

As they reached the crest of the hill out of the valley, Swagin turned his head to Falkier. "Prepar' fur a hasslin'. We got sum king's boys comin' dis way." Three men were riding towards them. Falkier could pick out black tunics bearing a silver crescent moon, the royal sigil of Grent Corine. Surely they were looking for the escaped prisoner. He pulled his shirt up to cover his nose and shrank down behind Swagin. Maybe they wouldn't notice him and they wouldn't bother stopping the mercenaries. If only he could be that lucky. The rider in front, a thin man with a groomed dark brown mustache, raised his hand to halt them.

"Good morning, men." The man's comrades, one with hair black as coal and the other a shaved head, fanned out to his sides, further blocking the road. Falkier could see each had a sword hanging from his hip.

"Marnin'." Swagin nodded his head to the man. "We dun' want any troubil. Jus' travla's minin' ar businuss."

"A man escaped from the prison west of here a few days ago. We are searching for him so that he may be captured and brought to justice." Falkier could feel the men's eyes staring at him. *They know. They've got to know it's me.*

"Dun know anathin' 'bout anathin'. Jus' headin' home afta' visitin' a friend o' ars in Tise Dews."

"There is a reward for anyone who has any information about the man or his whereabouts," the black-haired man added. "Three bronze spades for information, six iron marks for turning him in."

"Six iron marks?" Jofalk cocked his eyebrow. "The price an escaped prisoner is usually only a few spades. What did this man do to deserve such a reward?" Falkier was hoping that this reward wouldn't sway the mercenaries to turn him in. His heart in his throat, he tried to shrink himself even farther, trying to avoid the rider's attention.

"The man's crime was sedition, but during his escape, he killed six guards," the mustached rider answered. "This is a dangerous man we're dealing with."

"Pris'ner showed up yer guards? Boy, does that make m'feel like m'taxes er spent well."

"*Your* taxes?" The mustached man's voice carried restrained anger. "Neither of you sound like you're Corinian. If I had to guess, I'd say Dhorn and Sadetian."

"Thas right. Ah was born in th' mowntuns o' Dhor Isten, but me 'n Jofalk work 'ere in Grent Corine." Swagin reached into a pocket in his vest. "'Ere's m' papers t'prove it." He handed a folded piece of paper to the man. Jofalk did the same.

The riders paused to look at them, nodded, and handed it back. Falkier couldn't help but think that it would have taken far longer for them to have read foreign workman's permits. Though the five countries of the continent held an alliance, you had to get the permission of a foreign government to work outside of your native country. Falkier had crossed paths with those documents as a scribe for Lord Siphem, and he knew they were very wordy. Either the riders did not care that Jofalk and Swagin had permits, or they were unable to read.

“Now, as ah said, we know nuthin’ ‘bout nuthin. If we see yer boy, wull b’ sher t’let ya’ know.” Swagin kicked Olorn to continue on, but the riders continued to block the way.

“Hold on a second. What’s the deal with your friend here?” The mustached man gestured towards Falkier. Falkier raised his head to look at them. If they hadn’t arrested him yet, they probably didn’t have a description of him. “Why have you been so quiet?”

“I figured that Swagin and Jofalk were more than capable of giving you men all the information you required. As you can likely tell from my accent, I am Corinian, and so I don’t have any work or travel papers to display.” Falkier managed to keep his voice confident and calm, despite the pounding of his heart.

The mustached rider nodded. “You are right. As a Corinian, you don’t need to show us foreign work or travel forms.” The two men at his side drew their swords in unison. “However, as of three years ago, Corinians are required to carry identification with them at all times to be presented immediately to any law official. You wouldn’t know that, though, since you’ve been in prison until yesterday.” He gestured to his men. “Seize him!”

Falkier found himself rolling off the back of Olorn as Swagin leaped from his seat, bellowing, “No king’s boys er gun’ take m’ blood brotha’ Falkeer while Ah’m livin’!” He threw himself at the shaved man, completely ignorant of the piece of iron the man brandished. Falkier got to his feet in time to watch as Swagin knocked the sword away with his forearm and slammed his other fist into the man’s face. Olorn’s heads hissed as they snapped at the black haired man with long, razor-sharp fangs. Jofalk directed his horse away from the commotion, nocking an arrow to his bow. The mustached man dismounted and drew his sword, ducking an arrow in the process. He dived away from the rampaging Dhorn and Aoun, locking his eye on his prey, Falkier.

Falkier pulled the sword from its scabbard, the weight foreign to his hand. If it really was a sword meant for him as the dream said, shouldn’t it be more comfortable to hold? The knuckle-bow on the thumb side of the hilt seemed out of place and close to unnecessary. Why make them bladed to begin with? The only time a bladed knuckle-bow would make sense is if you were hitting someone with it, and isn’t the point of a sword to keep a little more distance from your opponent?

Falkier would have other times to question how functional his Ancient-given weapon was for him, as the mustached man swung his sword at Falkier’s feet, causing him to step back out of the way, barely blocking the follow-up swing. He swung at the man, who easily parried and struck at Falkier’s leg. Clearly, he’d been trained in swordsmanship.

Falkier winced as the blade sliced across his thigh, blood soaking the leg of his trousers. He struck back, stabbing at the man’s stomach. The mustached man moved the blade out of the way with a flick of the wrist and smacked Falkier’s wrist with the flat of his blade. Falkier’s grip faltered for a second, but he recovered enough to pull his sword back in front of him. All the while, the mustached man watched him, smirking.

Was he playing with Falkier? The man blocked Falkier's next couple swings with ease, retaliating with a few nicks on Falkier's arms and legs. *This is pointless. He could kill me without breaking a sweat. He must need to take me in alive, so he's just letting me wear myself out.*

Falkier looked at the longsword in his hands, a supposed gift from heaven he was destined to wield. He was no great warrior, how could he ever do anything with this piece of metal. He couldn't even find a comfortable way to hold it.

***Touch the black gem in the pommel and say 'Vatinp, yqab',*** a voice growled in his head. It was the voice from the woods before he blacked out.

Falkier obeyed, putting the fingers of his right hand on the pommel. Despite the freezing air around it, the gem felt slightly warm. "Vah-tinp, ee-cob?" Falkier said, the words feeling odd in his mouth. Whatever was supposed to happen, didn't.

***No! 'Vatinp yqab!' Say it with more confidence!***

Falkier took a breath and focused. "Vatinp, yqab!"

Warmth flooded through Falkier's body, and his wounds stopped bleeding. He watched in amazement as the sword transformed in his hand. The leather of the hilt took on a scaled appearance. The blade broadened into that of a falchion, the end becoming rounder and the top edge becoming blunted. The thumb-side knuckle-bow disappeared, while a hook grew downward from the hilt over the blunt edge. The hook bore a jagged edge that gave it an appearance resembling the jaw of some sort of carnivorous beast when paired with a matching adornment that extended along the bladed edge. Falkier's eyes and mouth felt strange, almost like they were also going through some sort of transformation.

The mustached man's eyes widened in terror. "Are you some sort of demon?" His stance quickly became more aggressive as he began striking at Falkier.

The newly-transformed sword felt easier to handle, and Falkier was able to protect himself, catching the man's blade across the blunt edge. After a few more swings, Falkier managed to hook the man's blade. He twisted his wrist and wrenched the sword out of the man's hands. The sword clattered to the ground, and Falkier rushed him, punching the knuckle-bow that still remained on the bladed side of his sword into the man's throat. The man wheezed as he collapsed to the ground. Falkier put the point of his sword to the man's throat.

"So this is how you managed to kill six men on your own," the man croaked. "Demon magic."

"I was not alo--"

The man spat at Falkier. "Kill me, you worthless cheat. I would rather die than listen to you try to corrupt my ears with your lies."

Falkier drew the sword back to deliver the final blow and stopped. He'd never killed anyone before. Swagin and Jofalk had already finished the other two men off and were rummaging through their

possessions. He looked into the man's eyes, defiant and prepared for what was to come. The sword descended, opening the man's throat. Watching the man's body collapse in a pool of blood, Falkier ran his tongue across his teeth and was surprised to find all of them sharp and pointed. He raised his sword and looked at himself in the blade's reflection. His eyes were the color of polished brass with slits for pupils. Smiling confirmed that his teeth had all grown to sharp points. *I really do look like a demon.*

***Not a demon***, the voice growled, ***a dragon. Touch the black gem again before your comrades can see.***

Falkier obeyed, and the warmth rushed out of his muscles. The sword remained a falchion, but the leather hilt lost its scaliness and the hook lost its jagged edge. Falkier looked at his reflection on the blade again and was relieved to see that his eyes and teeth had returned to normal as well. *What is going on? What happened? Who are you?* There came no response.