

SAND AND SMOKE

DRAGON DESTINY BOOK ONE

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Dedicated to Alex Wyman, my friend since 6th grade.

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PROLOGUE

SALEM THE WESECH DRAGON

AS HE SLITHERED THROUGH THE ROUGH TUNNELS DEEP WITHIN THE west end of the Morite Mountains, Salem hungered for the meeting that was about to take place. He tucked his giant wings in, spinning with muscles and talons through the callous, black throat of stone and dirt. His body was made for navigating it. The tunnels were saturated with the fragrance of smoke. The rock crumbled at his power. It gave way at a brush of his strong claws. His talons were like human swords, his hide was thick from years of long flights and a rigorous regimen. He shook and thrust himself downward. He wiggled hard. Some rock got lodged in between his back scales, pricking him, but he withstood the pain like the powerhouse he was. He spun, and a moment later it crumbled to dust.

Finally, he crawled out of the tunnels. He flapped his wings once, extending them completely. It was warm down here.

A gust of wind buffeted the cavern around him, and he dropped to the ground with a thud. His paws came to rest in shallow sand, and he craned his neck, gazing around the dusky cavern.

It was empty, of course. Dragons never came to the bottom. At least his breed, the Wesechs, never did. They preferred the deep

recesses of the smoky mountains or the cold heights of the snow-capped tops. Salem could not speak for the Sun dragons, a different breed who resided so far east that his kind never encountered them. And humans never came here; they knew that stepping into Wesech dragon territory was a fast way to get grilled. Well, most of them knew that. Some stupidly thought they were smart enough to steal Wesech gold without getting caught.

Salem smirked as he recalled the last time he'd caught humans trespassing on Wesech territory. It had been years ago. His fiery breath had greeted that small band of three, cooking them until they were nothing but ashes and smoke. What a rush he had felt upon looking at their remains. The power had been like a jolt of calcium to his bones.

Salem trudged out of the cavern, stepping into the muggy outdoors. Here, the sand was thick, and it was even hotter than inside. The light shone on his scales and in his eyes. He shielded his face with an emerald paw.

A man was waiting for him, illuminated by the midday sun. He had long blond hair, brown shorts and boots, and a tough and hardened face. Normally, Salem would have cooked him where he stood, just for daring to step near the base of the mountain, but he restrained himself this time. This man was here with permission from the dragon tribunal. It would not do to harm him.

Still, that confident look made Salem want to shove his power down the human's throat. He was looking at Salem as if they were equals. It was disgusting.

"Are you Russ?" Salem said.

He swallowed down the hot fire building in his throat. Russ was supposed to be the leader of the humans.

The man cocked his head, frowning.

"I'm here for the meeting," he said.

Salem snorted. Of course. He'd forgotten Rolf had told him

humans could not understand his language. Their minds were simple, but there was at least one thing they could understand.

Salem roared.

The man stepped backward, and a flash of fear appeared in his eyes. Now that was more like it. *Respect my power.*

The man reached to his hip, where he had a pistol. Salem snorted. If he drew that, all agreements were off. He was a dead man. Even if he did get a shot off, Salem was 30 times his size, covered in armor-like scales that were used to grinding against rock on a daily basis. Did this man really think a pistol could harm him? Even a baby Wesech dragon would be invincible to him.

They stood there, staring at each other for several minutes before Salem finally concluded that the man wasn't going to draw his gun. Perhaps it was for the best. Rolf would be disappointed if this meeting ended in death and not diplomacy. It was his choice to spare this man, Salem reassured himself. It was a good choice. Many idiots of the world did not understand how fruitful it could be to put off instant gratification for a bigger payoff later.

Slowly, Salem bowed to the man. It was a human sign of respect. Surely the man would recognize it. Out of the corner of his eyes, Salem watched the man.

The man's eyes went wide, and he relaxed. He let go of the pistol at his hip, and he bowed back to the dragon.

Excellent, Salem thought. Then he flapped his wings, soaring over to the man with a whoosh of wind and sand, and he snatched him off the ground.

PART I

AL HARDIN

THE SUN'S HEAT BEAT DOWN ON HIM, BEADS OF SWEAT THICKENING on his back—Al Hardin's back. He breathed in, the coarse, dry air filling his lungs. He coughed. It was always rougher downriver. His brown bandana was tied around his mouth, filtering some of the smog, but he still found it hard to breathe.

He surveyed the townsfolk as his horse trotted down the main road, searching for men who might harm him. He was a wanted man. Lucky for him, most wouldn't recognize him in his current getup.

A kid, he looked about ten, dropped the bucket he hauled. The kid frowned, then picked it back up again. Another man, much older, pushed a cart full of coal. Al looked away. None of these people appeared dangerous. It was possible that someone with criminal intent was hiding out of sight. There were probably a few shoot 'em up types in the saloon, but he wouldn't go that far to get a pulse on the town.

Two enormous wooden pillars and a bright indigo symbol marked the bank up ahead. The symbol was the Arustan stamp of a certified bank. It was an indigo circle with a cursive *e* inside of it.

He tugged on his horse's reins, and they halted outside the general store, opposite the bank. He climbed down, then patted her head.

"Find me when I'm done, Hera," he whispered. "Good girl."

Then he tucked himself in between two buildings, slipping his brown bandana off as he merged with the shadows. He checked the main road one last time, then pulled out his silver silk bandana and put it on.

Now he was no longer Al Hardin. He was the Silver Bandana, a hero to the people. Time to shed his evasiveness and caution. Time to charge into danger. Time to save some lives.

The Silver Bandana grinned, though no one could see it. He darted out of the alleyway. He'd seen three men ride into the bank, just moments ago, guns drawn. Hopefully, he wasn't too late. Unwanted memories flashed in his mind. This wasn't his first time dancing close to wildfire, and he could still remember the blood from bodies wasted those few times he'd been late in arriving. The memories brought him a feeling of sorrow.

He leaned against the outside wall of the bank and crouched down. He steadied himself. He couldn't hear any noise coming from inside. He grabbed hold of the doorknob and shoved the bank door open, making sure to stay against the wall and out of the doorway.

A gunshot reverberated across the room and a bullet whizzed by him, chipping the wood on one of the pillars opposite the bank's front door.

"What the blazes!" a man said. "There's no one there."

His voice gave him away. In an instant, the Silver Bandana was spinning into the doorway, wicked with his speed.

He raised his right hand and darted forward. He launched a blast of wind at the man. Screams sounded as his gust launched the man into the air. His heart pounded. His fingers twitched again.

The man hit the wall and dropped his gun. It clattered to the floor.

With a wave of his hand, he summoned the gun from the bank robber. The wind knocked it toward him, like it had been kicked. He stopped it with his boot.

“The Silver Bandana...” said another man.

He assessed the room quickly. Three bank robbers. One, with a wiry mustache and a mustard yellow sleeveless button-down, lay slumped against a wall. Another shoveled money into a bag. The third, nearly completely clothed in black, with a red bandana and a full beard, glared at him and growled.

The man's fingers closed around the handle of his six-shooter. The Silver Bandana's fingers twitched. The wind *thrummed* between those fingers, and then he launched a gust.

The pistol was only halfway out of its holster. The gun slammed into the rear wall. *What a rush.*

With a snarl, the man reached for his partner's gun but the story was the same. *Twitch. Thrum. Whoosh.* As the second gun clattered to the ground near the first, he summoned a reverse gust, bringing the pistols to the other side of the room, near him, far away from the robbers.

“Why you...” the man with the red bandana said. “You'll pay!”

They'd have to get their guns back before they could make good on that promise, and that wasn't happening. Once the Silver Bandana was in a room with criminals, the criminals always paid.

“Drop the money.”

The Silver Bandana walked toward the man in the red bandana. The man raised his fist, cracked his knuckles. He needed to do time. Men like him, it wasn't good for the country to have them on the streets. Around them, bystanders lay, flat on the ground, but increasingly looking up with interest. It seemed no one had been

shot. That was definitely a positive. He had arrived in time, everyone would live, all in all it was a great day.

The man swung a punch. He was met by an open palm and a forceful gale. He cried out, hitting the wall next to his comrade in yellow.

One left. The last man's eyes went wide. He dropped his big cloth bag of money, then backed away. No need to hit him with a gale, then. He'd still do time with his friends.

"Police!" came a shout from the front of the bank. "Nobody move!"

The Silver Bandana froze. He carefully turned around. They were a little early. He regarded the set of turquoise uniformed men. They had not drawn their guns yet. *Good.*

"No need to shoot. I stopped these men from robbing the bank. After I leave, you'll see that everything's still in order. All the money is in that bag."

"Turn yourself in!" one of the police said.

"Tell him he has till the count of three," the other policeman said.

"You have till the count of three, Silver Bandana! Turn yourself in!"

He let out a sigh of exhaustion. If they'd just open their minds, they'd see he was on their side. He was half-tempted to try and convince them now, but they had jealousy in their eyes. It would be futile.

"One!" a policeman said.

He sighed.

"Two!"

He waved and blew the police out of the bank before they could finish the count. Then he unlatched the window and thrust it open.

He leaped, dropping a dragonlength to the sand. The police

would scramble back into the bank soon, and when they did, they'd find him gone.

He took off running. Down a ways, Hera was trotting through the sand, waiting for him. He slowed, joy rising to the surface. He might not have anyone else, but at least he had his horse. His lone companion on his quest to save the world.

He'd saved more lives today. If the police had gotten there before him, there would almost certainly have been a shoot-out. Instead, he had disarmed the criminals with only one shot fired, and no one getting hurt or killed. He had delivered them straight to the authorities. All those bystanders, lying on the worn hardwood floor, they'd be spending tonight safe with their families. Safety and good health were two things that anyone who knew death intimately could appreciate more than most.

"Hello girl," he said, rubbing Hera's nose gently. She stepped closer to him, comforted by his touch.

He climbed onto her back. After a gentle kick, she trotted away from the town. Atop his horse, things felt right. He was more comfortable up here than on his two feet.

Suddenly, Hera halted.

"What is it?"

He looked down, and saw that a boy was standing in the horse's path. The boy had curly, brown hair, wore a dirty white v-neck, and looked to be out of breath. He couldn't be older than 12, from the look of him. His face radiated exhaustion and urgency.

"I have a message! Please. My name is Jack. My address is 48 Pallica Road in New Tenmor, tell him that. Please. My family needs the money."

"What are you talking about, boy?"

"The northman!" he said, and then his eyes went wide. "Oh, I almost forgot the message he gave me."

The northman? What did a northman have to do with anything?

"The northman gave me this envelope!" the boy, Jack, said. He pulled an envelope out of his belt pouch and held it up. "He said to give it to the Silver Bandana, if I should see him, and I've seen him; it's you!"

"Yes."

He took the envelope from the boy. On the front was written *Silver Bandana*, and alongside the name, the number 14.

"What northman gave this to you?"

"I don't know his name, but he gave me a whole five-hundred eros just to take the letter! Said he'd give me a kiver if I could deliver it to you. Please. My mama needs the money, please tell him it was me who gave it to you."

It was hard to tell if this boy was speaking the truth or not. There wasn't anyone else around, and it seemed he wasn't dangerous. He had no gun and no other weapons, unless they were hidden beneath his raggedy clothes. The Silver Bandana dismounted his horse. He leaned down and pressed a hand to the boy's shoulder.

"Fine," he said. "If I see this northman, I'll tell him. But you have to do me a favor."

"Anything!" the boy said. "I'd do anything for the Silver Bandana."

"Don't become a Puncher."

The boy looked confused. "But you're—"

"I'm what I need to be. Now can you do me that favor, or can't you?"

The boy nodded. "I'll do it. I won't become a Puncher."

"Good."

He stood up, then tipped his hat to the boy. "I'll hold you to it, Jack from 48 Pallica Road in New Tenmor."

Jack smiled from ear to ear. The Silver Bandana mounted his

horse again. He gave Hera a gentle tap, and she trotted around the boy, then broke into a gallop. They hit the open desert.

He hunched over, his head hovering above Hera's as they rode. On the outskirts of town, rough dust particles were still common, but despite this, he took the first opportunity he got to swap out his silver silk bandana for his plain brown one.

Now he was Al Hardin again, a simple-minded nomad who would sooner give up everything he owned than face down a criminal with a six shooter.

Al only existed so the Silver Bandana could exist, and the Silver Bandana needed to exist in order to make the world a better place. Bank robberies were only part of it. Those criminals often murdered people or committed other crimes if it would get them money. The police were rarely skilled enough to stop it, but the Silver Bandana was.

He saved lives. He inspired kids like Jack to be better people. He stopped criminals, both bank robbers and murderers. Collectively, they went by a single name. A name that referred to all people who made their living off crime. The Punchers.

Now that the Silver Bandana had been spotted in New Tenmor, Al had to ride to the next town over. The first quarter of the journey took him three days. He stopped along the river to sleep at night, desert sand flying in his face by day. It would've been hard riding for most horses, but Hera was used to it, same as Al. She was strong.

On the fourth day of their ride, he heard a bellowing roar in the sky. He looked up, and panic struck him as a sprawling green Wesech dragon glided just beneath the clouds.

That could mean trouble. He had heard a rumor a few seasons ago. The Wesechs weren't supposed to hunt humans, they weren't even supposed to land on human territory, it was part of the agreement that his home country of Arus had with the dragons. Though,

nothing in that agreement forbade them from flying over Arus, as this Wesech dragon was doing now.

The agreement kept human cities safe. Just a few seasons ago though, a man in Camotland claimed things were changing. He had reported seeing a dragon swoop down, snatching a lone human off the road. The others in the saloon had rolled their eyes, discounting the story as an illusion of the sand. Nobody had wanted to believe that a Wesech dragon might break the agreement, and Al was inclined to believe that the story wasn't true as well.

Still, he found himself scared as the Wesech flew overhead. If the man's story was true, and the beast swooped down for a midday snack, that would be it for him. Even the Silver Bandana, with his power to control the wind, could not hope to protect himself from a mighty dragon.

Fortunately, the beast flew past without so much as a glance in his direction. He let out a sigh of relief as the Wesech dragon disappeared into the distance, anxiety leaving him. The rumor was just one man's tall tale, he told himself. He wasn't going to be dragon food.

MAYA SAMORALT

SHE DANCED AS SHE FOUGHT. PRECISION GUIDED HER TIRELESS moves. She sailed through the cool air, sweaty and alive. A smile crept onto her face. Her cerulean skirt formed a colorful spiral as she moved. Her braided sable hair shot left and right, following her as she stepped along the contours of the outside stone. Wind brushed her face, and then a strike came dangerously close to her temple. She leaned back, dodging, then swung her wooden sword.

Maya's strike hit her brother with a thud. She felt resistance; he cried out. She pulled her sword back a hair, then thrust upwards. The uppercut connected with his arm, and a moment later, his wooden sword clattered to the ground and he tumbled backward.

Her brother, Aaron, was 10 years old, five years younger than herself. He had brown hair, black eyes, and a sleeveless amber v-neck with black buttons down the middle. A silver coin was embedded in his forehead, and it shone like jewelry – a symbol of his status. His shorts were navy blue, and on his feet he wore leather sandals.

“I win,” Maya said.

"Obviously," her brother said. "Now can we please go to the beach? I want to see the animals before sundown."

"One more round," Maya said. She'd taken too long to disarm him. She needed more practice. She pointed to his sword with hers. "Pick it up."

Aaron shook his head. "I'm putting my foot down."

"Aaron, don't-."

It was too late. Aaron stomped on the wooden sword and it cracked, splitting in two. Maya winced.

"Now you have to take me to the ocean," her brother demanded.

He has no respect for my swords, she thought, seething. She had spent a long time carving that wooden saber.

Honestly, she didn't understand his fixation with the ocean. The only things to see were sand, water, more sand, and sometimes crabs. Her brother could go by himself. Except that he couldn't, because their parents insisted it was too dangerous and Aaron was too young.

Maya dropped her wooden sword into a bucket and then gathered up the remnants of Aaron's.

"Fine," she said. "We will go. But after, we train again."

Aaron's eyes sparkled. "Race you there!"

He whipped past Maya, nearly running her over in his excitement. Maya rolled her eyes, and followed him with the pieces of the wooden sword.

In the next room, their mother was sewing a shirt and it became clear to Maya that she had stopped Aaron before he dashed past her.

"No running off," she told him. "You stick with your sister."

"Yes, Mama," Aaron said.

Maya tossed the fragments of the wooden weapon into the fire-

wood bucket. The *clang* of the pieces falling in made her wince. She felt as if she was tossing a part of herself away.

“Another one broken, huh?” her mother said.

“It was Aaron,” Maya seethed. “He shows no respect.”

“I hear you will take him to the ocean.”

“Yes.” Maya sighed with annoyance.

“Remember, we pray at sundown. Be back before then.”

“We will.”

“And do not wander off,” her mother added. “You are responsible for your brother.”

“I know.”

“Have fun.”

She would try.

Maya and Aaron walked down to the water together, following the cobblestone road most of the way. As they traveled, they passed from lush greenery to a stony and wooden town center. The town center was in between Maya's house and the ocean, so the easiest way to the water was straight through it. There was a stone temple not far into town. It had exactly 87 steps on all four sides, and at the top it was painted green and purple. Past the temple was an inn with a thatched roof that stood along the main road, with a sign that welcomed travelers from all parts of the country. Past that, there was a sword shop with a rockwood sign that welcomed visitors. Maya slowed as they reached the shop, and she gazed longingly at the dimly lit interior. She'd been inside before. They had an assorted collection of blades. Rapiers, curved swords, short swords, long swords, and more that Maya could not even name. She felt a pang in her chest as she thought about them. She would be happy with any kind of *real* sword.

Aaron tugged on her arm, and she walked away from the shop.

As they neared the opposite end of town, they came across the Serpentine house. It was painted jade and teal, so they could not

miss it, and it had a rockwood sign with an etching of a dragon rider on it. Maya stopped, longing causing her to stare. It was her destiny to live in a place like this one day. She was sure of it. She could feel it in her bones, a tingling sensation that she often felt when she thought of the Serpentine.

Aaron tugged on her arm again. "Stop stopping," he said, and she was forced to walk on.

Soon, the Serpentine house was out of view, and then they passed by a shrine to the god Shidao. She tossed a cacao bean at the god's feet. Her mother had always told her it would bring bad luck if she did not give an offering as she passed, for Shidao was the god her family chose to pray to. A cacao bean was the least she should give, but nytes or zords, Eltolix's official currency, were even better.

After leaving town and passing Shidao's shrine, Maya and Aaron reached the Coppers. They were slaving away in the fields, sweating under the heat of the sun. They were dressed in ragged clothes, their wiry bodies clearly undernourished. Each had a copper coin embedded in their forehead. Maya's hand went to the silver coin in her forehead. It felt warm. Her people, the Silvers, were engineers, artists, people who used their brains. They would never need to work in the fields.

"Hurry up," Aaron said, tugging on her arm again.

Soon, they were at the end of the cobblestones, which meant they had to take the beaten path the rest of the way. They hiked down it, between the thickets and the long grass. Because of Aaron, they had traversed the beaten path so many times it might very well not have been beaten if not for them.

When they reached the beach, Aaron smiled and he ran to the water. He liked to stand at the edge, and let the waves wash over his feet. Maya watched him, simultaneously surveying the beach as she often did to keep him safe. A trio of other kids were playing in

the sand, but they were too far away for Maya to discern their class. Same for the elderly couple who bathed in the sun even farther away than them.

After a while, she moved onto searching for wood that might be worthy of replacing the sword her brother had broken. It was a hard task, because even though many pieces of wood looked strong, when she picked them up they often felt hollow and weak. Plus, she had to make sure that the wood was the right length and thickness. As she searched, she made sure to keep an eye on her brother, who quickly moved on from standing in the water and started searching the shallows.

Right as she found a good piece of wood for her sword, she happened to glance across the beach, back towards the forest, and she saw a man leaning against one of the trees. He was tall, with long blond hair and brown robes. A sword hung from his belt, in a brown sheath that matched his robes. An obsidian coin shone on his forehead. He was eating a mango. Though what caught Maya's attention most was the Sun dragon on his shoulder.

Maya approached. He was clearly a Serpentine, but it took her a moment to place him. There were twelve Serpentes who lived in Ochai Town. She knew them all by face, they usually attended temple on Sunday, and they always attended town festivals. As she grew close, the Sun dragon lifted himself off his shoulder. She could barely make out their features, they were as small as a sparrow. Jade scales, teal feathers and gold fur, ivory incisors visible even when the dragon's mouth was closed.

"Maya Samoralt," the Serpentine said, then he tossed the rest of his mango in the air. His dragon caught it in their mouth. "Do you remember me?"

"Serpentine Tenic," Maya said. "You're the one who administered my exam."

Tenic nodded. "Have you received our letter?"

Letter? No, she hadn't. Did Tenic mean to tell her that the results of the entrance exam had come in? Maya couldn't help but grin. She had been waiting for that letter.

"I did not. Do you mean to tell me that I passed?"

"You'll have to read the letter to find out," Tenic said. "Though, I don't think you will be surprised. You're a lot like me, you know."

What did that mean?

"Coatan understands, but not everyone does. Oh, look, your brother has made some friends. Or enemies. Hard to tell."

Maya turned her attention to the water. The group of kids that she'd seen earlier were approaching Aaron's location. Suddenly, worry for her brother made a knot in Maya's stomach, and without another word to Tenic, she marched towards Aaron as fast as she could.

The three kids got there first. Aaron had wild eyes when he looked at them. Maya dashed forward, and with the salty ocean breeze filling her nostrils, she swung her newfound weapon, slapping a boy in the side.

He yelped, and she drew her wooden sword back in a threatening stance, ready to fight him and his friends. The kids turned around, and she saw that they were Bronzes. Their eyes went wide at the sight of her sword, and they fled, leaving Aaron and Maya alone. Aaron was holding up a crab. The joyful expression on his face turned into a scowl.

"What did you do that for?"

"I thought they were going to hurt you," Maya said.

"I was showing them my crab."

"Well, you shouldn't be hanging around with Bronzes, anyway."

"You're rotten," Aaron said.

Maya glanced back to the forest, where Tenic had been. She wanted to talk with him more about the test, but he was gone.

She sighed.

“We should go home, otherwise we might not make it before sunset.”

“Fine,” her brother put his crab down on the stone. “Goodbye Anderson. Someday I’ll come live here with you and abandon my sister.”

Maya rolled her eyes. As if. Their parents would never allow that to happen.

They traveled home. When they came upon the shrine to Shidao again, she tossed a cacao bean at the god once more. She was hoping to run across Tenic, but even when she passed by the Serpentine house, he was not around. After walking by the Serpentine house, she headed home as fast as she could. The possibility of her letter having arrived gave her motivation.

Her mother and father were sitting on the prayer mats when Maya and Aaron walked in the door. Her papa was still dressed in his gray work uniform, examining a piece of unopened mail.

My letter, Maya thought, inadvertently holding in her breath as she stood there and stared.

“Maya, Aaron, good, we pray in one minute.”

“Yes papa,” Maya said. “Is that my letter?”

“You may open it after prayer,” her father said. “Put that sword in its proper place, then come sit down.”

She nodded.

She ran into the other room, rushing as if it might make prayer go faster. She tossed the sword into the bucket, then returned to her family.

Her mother and father were sitting cross-legged now, and Aaron was setting down his mat. She grabbed her prayer mat from the box near the door then sat down on it. She could not take her mind off the letter.

The sword training she did, everything she learned in school, it

was all for the chance to be a Serpentine one day. She didn't have a reason for why she needed to be a Serpentine. All she knew was that it was her destiny, and nothing could stop her from achieving that destiny. She was determined. She was confident. She needed to read that letter. All of her dreams were on the line.

Together, Maya and her family prayed.

Their father led the prayer and recited the bulk of it. Tonight, as usual, they prayed to Shidao. Shidao was a god revered for their sight. They were said to be a thousand-eyed omniscient being. At night, their eyes were the moons and the stars, and in the day, they turned their head around, and a glowing single-eye on the back of their head, the sun, watched over the world. Maya's parents sometimes told her that they might not always know when she disobeyed them, but Shidao knew. She often responded that she would only disobey them if the gods led her to. They accepted that answer well enough.

As her father recited the prayer, certain portions demanded that the rest of the family join in, and Maya had to pay close attention to those parts. She didn't know the words to the entire prayer by heart yet—her father insisted that she would one day—but she knew enough to know when she should participate.

The prayer ended after five minutes. At this point, her father bowed, and the rest of the family bowed too. They hung their heads, allowing silence to fill the room. They rested like that for ten minutes, in what was supposed to be a moment of contemplation on how the gods had interacted with them throughout the day. Maya did not know how the gods had interacted with her, as usual. She tried to contemplate it, but her brain disobeyed her. She thought about Serpentine Tenic instead, and about the entrance exam. She had worked tirelessly to ensure she passed. What could the letter say? Tenic would not have shown up, and spoken to her, if she had not passed. Correct?

When the prayer was finally complete, Maya snatched the letter up and tore it open. Her mother walked to the kitchen, and her father rolled up the prayer mats. On the inside of the letter, a sheet of paper was adorned with the royal symbol of the Serpentine. The symbol was an obsidian dragon inside a circle of jade. It was the same symbol that Maya saw so often outside the Serpentine house. It combined the color of the Serpentine with the color of Eltolix royalty. There could be no mistaking it. The letter was regarding the entrance exam.

Maya unfolded the paper with trembling hands. She read the opening words. *Congratulations*, it said. She was in. She read the rest of the letter. She had been nervous when she'd started reading, but now she relaxed. She was one of only twenty 15-year-olds admitted to Serpentine school. Thousands of her peers had taken the test. She had outperformed almost all of them.

"If you didn't make it," Maya's mother said, coming over to her. "It's normal. Most don't."

Maya shoved the letter in her mama's face.

"I made it!" she screamed.

Her mother's eyes went wide. "You...made it," she said as she read the letter herself. "Camden! Aaron! Come here! You must see this!"

Her father approached. Aaron only came after additional prodding, and he groaned about it.

"Do I have to mama?" he said.

"Yes."

They all gathered around. Maya's papa read the letter while her mama waited in silence, and Aaron sighed impatiently.

"She made it..." he said. Then he grinned. "I always knew our daughter would make it."

"You did not!" Maya said. "You said there were low odds just yesterday."

"Low odds for most people. I didn't say you specifically."

"You implied it."

"Fine, fine," her father said. "Well, I was wrong. Congratulations, Maya."

Maya smiled. It felt good to hear her father say that word. *Congratulations*. He didn't say it often.

"Can we eat supper now?" Aaron asked.

"In a moment, Aaron," Maya's mother said. "When does it say Maya leaves?"

Her father studied the letter. "Three weeks," he said.

"Our little Maya is growing up."

"Yes. She truly is."

"Great. Can we eat now?" Aaron said.

Maya's parents finally relented. As the four Samoralts seated themselves around the dinner table, Maya couldn't stop thinking about what awaited her.

Serpentine school would be her chance to bond with a Sun dragon, and to soar in the sky on one's back. It would be her chance to become a master with the sword, and to wield real ones, not wooden. It would be an opportunity to serve her country in the most honorable of ways. She might even be invited to help with controlling the weather in the Eltolix kingdom. Her destiny was so close, she could taste it, just as sweet as the fruit on her dinner plate. She was finally going to be a Serpentine. Three weeks couldn't pass fast enough.

AL HARDIN

PROPPED UP IN HIS BED, AL UNROLLED THE LETTER THAT THE Silver Bandana had received and read it for the sixth time in as many nights. He had just lit the lantern nearest to him. It burned oil to bring him light in his stuffy room at the town's hotel.

Mr. Silver Bandana,

I write to you with great need. Our country—in fact, our world—depends on you. I know not of another with the talent and heart for what needs to be done. I dare not place my name in this letter, or write what this is about, for fear it may end up in the wrong hands. Instead, I implore you, meet me in Chaloya Town this winter. I will be at the statue of Ed Moran, at dawn on the 24th, awaiting your arrival.

Al looked at the wall, his head full of confusing thoughts, and then he read it again. There was no signature. Cramped, sore, and tired,

he found that the words passed through his mind, forgotten, as soon as he read them.

Why did he still have the letter? He knew what it was. A trap, no doubt. He rolled the letter up again, and considered throwing it away. The Silver Bandana helped people, that was true, but he wasn't stupid. A lot of Punchers wanted him dead, and if he showed up in Chaloya Town on the 24th, there was a good chance that one or more of them would be waiting for him, instead of a mysterious northman.

Al felt a pit in his stomach as he thought about throwing away the letter. He couldn't do it, couldn't dismiss this thing, which seemed to have been written in such earnestness. Or was it the Silver Bandana who couldn't throw it away?

The boy, Jack, had said that a northman had given him the letter. Why would a northman be this far south? Jack was either lying, or some Puncher had deceived him. It made even less sense why a northman would want to meet the Silver Bandana all the way in Chaloya Town. That was as far south as one could get.

Al blew out his lantern, then he lay back on his tough bed, resigning himself to figuring out the answers another day, hoping to get some shut eye. Still, as he stretched out and rustled around, looking for a comfortable position, he couldn't help but wonder if maybe the letter had been written in earnestness. Staring at the crumbling ceiling of his little hotel room, the voice of the Silver Bandana was whispering in his head. He was asking Al not to ignore the people who needed his help in Chaloya Town, but Al didn't want to take the risk.

In the morning, he left the hotel and stepped into the bustling town of Elaona. The air was thick, people were shouting, horses clacked

as they led carriages on by, and the wagons rattled. The sun was barely up, casting a dim orange glow over the brick and wooden buildings and the sandy streets. Al found Hera at the hitching rail in front of the hotel, and he rubbed her neck, then fed her some coastus. She neighed happily, chewing on the fluffy and bready food for only a second before swallowing. He wouldn't need her today. He let her know he'd be back soon, then he walked away.

As he trudged quietly down the street, the sun rose higher and beat harder. The air grew thicker and the heat swelled. He passed by a barbershop, a general store, and the saloon. He'd been to the saloon the night before, and he'd met a dancer whose father was looking for help at the train station. He had volunteered for the job, not knowing what it entailed, but that he needed some spending money. She'd told him to show up first thing in the morning.

He found her standing outside the station with another man. As he drew close, he got a good look at the man, and wariness took over. The man had been at the saloon last night, seated alone at the bar. Now, in the middle of the sand soaked streets, he was standing around with that same intimidating aura as he'd had the night before. He had that look to him. A look that Al knew all too well. The look of a Puncher.

Not everyone could recognize a Puncher when they saw one, but the Silver Bandana could, due to the fact that it was part of his job. This man wore a dark cowboy hat, with a black and red striped button-down and black shorts. His face was shrouded in stubble, and he had a look in his eyes that said he'd seen the end of the world and survived. That look was what gave him away as a Puncher. But the six shooter on his belt was also an indicator. Ordinary folk didn't carry guns on them day to day, not unless they had a good reason.

"Al, over here," the dancer said. She had caught his eye, and was waving, a cheerful smile on her face.

Al took a deep breath. He wanted to run. He didn't want to work with a Puncher, but the money was good, and he was here already.

Channeling his inner Silver Bandana, Al went over to the two of them.

"My father will be along soon to explain what needs to be done. Until then, we're just talking. This is Rik, by the way."

"A pleasure," Rik said.

Al shook his hand. It was sweaty and unpleasant. He couldn't take his mind off the fact that Rik was a Puncher. It had been two years since he'd last worked with a Puncher, though what he'd done before wasn't work. It was theft.

He'd committed the date to memory. Not on purpose, but just because he thought about it so much. The 37th of fall, 4717. He'd been working for Jim Masterson. It had been a simple robbery.

Al rubbed his eyes. They were tearing up.

It had not been a simple robbery. The memories came back to him with all the power of a sandstorm.

"Gimme the key," a member of his crew named Kit had said.

It was the first thing Al remembered that night. Kit was a small fellow with shorts two sizes too big, and a Wesech dragon brand on his left arm.

"I wanna be the one to open the door."

"No. You shovel the money into the bag," Jim had said.

"What about me?" another crew member, Mel, asked.

The 'simple robbery' was his first night on the job.

"You help him with the money," Jim told Mel.

Moments later, Jim stuck the key in the lock. Then he turned around and asked them all a question.

"Now remember, what do we do with witnesses?"

"Shoot 'em."

Goosebumps appeared on his skin as Al remembered his own

words. He had to wipe his eyes again. This was too much. He didn't want to remember anymore.

"Look, my father's here," the dancer said.

Sure enough, an Arus policeman in a turquoise uniform was approaching them. He had about six others with him; they didn't appear to be policemen or Punchers. The dancer's father introduced himself as a deputy. He explained how Al and Rik needed to load coal into the train once it arrived. The train was due to arrive at any moment, and while they waited, the deputy showed them where the coal was, and where some wheelbarrows were too.

A short time later, the train horn sounded. The gray cars became visible in the distance, spewing smoke. The deputy yelled for everyone to get ready.

Al loaded his wheelbarrow up with coal from the stockpile. He coughed as he put in the pieces, struggling not to breathe in the dust. The stockpile seemed to contain enough coal to fill the entire hotel lounge. He had to wonder what they would do with such massive quantities of the stuff.

Soon, he was bringing coal over to the train side-by-side with Rik.

"How long have you been in Elaona?" Rik asked as he set his wheelbarrow down beside the train and dumped coal into the car.

"A few days, I reckon," Al said.

"I've been here for the better part of a year," Rik said. "Ever since I retired."

"You're retired?"

"Uh-huh," Rik said. "I used to be a Puncher, like you. I reckon that's why they put us together."

Al sighed with annoyance. He hated when people mistook him for a Puncher.

"I ain't a Puncher."

"You ain't?"

“No.”

“But you were in the past, huh?”

Al shook his head. “No.” He had been a Puncher, yes, but he wasn't going to admit it to this man. Admitting it would mean he'd have to talk about it. He didn't want to do that.

“Well, everyone's got things they regret,” Rik said.

They went back to get more coal.

Al begrudgingly agreed with Rik, though he didn't say so. Without wanting to, he got to thinking about what he regretted. Two years ago, he'd been a naive 15-year old. He'd joined the Punchers in his part of town because he had thought a Puncher was a cool thing to be. Some people joined because they owed money, or because they were in a bad situation. Al had joined, and joining had caused all of the bad situations he'd been in since.

He remembered that fateful night again. The 37th of fall, 4717. It was the last time he'd worked alongside a Puncher, and the last time he'd considered himself a Puncher.

“I could drown in this much jade,” Kit had said as they shoveled money into a bag.

“You can't drown in jade,” Mel had said. “You can only drown in liquids.”

“Y'all know what I mean.”

Kit was a strange fellow. One time, he had hidden his money in a chicken carcass so others wouldn't find it.

“Let's just hope your papa doesn't catch us, Mel,” Al had said. Mel's papa was a banker.

“He won't. I'll be putting the key back in his safe before he wakes up.”

“Stop talking and shovel money faster,” Jim said.

They quickly emptied out the bank, with hours to spare until sunrise. On their way out, Jim locked up.

That was when Al had heard the scream. It was a lady's

scream, and just the memory of it brought her face to mind. The image of her caring eyes, her comforting smile, and her warmth lived on in his memories. The scream was the last thing Al had ever heard come out of his mother's mouth.

The sound of the gunshot reverberated across Al's mind. Jim had killed her.

No hesitation, not a moment for her to say a word, or even register what was happening. Al remembered his mama's wide eyes. He remembered crouching down next to her. He remembered thinking it was his fault she'd died. Tears pooled in his eyes as he remembered it all. She'd clearly come to the bank looking for him, worried about him. If he hadn't been with the Punchers, if he hadn't been on the bank raid, she would still be alive now.

"You all good?" Rik said, breaking Al out of his daydream. Al wiped under his eye, realizing he was crying now. He shook his head, trying not to feel things anymore. Trying not to remember.

"I'm fine," he said, and they resumed loading the coal into the wheelbarrows. Just a little longer of working with Rik, and then he would collect his money, and be on his way.

For once, it occurred to him that the man might be the same as he was. Rik had said that everyone had things they regretted. Maybe Rik regretted being a Puncher too. Maybe he had been responsible for the death of someone close to him, like Al. Still, he couldn't be exactly the same as Al. He wasn't the Silver Bandana.

They emptied their wheelbarrows at the train car again. It was getting close to being full. The stink of the coal seemed ordinary now.

"Do you know what the Wesech dragons do with coal?" Al asked.

Rik shook his head. "Nuh-uh. I didn't even know Wesech dragons liked coal," he said.

“Apparently, most of the coal we mine goes to them,” Al said. “So that they don’t attack us, I think.”

“That makes sense,” Rik said. “Gotta trade ‘em something for that. Though I always thought it went to the northmen.”

“It goes to them first, and then to the Wesech dragons. That’s what I heard,” Al said.

What did Wesech dragons do with coal? Did they have railways in the mountains? That made little sense, they could fly.

Al dragged the wheelbarrow back around to get more of the coal.

“Why’d you quit being a Puncher?” Rik asked.

Al shook his head. “I told you, I wasn’t one.”

Rik stopped work for a click. Al looked at him, curious, and saw him with a tear in his eye.

“I stopped cause of the Silver Bandana,” he said. He wiped the tears away. “This spring, I saw him, and I thought, what in the world am I doing? The Silver Bandana saves this goddamn world every day. I know he has a power and all, he can control the wind, but that man puts his life on the line for others, and what do the Punchers do? They put other people’s lives on the line for themselves. I couldn’t be so selfish, but I couldn’t be the Silver Bandana, either. I figured the least I could do is be a normal member of this world, and not a criminal any more.”

Al didn’t know how to respond. He worked a little longer on loading the train up, and eventually they chatted some more, but he kept thinking about what Rik had said regarding the Silver Bandana. Rik didn’t know Al and he were one and the same. Al had the silk bandana in his belt pouch, safely out of sight. It was the first time anyone had ever talked to him about the Silver Bandana. He felt strange about the reverence that this former Puncher expressed for him. He wasn’t sure if he liked it or not.

But it was what he wanted, wasn’t it? Or at least, it was what

the Silver Bandana wanted: to inspire people to do better, to save lives from Punchers. If Rik had truly changed his ways, then the Silver Bandana was doing his job.

It was a job that had been created from grief and bloodshed. The Silver Bandana was born of Al's empty, hopeless shell that some people called a body. A week after her death, Al's mother had been buried, but he had mourned her for the rest of fall, and then all of winter. She was the only family he had, ever since his father had disappeared when he was only five. All of Al's friends had been Punchers. He had no longer wanted anything to do with them. Without his mother and without his friends, he had hung around his house alone, spending most days unable to face the world. Eventually, starving and out of food and money, he went to his teacher Ela Kitefelt in hope of a meal. She had been a friend of his mother's. That day, she had given him more than food. She'd inspired him to keep on living.

At first, after his mother's death, he'd been sure it was too late for him. His life was ruined. Through Ms. Kitefelt's words though, he had realized that even though his life was ruined, there existed many others whose lives weren't. Al had a gift. He was able to summon the wind. He could do things with that. He could make things better for others. He could stop people's lives from being ruined, and he could save lives. The Silver Bandana had matured in his mind, growing from a baby to a toddler in the presence of Ela Kitefelt.

What was Rik, if not another life saved? A Puncher, admittedly, and not the type of person the Silver Bandana expected to save, but he was still a person. By reforming him, perhaps the Silver Bandana had saved other people who might have otherwise been killed by Rik if he'd kept on being a Puncher.

After they loaded the train up, the deputy paid Al and Rik five-hundred eros each. Then, the two of them went their separate ways.

Al wasn't much for spirituality, but as he walked down the sandy road back to his hotel, he thought of how, growing up, his temple priest had said that God interacted with every person. It was each person's responsibility to recognize when it happened and what God wanted. He remembered that from back when his mama had made him go to Sunday temple. If God had ever interacted with him, he figured it had to be happening today.

Perhaps the way that the former Puncher Rik had talked about the Silver Bandana was a sign. Maybe Al should take inspiration from him too. He still couldn't get his mind off that letter. Even if it was a trap, the Silver Bandana wanted to go to Chaloya Town. Al didn't, but deep down he knew that he had to go. For Jack, for Rik, and for all the people of Arus, he needed to ride south to meet the northman. The Silver Bandana couldn't ignore a call for help.

The Silver Bandana was needed in Chaloya Town. Al's wants and desires didn't matter; he would answer the call.