it became natural to consider these people somehow unworthy, deficient, deviant.

“This community [Renaissance Paris] acquired an ethical power of segregation, which permitted it to eject, as into another world, all forms of social uselessness” (FR 135). This came to include those considered mad. They were all made *moral* problems to be solved, rather than people to be helped, because people invested with judicial and martial authority said so, and acted on their words. The level of organization that went into confinement and impressment, and the effectiveness of the psychological and sociological suggestion to consider the whole matter one of normativity and merit, were such that Foucault describes “cities of pure morality, where the law that should reign in all hearts was to be applied without compromise, without concession, in the rigorous forms of physical constraint. Morality permitted itself to be administered like trade or economy” (138)—that is, to be considered as an impersonal play of forces pushing this way and pulling that, and as something to be made as efficient as possible through the application of physical power, not ethical authority.

In “The Birth of the Asylum,” Foucault describes how the notions of rightness and normality decided upon by asylum administrators were primarily pressed not onto a public whose support they needed, but onto the inmates themselves. They were not so much reasoned with as placed into situations where their conformity to expected behavior was beneficial enough to them that they acted as they believed the others wanted them to act. For example, a man apparently suffering from delusions of grandeur might be subjected to a total lack of attention and interaction, not only by the administrators but by his fellow inmates, and the resultant sense of isolation would be enough to “[return him] to more sensible and true ideas” (FR 151). Or a woman might simply be subjected to humiliating (if not particularly injurious) treatment as if guilty of some grave transgression, eventually succumbing to the psychological pressure and “repenting” (156-7). It was not a matter of recognizing a moral truth, or any other kind of truth, not a moment of epistemic or logical clarity. It was a matter of fitting in and playing along, because they *had* to, because they were otherwise deprived of dignity, treated as less than entirely human, disoriented and disheartened. Perhaps they did ultimately internalize the norms they were forced to adopt, but this does not suggest that it was necessary or that the norms were “natural.”

It is a bleak and at times contemptible picture Foucault paints in *Madness and Civilization*, but we can still see how confinement and labor impressment might have been (or been believed to be) necessary, even constructive. We can understand, without too much effort, how it would be beneficial to convince certain people that they really were insane, and even how, given majority opinion on the matter, they *would* be better off accepting this judgment than not. More than likely this is because we can recognize that we are party to such practices ourselves. In selections from *Discipline and Punish*, which examines coerced normativity in a broader light than *Madness*, we are shown more clearly how an individual can reap something of worth from conditioning he does not for the most part control. For instance,

“the soldier was someone who could be recognized from afar; he bore certain natural signs: the natural signs of his strength and his courage, the marks, too, of his pride; his

body was the blazon of strength and valor; and... movements like marching and attitudes like the bearing of the head belonged for the most part to a bodily rhetoric of honor..." (FR 179)

The image is not unfamiliar in the twenty-first century, nor is the notion that military training can make almost anyone into something much more capable and more impressive in certain ways than he was before. (Note that the "natural" signs of the soldier are actually cultivated, just as the "normal" behavior adopted by some asylum inmates was forced.)

In such an image, Foucault sees "a military dream of society [whose] fundamental reference was... to the meticulously subordinated cogs of a machine... not to fundamental rights but to indefinitely progressive forms of training" (FR 186). Ancient Sparta is the most obvious example of a nation-state striving for such a utopia, and despite some undeniably non-utopian features of that society, she can hardly be denied a certain glory. She remains enshrined in the nostalgia of Western civilization as the embodiment of war-strength, and of an uncompromising hardness in the service of a greater good. The holding action at Thermopylae during the Persian Wars is *the Last Stand*. Though with our modern notions of what makes a good education we can't (or won't) condone or praise the oppressiveness of the Spartan system, and though we have problems with their slaveholding, it would be foolish to say that what Sparta achieved militarily was not, at least for awhile, some kind of spectacular.

Not entirely unlike the asylum, the military demoralizes and breaks down those who enter it, but in return it rebuilds them harder, better, faster, stronger. Even as it tells them they are expendable it makes clear that as parts of something greater than themselves they play important and often indispensable roles that would be quite difficult for others not so trained; even as it makes them uniform amongst each other it makes them strikingly different from those not among their number, makes them special.

Perhaps Foucault is not quite as enthusiastic about the matter as I am, but he recognizes the power of rigorous training. He also sees, as ever, the (ethical) power *behind* it. "It is not a triumphant

power, which because of its own excess can pride itself on omnipotence; it is a modest, suspicious power, which functions as a calculated but permanent economy” (FR 188). The military marching camp as a structure of control “must be all the stronger, but also all the more discreet, all the more effective and on the alert in that it is exercised over armed men” (189). This is a power exercised as much through the soldiers (or students, as the case may be in a civilian academy) as upon them. It is grounded not in displays of force but in the regulation of space and the prioritizing of sensory awareness. The soldiers or students know that they are being watched by *someone*, at least in theory, and this in turn encourages their alertness, although it is an alertness regarding themselves and their actions rather than those to whom they are beholden. “In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen” (199).

Here Foucault sees “the birth of the sciences of man” (FR 203), of fields of knowledge devoted not to understanding and controlling the world—which happened to improve human capabilities as a matter of accidental necessity (mother of invention that she is)—but to improving human capabilities directly, and drawing a connection back to ancient Athens and the concern of her great philosophers with the good life, he begins to see, too, hope for the future.

Foucault and Wolf on Self-Cultivation

Foucault identifies four types of technologies that have driven and shaped society. The first is production, the second sign systems (like languages). The third type includes what is discussed in the previous section of this paper; he calls these the technologies of power. Finally, and most interesting to him in his later career, are the technologies of the self, by which individuals can “transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, a purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.” Although of the four, technologies of the self are most directly focused on cultivating an individual’s abilities, “[e]ach implies certain modes of training and modification of individuals, [including] acquiring certain attitudes” (*Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* 225).

In preceding sections of this paper, I have discussed power relations generally, and the ordering potential of thoughtfully applied force; I move now to the ordering of the self in particular. Power in abstraction, though still informing this as it informs everything, has at least for the moment taken a back seat.

Foucault is still concerned with the connection of power and technology to ethics and morality. In Plato's *Alcibiades*, Foucault finds a deceptively simple-sounding, self-concerned moral imperative grounded in these technologies of individual cultivation: "Take care of yourself," closely related to the Delphic oracle's "Know yourself" (ETS 226).

In Enlightenment ethics there is often a divide, implicit or not, between serving one's own interests and serving the greater good. But in the Greece of *Alcibiades*, the two—perhaps loosely analogous to ethics (in the broad sense regarding a good life) and morality (in terms of making sacrifices for the sake of others)—cannot be separated. Socrates advises the young war hero that in order to properly carry out his political duties he must see to the health of his soul (ETS 226-27). With the Greek notion of taking care of oneself (*epimeleisthai*), it simply doesn't make sense that one can do good things for others without seeing to one's own well-being first. Foucault notes that by contrast, "our morality, a morality of asceticism, insists that the self is that which one can reject" (ETS 228).

Susan Wolf says something similar in her essay "Moral Saints":

"it might be that a limited and carefully monitored allotment of time and energy to be devoted to the pursuit of some nonmoral interests or to the development of some nonmoral talents would make a person a better contributor to the general welfare than he would be if he allowed himself no indulgences of this sort.... [*but they*] are only weak and somewhat peculiar sorts of passions to which one can consciously remain so conditionally committed." (Wolf 382, my emphasis)

According to Wolf, "the development of our power to achieve physical, intellectual, or artistic excellence" is merely instrumental for the Kantian (Wolf 383) or, presumably, the utilitarian. But *epimeleisthai*, taken together with "Know yourself," is indeed a primary imperative, valuable in itself, for one concerned with living well. It is not, furthermore, primarily considered indulgent, nor

should it be thought easy or simple. “*Epimeleisthai* expresses something much more serious than the simple fact of paying attention. It involves various things: taking pains with one’s holdings and one’s health. It is always a real activity and not just an attitude” (ETS 230).

As in the ordering of a military camp or in being a good classroom student, attentiveness is critical. Alcibiades is given the relatively vague advice to concern himself with wisdom, but *epimeleisthai* as Foucault understands it anticipates Aristotle’s discussion of the various goods, including material wealth and physical health. It would seem that taking care of oneself encompasses everything in a life. In a letter to Fronto, Marcus Aurelius recounts “all the unimportant things he has done” in a day. While he confesses to have done little, he also betrays a “meticulous concern with the details of daily life,” which “are important because they are you—what you thought, what you felt” (ETS 233-34).

It seems intuitively right to pay such attention to personal well-being, but it also seems somewhat difficult to find, in such an ethical framework, a parallel to traditional criteria for judging how well one is living up to a *standard*. Foucault finds a system of self-evaluation in Seneca, but unlike typical conceptions of morality or ethics, it is not juridical but administrative, “following the rule but not the law,” looking not for moral transgression but for flaws in the daily execution of *epimeleisthai*. It is forward-looking because to look back is to waste time. Administrative evaluation is constant, rather than coming into play only to judge certain acts. It is also a process of permanent fine-tuning, always with an eye for improvement. Juridical evaluation can more easily grow stagnant or irrelevant, with its focus on the past (ETS 337). The administrative model fits well with the cog-in-a-machine image of military perfection, and we have found again the exercise of invisible power, now on oneself.

What remains unclear is to what specific end this *epimeleisthai* might be directed. We can see that it encourages improvement, but of what? We know it is a technology of self-cultivation, but what do we want to cultivate?

For Foucault, we “should relate the kind of relation one has to oneself to a creative activity,” treat our lives as artworks ever in the making (FR 351). An understanding of the various means of training as discussed in *Discipline and Punish* could guide us here, but Foucault himself would not advocate any particular artistic vision.

For her part, Wolf offers an account ultimately still anchored to Enlightenment ethics, but one she believes “may be taken to support a more Aristotelian, or even a more Nietzschean, approach to moral philosophy” (Wolf 385). She points out that far from evaluating people and choosing role models based only on classical utilitarian or deontological considerations, we look to people and fictional characters who are “accomplished or attractive in nonmoral ways as well.... We may strive for Kath[a]rine Hepburn’s grace, Paul Newman’s ‘cool,’” and we are drawn to fiery personalities and people with high levels of ability and skill in various areas (379). Often, today, “badass” serves as a fairly wide-ranging adjective for powerful, skilled, or stylish individuals. Sometimes it even seems to be higher praise than “He’s a good guy,” since some version or other of the latter is still said more often.

It is perhaps telling—in light of the Nietzschean-Foucauldian exhortation to consider the “aesthetics of existence,” to make our lives art—that many well-known idols and role models are *literary*, works of art themselves in their way, very much *cultivated*. Figures like Achilles, Beowulf, and Arthur are paradigms of martial valor; figures like Christ and the Buddha are paragons of benevolence, and though they may have really existed, are known to us only through stories that are far from properly “historical” (not unlike, perhaps, some of our notions of ancient Sparta). Modern pop culture characters like James Bond, the flagship superheroes of the major comic book publishing houses (DC and Marvel), and other protagonists in genre fiction works from *Star Wars* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to *Harry Potter* have an influence on young people (who grow up!) that cannot be denied.

Many of these long-beloved and widely recognized characters fall short in some way of total

adherence to traditional Enlightenment morality. Achilles is pathologically proud. James Bond is a womanizing alcoholic with little regard for collateral damage. Batman is a harsh loner who, though he will not kill, will do just about anything else. “Younger” characters may be no less susceptible to fear or selfishness or indecision than their readers or viewers. All these nevertheless draw our affection and admiration through being especially capable or particularly striking or, if anti-heroes of the Holden Caulfield variety, just plain interesting. Even when they aren’t flawed in any traditionally moral sense, and may even come close to sainthood (or in the case of Christ or the Buddha, *are* supposed to be perfect), “it is also essential to their power and attractiveness that the moral strengths go, so to speak, alongside of specific, independently admirable, nonmoral ground projects and dominant personal traits” (Wolf 379).

Wolf’s argument is that due to this widely held pre-theoretical intuition, we should reconceive moral theory so that the cultivation of these independently admirable traits is considered to “contribute to one’s *moral* personality” much as benevolence and duty do (Wolf 384). Though this is a more specific account than anything Foucault offers, it is not incompatible with his, and in its specificity—which still leaves plenty of room for unusual and varied conceptions of human excellence—it may at least start us in the general direction of a more truly Foucauldian ethics.

Conclusion

We may return now to the technologies of the self and *epimeleisthai*, and how they might serve an aesthetics of existence. To weld Wolf’s account to Foucault’s, it seems appropriate to consider again the power structures that have hitherto enforced morality as we know it. A surprisingly appropriate sentiment comes from perhaps *the* badass of the twentieth century, Bruce Lee, for whom art “is work of enlightenment. Art, in other words, is a technique for acquiring liberty.” It also “calls for complete mastery of techniques, developed by reflection within the soul” (Lee 10). Living by an ethics of self-cultivation is not, recall, supposed to be somehow easier than

living by a traditional moral theory, though it may be more palatable or more attractive.

And the notion of art (as *technē*) as liberating (Foucault's lack of fondness for that word notwithstanding) suggests that *epimeleisthai* should be concerned not only with self-administration but with creating a self with the agency and awareness to somehow step outside of passively going along with power structures that, despite anyone's best intentions, would inevitably become settled, institutionalized. The best way to ensure that external forces do not manipulate me (more than is already unavoidable, anyway) is to be particularly strong and smart myself, in as many ways as it is possible for me to be strong and smart. A certain spiritedness and (Nietzschean?) sense of style may help, too. If we are not concerned in our ethics with rules for behavior, we might cultivate capabilities hitherto and currently seen as dangerous, but which could in the right circumstances prove quite useful indeed. For his part Foucault desires a broader conception of pleasure, so to include a highly-developed capacity for martial violence (for example) in a conception of developing our fullest human potential does not strike me as incoherent. It could in fact save my life, or someone else's, or just instill in me, in the process of cultivating it, spirit and will that could be independently beneficial. Along similar lines, to cultivate a capacity for deception could be helpful in not being deceived myself, or might help me develop a general agility of mind and tongue. Above all, it would be—it *is*—important to cultivate a self that one finds interesting and attractive. Almost anything could fit into this picture, but strength and cunning (not necessarily a deceptive streak, of course)—and, perhaps, a certain Aurelian peace of mind—seem appropriate as a foundation.

Some might find troubling elitist implications in what I am suggesting, and in some important respects elitism is anti-Foucauldian. It is not, however, anti-Nietzschean, and the exhortation to strive and to make oneself interesting is, I think, rather less dangerous than the command to fall into line. Given what Foucault brings to light in *Discipline and Punish*, it seems both ironic and fitting that the best way to bring about a society with a Foucauldian ethics might be to very carefully institutionalize it. An educational system that did not focus on keeping its students in

a narrowly conceived order, but that equipped them with certain technologies of the self to promote the enhancement of their abilities, that was perhaps less concerned with a canon and more enthusiastic about promoting ingenuity, could be just the fine line to attempt treading. Whatever the best vision, I think it would be informed by, and that Foucault's project—concerning technologies of the self and aesthetics of existence—can fit with, this sentiment of Nietzsche's:

With the help of favorable measures great individuals might be reared who would be both different from and higher than those who heretofore have owed their existence to mere chance. Here we may still be hopeful: in the rearing of exceptional men.

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APPENDIX II: “The Fourth Incentive: Thumos as a Supplement to Schopenhauerian Ethics”
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Cranky and *despairing* aren't words that come readily to mind when one imagines an exponent of an ethics based around “loving-kindness.” Yet all of these things are true of Arthur Schopenhauer, and though his ultimate destination of loving-kindness appears decidedly warm and fuzzy, his path to it in *The Basis of Morality* (1840) is strewn with mostly disheartening observations about a three-part motivational psychology. We are not particularly inclined to loving-kindness by nature, Schopenhauer thinks; we are moved to it when we witness suffering and our *compassion* kicks in. But apart from compassion, we are driven by selfish *egoism* and externally-destructive *malice*, so it is something of a wonder, for Schopenhauer, that loving-kindness exists at all.

Schopenhauer is hardly the first philosopher of ethics to arrange things in threes; Plato presented his own tripartite conception of humans' moral decision-making faculties in the *Republic*: reason, appetite/desire, and a more complex drive than either, which he calls “spirit.” His ethical project is, to be sure, different from Schopenhauer's (his primary concern is justice in a city), but still bears discussing since both philosophers are concerned with motivation and because the Greek can fill in some gaps in the German's thinking, whether Schopenhauer would for his part be particularly concerned with those gaps or not.

In what follows I will first sketch Schopenhauer's picture of human nature, addressing in the process its elements' relation to one another. Second, I will briefly address what Schopenhauer leaves out that is important to a comprehensive account of ethics. An even briefer sketch of Plato's tripartite soul will follow next, the real point of this being to build upon—or at least more fully articulate—Schopenhauer's thought using Platonic ideas, specifically the notion of *thumos*, or spirit (in the sense of “fighting spirit” or something like it, not in reference to an immortal soul). The result will likely venture little further than what Schopenhauer presents, at least in terms of being a *guide* to action, but with luck the final picture will be more complete than either of the sketches that went into it, and with a little more luck the deeper understanding afforded by said picture will be of use to the

concerned moral agent.

I. Schopenhauer's Incentives

Humanity's concerns, for Schopenhauer, are only two: weal and woe. We wish to maximize our weal (welfare and well-being, pleasure, happiness) and to avoid woe (all things painful and weal-thwarting) as much as possible. We can call the sum of these urges "**Egoism**, that is, the urgent impulse to exist, and under the best circumstances" (*The Basis of Morality*, Dover 2005, p. 75). Unless we are in fear of something that can thwart the satisfaction of our Egoism, or unless "the real moral incentive" (Egoism being an "antimoral" incentive) acts upon us, we will tend toward the single-minded pursuit of desire fulfillment. If others get in our way, but we do not fear them or experience any particularly beneficent sentiment regarding them, we are just as likely to shove them aside (or do worse, if it works and isn't a terrible expenditure of energy or time) as to circumvent them. This need not be out of any particular feelings of animosity; Schopenhauer's point is that Egoism simply has no room for regarding others. "It is true that Egoism may lead to wickedness and crime of every sort; but the resulting injury and pain to others are simply the means, not the end, and are therefore involved only as an accident" (79).

In other words, it gets worse: "**Malice...** makes the **pain** of others its ultimate purpose" (BM 86). Schopenhauer has little to say about it besides that it is "equally useless to the self as compassion," and that it can "develop to the utmost cruelty."

These antimoral incentives out of the way, Schopenhauer turns to that most bewildering phenomenon, human goodness. It is, of course, incompatible with Malice. Truly Egoistic acts can have no moral worth, either, even should they happen to benefit another; much as harm done to others is a (mere) means to an (actually desired) end, help rendered to others might just happen to be what works best to achieve selfish goals. Perhaps creating several jobs is the best way for me to eventually get rich, for example. Consider it a more-pleasant-than-average case study for the doctrine

of double effect. This leaves us, finally, with “**Compassion**[:] the direct participation, independent of all ulterior considerations, in the sufferings of another, leading to sympathetic assistance in the effort to prevent or remove them.” This inexplicable regard for the well-being of the other, in which no thought of benefiting myself can be present (even if by some accident helping the other *does* serve me, which is far from a rare possibility), is alone “the real basis of all **voluntary** justice and all **genuine** loving-kindness” (BM 85).

So for summary’s sake: Egoism concerns weal of self, Malice concerns the woe of others—Schopenhauer says that its maxim is to injure all people as far as you can (79)—and Compassion concerns their weal.

These drives, though distinct, are hardly independent of each other. Schopenhauer notes that while “Every human act is referable to one of these springs... two of them may work together” (86), and indeed they seem to rely on each other. Compassion, for example, is in a way an extension of Egoism: “When once compassion is stirred within me, by another’s pain, then his weal and woe go straight to my heart... Consequently the difference between myself and him is no longer an absolute one” (85). Of course I know that *he’s* the one in pain, but if I don’t have at least an inkling of what it’s like to be kicked in the groin (for instance), I’m not going to understand how that hurts him. If I see someone else kicked in the groin, I wince not just because of *his* pain, but because I can imagine experiencing that pain myself. My sympathy comes from my own (very) strong desire not to experience kicks to the groin. Compassion would seem, therefore, to be impossible without Egoism: if suffering carries no meaning for you, how much can you care about the suffering of others?

Egoism is also related to Malice’s sources, like ill-will and envy. “Ill-will usually arises from the unavoidable collisions of Egoism which occur at every step” (BM 78). That which obstructs our pursuit of pleasurable existence, Schopenhauer says, awakens our anger and hate, and this includes other people. Many of the things that please us cannot be shared with others, and we are frequently in competition over these things. While our harming others might often or initially be solely for the

sake of improving our own chances, the distinction between this and harming them because we want to thwart *their* desires may at some point be difficult to judge: some satisfaction can be derived from defeating a foe even if the victor gains little or nothing of substance, and while even this phenomenon isn't *necessarily* malicious, it certainly can be.

Or if someone makes us angry, we might go out of our way to return the favor, whether this is useful to us or not: our regard for ourselves spurs and is consequently smothered by animosity toward others. Petty grudges between middle school children (and ostensible adults, if we're being honest) work this way. One offends another, so the second inconveniences the first in some way, perhaps at some small cost to himself, because inflicting that injury becomes more important than being reasonable, and the cycle may continue. While Egoism may eventually leave the ill-will picture (unless one considers it tied to pride), it still has an undeniable relationship to Malice as its ultimate cause.

II. Problems

We can see how Egoism lies at the root of the other two incentives. It does not seem, for its own part, to be conditioned by either of them. But that exclusion seems at least a little odd. Furthermore, Schopenhauer goes no further in his moral psychology than the *recognition* of a situation requiring ethical thought and action. Though he does describe thoroughly what goes into this, he does not delve into either the thinking or the acting on their own terms, and in this neglect he gives the impression that ethics is simple, and purely or primarily intuitive. No doubt it is a powerful statement to make a supremely ethical life theoretically accessible to all, and there are good reasons to want to do so. It addresses, for one, the problem Kant and Hegel have of implicitly dismissing real hardship in the lives of those who simply do not have the luxury of ignoring their particular circumstances in the name of making The Right Choice.

Still, the choice itself loses something if any idiot can make it correctly—certainly

Schopenhauer doesn't have that much faith in humanity—and there will at some point, for someone, be large-scale moral decisions with complicated origins and consequences, at which point Schopenhauer's phenomenology of ethics will little avail the agent in question. Schopenhauer does say that he wants to avoid any discussion of *ought* (BM 74-75), but this doesn't mean he should avoid discussing all the factors that might motivate action, and on its own it certainly doesn't warrant an overly reductive approach to moral philosophy.

Even disregarding issues of *ought* and *how*, which for all their importance have only a weak connection to motivation if any, it is not clear that Malice and Compassion are quite enough to *push* someone to do anything. Plenty of people feel sorry for others without actually acting on this; the utilitarian Peter Singer would have volumes to say about that in the context of government-dispensed foreign aid that rarely matches the strong rhetoric preceding it, or the relative lack of significant action on behalf of animals in factory farms. And people certainly, and not infrequently, feel the desire to inflict pain on others without acting on it, without doing any more than perhaps conducting a thought experiment for their own amusement. For its part, Egoism will drive certain actions necessary for survival, but beyond that, people will often neglect or decline to do things that advance or defend their well-being. They might let insults go unanswered at least; at higher degrees of severity they might not protest unjust treatment by police or others in positions of legal power; in between they might let themselves get walked on by objects of pseudo-romantic infatuation, or let overbearing parents pick their classes.

In any event, whether or not criticizing Schopenhauer's decision not to go there is relevant or productive, gaps can with some effort be filled, and his neglect does not actively hamper our efforts at that (there is, you might say, no Malice in it). To that end, it will be useful now to turn to Plato.

III. Plato's Soul and Spirit

In his *Republic*, Plato's chief concern is what the ideal city would be like. The inquiry, in the

form of an extended conversation between Socrates and some friends and students, leads to an attempt to define justice in the individual. Like Schopenhauer, Plato numbered the aspects of human moral agency three. Two should be familiar to just about anyone: “We can call the reflective element in the mind reason, and the element with which it feels... desires, the element of irrational appetite—an element closely connected with satisfaction and pleasure” (439d). Appetite is obviously close kin to Egoism, though it doesn’t map on perfectly. Reason can be left alone; Plato discusses it more as a compass than as an impulse, and Schopenhauer probably wouldn’t deny that no matter what incentive drives an action, reason will play some role in guiding that action. He might even link it to Compassion (Singer does), since some cognitive step is necessary to consider the pain of another something I should be concerned with.

But Plato has Socrates introduce a third part of the soul, which actually enters the conversation quite a bit earlier; those who would guard the ideal city from external enemies must have “high spirits,” like a watch dog (375a). This trait is later further characterized as “indignation” and anger (439e-440a), pride and obstinacy (440c-d); the term “spirit” is used again when Socrates waffles on whether it should count as a third element of the mind (441a). He finally decides that it does, and asks rhetorically, “won’t these two elements be the best defense that mind and body have against external enemies? One of them will do the thinking, the other will fight under the orders of its superior and provide the courage to carry its decisions into effect” (442b).

This *forceful* element of mind, this spirit—*thumos*—might be what is missing from Schopenhauer’s account. Even if it isn’t quite necessary for Egoism the same way Egoism is ultimately necessary for Compassion and Malice, *thumos* can take Egoism farther than it can get on its own. The indignation or anger need not even be outwardly directed; it can be self-exhortative, or even self-loathing—a matter of pride and of integrity. *Thumos* can simply manifest itself as courage, as daring, as mere ambition. It can be the difference between a person who wants more but is afraid to reach for it, and one who subscribes to the *l’audace, l’audace, toujours l’audace* philosophy of life and

war. It is the difference between the kid who laments his weakness and lack of physical agency, and the one who takes up karate.

When thumos *is* outwardly directed, it need not be malicious; *righteous* indignation is concerned with justice, sometimes perhaps with retribution, but not with wanton harm. One can feel indignant that others are mistreated or unfortunate, and this can catalyze action beyond merely *experiencing* Compassion. Thumos is the difference between the couch potato who frowns or sighs sadly at disheartening news stories about human rights abuses but leaves it at that, and the activist type who perhaps joins the Peace Corps, or lobbies government, or even just donates money (though certainly the latter two have less thumos than the Peace Corpsman). Thumos is the difference between the majority of high school students who watch uncomfortably as the resident macho jerk picks on the little guy or harasses the vulnerable girl, and the one kid who says, “Hey asshole!” and does something about it.

Of course, thumos *can* be malicious. Details would probably be redundant at this point.

Socrates says, “we call [a man] self-disciplined when all these three elements are in friendly and harmonious agreement, when reason and its subordinates are all agreed that reason should rule and there is no civil war among them” (442c). Justice for Plato/Socrates, like goodness for Schopenhauer, corresponds to self-discipline and control, to a restraint of our worst impulses so that our best may flourish. But the desire for this harmonized state of being comes at least in part from a more active incentive than any of Schopenhauer’s, and is most fully achieved only by its exercise. To Egoism, Malice, and Compassion as human moral motivations, then, we can formally add Spirit. For Plato it is the heart to reason’s head and appetite’s gut; for Schopenhauer we might say something similar. If it does not add anything to understanding human drives, it gives these drives life and direction. It is perhaps a second-order incentive, as it were, but without it the other three would at times be lost, or simply stuck. Without Spirit, they are nothing.