

CARL COTA-ROBLES

NOTES AND
—⊕— DRAGON DESTINY PREQUEL ⊕—
A NOMAD

Notes and a Nomad

Prequel to the *Dragon Destiny* series

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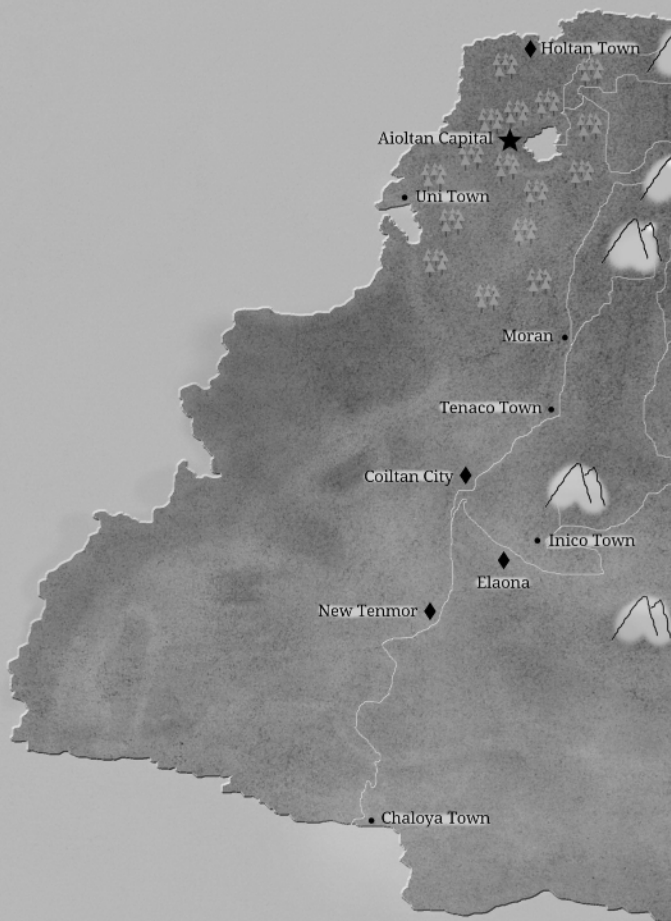
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NOTES AND A NOMAD

DRAGON DESTINY PREQUEL

CARL COTA-ROBLES

Dedicated to all those who struggle with mental health.





AL HARDIN

'ROUND THE DEEPER PARTS OF THE DESERT IN THE SOUTH, SOME of the seedier folk sometimes muttered a saying. Al Hardin, a young man of 15, had heard the saying when he'd first joined his old gang, and he hoped he would never have to hear it again.

There's two types of folks in this world, it went. Those who take advantage of others, and those who are taken advantage of themselves.

Astride his horse, Al shook his head, frowning at the thought of the sort of people who would dare think in that way. Mahogany, light brown, and off-white wooden and brick buildings sat in the distance, occupying the horizon right underneath the setting sun, marking the border of a town that emerged from the wild, dusty desert landscape. It had been a long journey to get here, but he was finally within sight of his destination. He breathed in the coarse, dry air. Even though it was just as rough here, a feeling of comfort filled his soul. He was free of his hometown, venturing out for the first time on his own.

He shook away his nervousness. With a sigh, he gave his horse a gentle kick, and she picked up the pace. He leaned down, resting the inside of his elbows against her neck. The sand and wind whipped around them and they sped down the bare valley, breaking into a loud gallop.

After a moment, he spread his fingers, letting the wind rush through them. At his command, the wind grew stronger, pushing them along faster. Al savored the touch. The power he had over the wind calmed him. It had only been a few years since he'd gained the strange ability to manipulate it, but ever since then he had learned various ways of using his magic. He could calm the gales with a simple flick of his finger, and with another flick he could toss people through the sky. He could even speed Hera along, giving her a tailwind that let her outrun other horses. Back when he'd been with his gang, he hadn't used his powers much. Ever since he'd been alone, though, that had been changing.

Al gritted his teeth, heart pumping as his nerves set in. He wasn't sure what awaited him in this new town, called Inico Town, but he did know that he wanted nothing to do with gangs of criminals anymore. Down south, there was a name for those who ignored the law, whether they be murderers, thieves, or anything in between. Those sorts of people were called Punchers.

Al had run with a couple of Punchers for more than a year, back in his hometown of Coiltan City. He'd joined them because he thought a Puncher was a cool thing to be. Now, though, he realized that there was nothing cool about ending a person's life. *The permanence of death ain't exactly something that's clear to most folk until they're staring it in the face.*

His horse slowed as they neared the edge of town. The

wide, sand soaked streets were almost entirely empty, and it was so quiet that he could hear the wind as it rustled through town. Buildings with fading paint lined both sides of the street. Loose signs creaked in the breeze. Al gazed about, taking in the lonely feel of the small town. A grocery store, a general store, and one bright indigo bank stood at the center of a cobblestone square. A statue of Jose Yao loomed over the area. From what little schooling he'd had, Al knew that Yao had been the second president of Arus.

He gave his horse a gentle kick again, and spurred her forward, past the statue and deeper into town. A barbershop sat on the corner. A few men lazed about on rocking chairs, pipes to their lips as they eyed the passing Al and his horse with cold, silent gazes. Their emotionless faces and the six shooters slung to their hips told Al all he needed to know about them. They were Punchers, and so he hung his head low, making every effort not to stare for too long, and he shuffled on by.

After a few more minutes of riding, he came upon a big bright mahogany building with loud chatter coming from inside. A plain wooden sign denoted the place as a saloon, welcoming anyone to come inside for a drink and a good time. As Al rode closer, he heard a musical tune mixed in with the chatter, coming from a piano no doubt. It was a classic that put his heart at ease and calmed every nerve in his body.

A plain metal hitching rail sat outside the saloon. Three other horses were affixed to it already. Al dismounted, taking hold of his horse's reins as he hit the ground, then he tied her to the rail.

"Good girl," he said, patting her on the cheek. "Here, I'll give ya sumthin to eat."

He retrieved a wad of fluffy coastus from his pocket, rolling the bread-like food between his fingers. Coastus was a staple of the south, on account of the fact it grew on trees that could stick around with very little water, it kept bellies full, and it didn't spoil easily. Al offered up the coastus to his horse. She snapped it up hungrily.

"Be good, Hera," he said, smiling at her. "If we're gonna start over, we need to do things on the straight and narrow, ya know?"

His horse neighed softly. Al petted her cheek one last time.

"I'll see you later."

A harsh gust of wind buffeted the two of them, and he noticed a hat go flying over his head. It was well out of reach of his fingers, but instinct set in, and he used his magic, guiding the hat back down towards the ground before it reached the roof of the saloon. He snapped it up before it hit the hardwood porch.

"Nice catch, sir," came a voice from down the road. Al looked to see a burly man in a black collared shirt approaching. The fellow wore a lighthearted, friendly face, and as he grew nearer, Al noticed that he wore a wooden cross around his neck. Definitely a priest. "That was a close one. Hahaha. Rough winds today. Thank ya mightily."

Al nodded, offering the priest his hat, not wanting to start a conversation. The man took it and placed it back on his head.

"Your instincts are sharp. And I reckon you're a true gent, not everyone would have bothered to save my hat like that. Ya headed in or going out?"

"Um, in," Al said.

"Good deal. You're at the right place, young fella. You can find what you're looking for, if you open your mind and your

heart. If there's any town in all of Arus worth protecting, this is it. You know how I know that?"

Al shrugged. The man had piqued his curiosity, but he still wanted the conversation to end. Maybe heading to the saloon wasn't such a good idea, if people were going to chat with him like this ... but he needed to eat.

"I grew up here," the man said, briskly approaching Al. "Anyway, I reckon it's time I head inside. My brother actually owns this here saloon, so I've got to say hi while I'm in town. By the way, if you ever need anything, just ask him and mention my name, it's Maro."

The priest stuck out his hand to shake. Al took it.

"And yours?"

"Um, it's Al."

"Welcome to Inico Town, Al. C'mon inside."

Maro clapped Al on the shoulder, as if the two had known each other forever, and then he walked on by. Al watched him head up the stairs into the saloon. He waited a moment, breathed a large sigh of exhaustion, and then he headed up the stairs and into the saloon too.

The place wasn't nearly as packed as it had sounded like. Al took his hat off as he stepped through the swinging bat-wing doors, and he held it to his chest. Gazing about, he took in the boisterous crowd. Ordinary folk in muted plaid, sleeveless shirts and shorts sat at various circular tables, laughing in each other's company. In one corner, a couple of bearded men with bowler hats were having themselves a very serious game of billiards. At the other side of the saloon, a darker sort of crowd, Punchers most likely, played cards. Most smoked, and all carried pistols on their hips. The front of the saloon was largely empty, save for an old man with thinning gray hair and a wispy beard, drinking whiskey from a glass in a calm manner,

and Maro, who had sat his butt a few stools down from the old man, and was chatting with the barkeep. Al sauntered over to the unoccupied portion of the front of the bar, not wanting to get in anyone's way or draw attention to himself. He made a note of a young lady at the saloon's piano. She was a striking figure, with a crisp white blouse, a matching skirt, and light freckles on her face. As she played, her entire body swayed to the tune, relaxed and entranced by the harmonious music. If it were possible, Al might've thought the music was playing her.

He sank into a seat and turned his attention to the barkeep, who was sauntering over.

"What can I getcha, dude?"

The barkeep was a bit on the chubbier side, with a large nose and a balding head of short brown hair. He was clearly much older than Al, but not any taller, and there was a sort of innocence to him, as if he'd never known anything more dangerous than a horse's kick and a lady's temper. Al could definitely see the resemblance to Maro. They both had the same receding hairline, the same wide nose, and the same double chin. The man gave Al a friendly smile.

"Uh, two chicken thighs with the mashed coastus, and an ale, please," Al said.

"Comin' right up," the barkeep said, and he turned to get those things ready. "My name's Orin, by the way. Holla if you need anything tonight, otherwise make yourself at home, man. How long are ya in town for?"

Al wasn't sure how he wanted to answer that. He was hoping to move out here, but it all depended on how well he could fit in with the townsfolk, and he certainly didn't want to be recounting his life story to people who might ask him *why* he was moving.

I reckon I'm here as long as it takes me to start over and get

away from the Punchers, Al thought, feeling guilty as he admitted to himself that he'd been one of them. *I need to forget the past.*

"I ain't quite sure yet," he ended up telling the barkeep.

Orin nodded, taking the answer in as if it were the most logical response out there. "Well, I hope you enjoy it here," he said. "We don't get many visitors."

Al nodded. A moment later, the barkeep brought him his food, and he dropped the conversation after that.

Al ate in silence, thinking about his new life with a mixture of hope and anxiety. The food was good; spicy, steaming, and covered in thick gravy, but even though it filled his belly, he couldn't help but feel dissatisfied and lost. His plan had only gone this far. After escaping from Coiltan City, he'd known he would ride for Inico Town, and he'd known he would find the saloon and get a bite to eat. After that, though, came the hard part. He needed to find his purpose. He'd left everything he'd ever cared about behind; he had no idea what that purpose might be.

I'm alone, he thought, shoveling food into his mouth and tightening the muscles in his face to keep from letting his tears out. *I'm alone and I don't know what the point of anything is anymore.*

He took a deep breath, then reached for his ale and downed a large amount. He burped. A chuckle came from behind him, and Al looked up to see Maro standing there.

"Hey man, how's it all going over here?" the priest asked, sinking into a chair.

Al was tempted to unload his feelings on the man, but he held back. He'd learned the dangers of trusting strangers too well.

"Hey Orin! You taking good care of Al here?" Maro called.

“You know I am, bro,” the barkeep said, approaching with a big smile on his face.

“Just make sure you don't slack off. Remember, like you used to?”

Orin chuckled. “What? When we were twelve? Nah, I'm not a slacker anymore.”

“Okay, bro,” Maro said sarcastically. “But seriously, Al's the one who saved my hat from going over the roof earlier, so we owe him.”

“Oh. I see,” Orin said, smile widening. “In that case, next drink is on me, Al, my dude!”

Maro laughed. “Excellent.”

Al didn't know how to react. He just nodded, muttering his thanks. He wasn't sure why Orin and Maro were being so welcoming.

“But seriously, Al, you need anything at all, you ask Orin. I'm heading out and going to be traveling for a while,” Maro stretched, getting out of his seat. “The priest life calls! I'm off. Later, bro.”

“Enjoy the road!” Orin called.

“Say bye to the wife and little Vica for me!”

Al wondered if he should say something. He was too anxious to open his mouth, though, and he watched Maro trudge out of the saloon, without saying a word to the nice priest. Afterward, he felt a little guilty. Maro had been so welcoming and so willing to do anything for him ... and Al? Al was just a quiet mess.

He sighed.

If he was gonna make a new life for himself, and if he was gonna find a new purpose for himself, then he needed to provide some value to the people around him. He needed to be more like Maro and Orin. Punchers hurt the ordinary folk of

the world; they robbed them or they shot them, but Al would be the opposite of that. He still wasn't quite sure what that opposite looked like. Would he be a priest like Maro? A barkeep like Orin? Maybe the ordinary rancher life was for him? Whatever the case, he felt a lot of pressure to do something to make the world better, especially as Inico Town was turning out to be such a kind place. He was just a 15-year-old kid, though, and he wasn't good at much ...

He reached into his pocket, then pulled out a smooth, silky silver bandana that had been sitting there since way back in Coiltan City. He placed the bandana gently on the table, looking at it with remorseful eyes.

"Cool bandana, dude," the barkeep said, sauntering over to grab Al's empty bowl of food.

Al nodded, unable to force a smile as he stared at the old bandana. It had belonged to his mother, before she'd ... well ... Al shook his head, dismissing the thought. He couldn't bring himself to think the words. He wanted to forget about what had happened to her. He'd spent too long ruminating on it already.

"Papa!" came a girl's scream from across the saloon. Al turned to see a little blond-haired lass with pigtails. She rushed from her mother to her father, the barkeep Orin. Orin smiled as he caught sight of her, then he wrapped her in his arms. Her mother smiled at the two of them. The girl was short and small; Al guessed she was maybe about nine or ten years of age.

"How are you, Vica? Did you learn a lot at school today?"

The girl nodded eagerly, smiling from ear to ear. "I learned all about the Three Scoundrels!" she shouted.

A horrified expression came over Orin's face, and he put a hand to her mouth, eyes wide as he looked from one end of the

bar to the other. Al followed his gaze. None of the other patrons seemed to have noticed the girl's outburst.

After a moment, Orin took his hand away from her mouth.

"You mustn't talk 'bout them," he said.

"But why not? Maha said that—"

Orin put a finger to her lips, cutting her off.

"It doesn't matter what your friends say, they're a dangerous bunch," Orin said. "Now, I'm sure your teachers ain't talking 'bout them, right?"

The girl looked down at the ground, sad. "No," she said.

"Then we won't either."

The girl nodded. Orin looked up at the mother, offering her a kiss.

"Pretty quiet night so far," he said as they pulled apart.

"That's good," she said.

They relaxed with their backs against a wall, chatting in quiet tones of voice, making it hard for Al to hear the conversation. He glanced around the space, eyeing the sparse crowd once more. Back in Coiltan City, the saloons had been packed, often with so many people that the women sat on men's laps because there weren't enough available seats. Tonight, there were seats to spare, and as Al's gaze moved back to the little girl and her mother and father at the bar, he watched as she wandered away from them, eventually sitting on a barstool right next to Al.

She turned and looked straight at him.

"Are you a Puncher?"

Al was taken aback at the question, and feelings of guilt and low self-esteem immediately came over him. Truth was, he wasn't a Puncher anymore, but he had been one a few seasons ago. He wanted to tell her no, but he knew that he still looked the part, with dark, distant eyes and a cold demeanor. He

wasn't sure how to get rid of that demeanor. Once one had experienced the life of a Puncher, it was hard to blend in among common folk again. He really wanted to blend in here.

Al shook his head, denying the Puncher part of himself. He was a new person now.

"No, I ain't."

"You look like one," she said.

Al cringed. He decided to remain quiet.

The girl leaned in close, lowering her voice to a whisper.

"Have you heard of the Three Scoundrels?" she asked him.

Al felt wary. He wanted to tell her to go away, but he felt guilty at the thought of being rude to her.

"I heard they're the biggest, baddest Punchers around. I heard they robbed a bank of three-hundred Kiver, then came here and just started doing whatever they wanted. I heard they live somewhere in town, but it's a secret, and sometimes they just show up and kill people. Like old Zach who turned up dead in the street last week. Did you know old Zach?"

Al frowned, then shook his head.

"I ain't—"

"He was shot," the girl said. "I heard the Three Scoundrels are all short, too. Like if you look at them, you'd think they're harmless midgets, but then they'll kill you in an instant. Bam! You're dead."

"You shouldn't be talking 'bout them," Al said with a heavy sigh.

"That's what my papa said," the girl rolled her eyes. "But he's wrong."

Al was silent.

"You don't seem like you know anything," the girl said.

"Nuh-uh," Al said, hoping that would get her to leave.

"Well, you should get smarter," the girl said.

Al sighed. "I'll try."

"Stupid town is full of wussies and dumb people," the girl said. "Nobody can do anything about the Three Scoundrels."

Al frowned. "What do you mean?" he asked tentatively.

"What I mean is they're bad people," the little girl said. "And everyone's too scared to stand up to them!"

MAYA SAMORALT

NO MATTER WHAT ANYONE ELSE SAID, MAYA DIDN'T BELIEVE IN letting go of her dreams. As she strode down the cobblestone path, making her way through the verdant edge of town with her eight-year-old little brother trailing her, she gritted her teeth in determination. Those with bold dreams like her weren't foolish. It didn't matter how dismal the chances of success were. All that mattered was that she was striving for something worthwhile.

The path grew wider and the trees on either side of her began to let up as she reached Ochai Town. It was a place nestled into the center of the forest, with great, colorful brick and stone buildings and a raucous community of merchants, families, priests, and business-people. Maya took hold of her brother's hand as they passed by a couple of men hauling bags of coastus. Her brother was staring around in wonder at all of the people, watching them as they went about their business or just chatted casually in the streets. Like most boys in her country, her brother wore loose fitting shorts, a simple gray button-down shirt, and airy sandals. Like her, he had a silver coin

embedded in his forehead—a symbol of their standing as members of the country's Silver class.

The streets were occupied by men, women, boys, and girls of all four classes. Coppers swept outside the buildings, Bronzes and Silvers hustled from one place to the next, and Maya even spotted a Gold, riding in a carriage, headed down another street that ran perpendicular to the one Maya and her brother were walking on.

Golds were the most influential of the four classes, but to most, the silver coin was enough to elicit respect. Silvers worked as engineers, artists, doctors, and in other trades that required use of the mind. The other two classes, Bronze and Copper, did skilled trades such as metal working and construction or menial tasks like sweeping the floors or tending to the crops on Gold-owned farmland.

“That one is limestone!” her brother, Aaron, said loudly as she dragged him along the path through the middle of town. “And that building is made of standard brick.”

“You do not need to keep saying that,” Maya said, feeling exasperated.

“Yes, I do,” Aaron said.

“No. You really do not,” Maya said.

“Yes, I do,” Aaron said again.

“By Shidao, shut it!” Maya exclaimed, and Aaron was quiet after that.

Shidao was the god of sight and understanding. Maya's family chose to pray to them, as they were one of three major gods within her religion, along with Vidao, the god of all things in the world, and Xixao, the god of miracles and chaos. Under those three gods, there were also numerous other gods, some of which Maya occasionally worshiped, like Wenea, the god of water and ice.

Aaron's silence only lasted a few moments. Soon, he was back to shouting out the type of rock or brick on various buildings, and Maya just sighed, pulling him faster through the street, not even bothering to ask him to be quiet again. His constant jabbering was drawing stares from people they passed, and she didn't want the attention. She just wanted to reach her destination on time.

Finally, up ahead, she spotted a stone house built on a small grassy knoll, made from granite according to Aaron, with a wooden sign out front, painted jade and black, and a symbol of a dragon rider on it. Maya couldn't help but smile as she came upon the house and the sign, a feeling of excitement coming over her. She'd been looking forward to this ever since her father had come home the night before, with the news that Serpentine Tenic had asked for her audience.

Maya stopped on the grass just a few paces away from the front door, and then she turned to Aaron.

"Wait here," she said sternly, giving him a glare to let him know that she was serious. "Do not run off or do anything stupid."

Aaron smiled mischievously. "Okay, Maya," he said.

"You promise?" she asked.

He put his hands behind his back. "I promise," he said.

"No crossing your fingers. Let me see your hands."

Aaron groaned, and he slowly brought his hands out where she could see them, revealing crossed fingers. She made him uncross them and repeat the promise. Shidao knew it was unlikely that he would actually do as she asked, but Maya wasn't about to bring him into the Serpentine house.

"I mean it, you must wait here," she reiterated to her brother. "I am meeting with Serpentine Tenic. He is assigning

me an important job, and if I want to become a Serpentine someday, I must make a good impression.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “Okay.”

“The only reason you are here is because mama made me take you. You will not ruin this for me, understand?”

Aaron sighed. “Yes. Just go. Hurry up. I want to go to the beach already.”

Maya smiled. She knew he loved looking at the animals on the beach. “All right. I will promise to be quick if you promise to be good.”

“I already promised!” Aaron complained. “Hurry up, slowpoke!”

Maya rolled her eyes. She turned and trotted off. Her body tensed up as she marched the path to the Serpentine house, feeling worried that she'd forgotten something. Truth be told, she had no idea exactly what the Serpentes expected from her. She'd combed her hair, dressed nice, used perfume, and chewed gum to make her breath smell better, all in the name of meeting their mysterious expectations.

Carefully, she knocked on the front door, and a Serpentine answered immediately. She recognized him by the obsidian coin in his forehead, as well as the black and gold uniform. The Serpentine who answered introduced himself as Jozin. He appeared to be roughly the same age as her father, in his middle years, with long, brown hair and a thick beard.

As he escorted Maya from the entryway into a sitting room, his dragon flitted about, from one of his shoulders to the other. The dragon was a Sun dragon—one of two types of dragons in the world, with the other being the Wesech dragon. The Sun dragon had beautiful jade scales, teal feathers that sprouted from its calves, and lines of gold fur around the side of its body, in between its white belly and jade backside.

When the dragon smiled, they revealed ivory incisors and canines. They were serpentine in shape, with no wings and four legs.

As Jozin offered Maya a seat on the couch, the dragon shuffled around on his shoulder, finding a comfortable position. At only the size of a small bird, he barely seemed to notice it.

"Ah. You must be Maya," came a voice from across the room, and Maya spotted an old lady with white hair and an identical uniform to Jozin's, knitting at a kitchen table.

"Katherica, do you know where Tenic is?" Jozin asked.

"Doing a round of the city," the older Serpentine said. "He should return soon. Why don't you sit?"

"I'm much too busy to relax," Jozin said. "Perhaps you could watch her until Tenic returns?"

Katherica smiled mischievously. "Now, now. I thought he asked *you* to do that."

Jozin rolled his eyes. "Well, there's no sense in me doing it if you're here and can do it just as well."

"Perhaps Maya would like to hear about your exploits," Katherica said.

"Oh, yes please," Maya butted in, feeling excited.

"You could tell her about your exploits, too," Jozin said.

"I could. But you're the one who has been assigned to this duty," Katherica said with a smile.

Maya couldn't help but feel like she was missing something. Jozin sighed, then sat down across from her.

"Fine," he said. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything," Maya answered truthfully, leaning forward as her heart raced with excitement.

"And what's everything mean?" Jozin said with a tired look on his face.

"What is it like to fly on a dragon?" Maya asked.

A small smile appeared and then disappeared on Jozin's face.

"Well," he said. "It's a bewildering experience, at first. Being so high up, you can see everything, but at the same time, since it is all so small, you see nothing. You see the world as it is, and you see just how small we humans are."

Jozin hesitated, then continued.

"Also, it is a bit strange, when you go up for the first time and there is no wind. The dragon's magic keeps the air calm in their vicinity. It is almost as if you are removed from the world."

Maya found herself hanging on his every word, completely in awe of it all.

"And you can fly anywhere in the world?" she asked, imagining herself soaring over the capital to the north, through the clouds that hung over the mountaintops, or even flying over the empty expanses of desert to the west.

"Theoretically, yes," Jozin said. "However, when you are a Serpentine, you are wed to your duty. You go where the king and your superiors demand."

Maya nodded, smiling. "I know that," she said. "Serpentines have a duty to the kingdom. You are the only ones capable of weathermaking, and you're also responsible for keeping the peace, as sword fighting is a big part of being a Serpentine."

Jozin sighed. "Not just sword fighting," he said. "You kids believe that is the only thing we do, but combat is more than just learning how to swing a piece of steel. Primarily, our duty as Serpentine is to deal with minor disputes, most of which should be solved with no force or minimal force, so use of the sword is truly a last resort."

Maya leaned forward. "So what should I learn?" she said.

Jozin shook his head. “Nothing,” he said. “You’re no Serpentine.”

Maya frowned, feeling as small as a mouse in the presence of an owl.

“Why don’t you tell her how you became a Serpentine?” Katherica interrupted from across the room.

Jozin snorted. He wiped the hair out of his eyes.

“You know as well as I do that she faces impossible odds,” he said.

“Yes,” Katherica agreed. “That is why it will be helpful for her to hear your story. Look at her—the girl’s not giving up her dream.”

Jozin frowned, making eye contact with Maya as she stared at him with determination. Katherica was right. Even if all the Serpentes in the world said she stood no chance, she wouldn’t give up her dream of becoming one. Just looking at Jozin’s dragon filled her with a sense of wonder and purpose; nothing else brought her that feeling.

“I joined our ranks the same way as everyone,” Jozin said with a neutral expression, finally breaking the silence in the room. “I passed the entrance exam. I proved myself worthy at Serpentine school. I bonded with Zulonq here.”

Maya looked from Jozin to his dragon.

“So how did you pass the entrance exam?” she asked.

Across the room, Katherica laughed.

Maya knew the exam would be the hardest part of the process. It was said that thousands took it every year, and of those, only a handful were chosen to attend the school. According to her calculations, that gave her less than a one-percent chance of making it.

“I studied,” Jozin said. “I got a good night’s sleep. And, I got

a little lucky. Many of the questions on the exam were questions that I had prepared for.”

Maya nodded. “So study, sleep, and luck,” she said. That was all that stood in the way of her and her destiny.

“The exam is a written test, but you will find that it assesses your physical capabilities too.”

It was hard for Maya to imagine how a written test might do that.

“Will you help me to prepare?” she asked.

Jozin laughed. “No. I am much too busy for that.”

Maya frowned, discouraged again. She knew that she would be eligible for the test once she turned 15. That was two years away. She had no idea what to study in those two years.

“The exam measures your intelligence in various subject areas,” Jozin said with a sigh. “Be curious. Learn everything they teach you in school, and then learn more.”

Before Maya could ask another question, the front door opened and Tenic stumbled in. He was a tall man, with brown hair, a clean-shaven face, and as he entered the house he removed his brown robes, revealing an obsidian uniform underneath, like Jozin's. His dragon zipped into the room ahead of him, and when Tenic entered, he smiled at Maya, giving her a wave.

Jozin left without so much as saying goodbye.

“Thank you for coming, Maya,” Tenic said, motioning for her to stand. She did, and he shook her hand. “Excuse Jozin, he is still learning social skills. I hope I did not keep you waiting long. I called you here because I've heard from the temple priest of your passion for becoming a Serpentine.”

Maya brightened. “Yes!” she said. “I was just speaking with Jozin ...”

Tenic chuckled.

"I can't take the entrance exam for another two years, is that right?"

"Correct," Tenic said. "However, in the meantime, how would you like to do me a favor?"

"Anything," Maya said. "Will it improve my chances of becoming a Serpentine?"

"I cannot guarantee that," Tenic said. "However, you would be helping me greatly. You see, I must travel for a little while, and I have a pet that requires caring for while I am away."

"Your dragon?" Maya asked, eyes going to the jade-scaled, teal-feathered dragon that was relaxing on the armrest of the couch. She smiled, feeling a tremble of excitement.

"No," Tenic said, and she frowned. "Coatan will come with me. I speak of my hamster, Ronmach. Wait here a moment, please."

Tenic shuffled off, and Maya instantly felt let down about the idea that she was just going to be taking care of a hamster. A dragon would have been much more exciting.

A moment later, Tenic returned with a simple, metal cage holding a shy little brown hamster. The hamster was huddled behind a pile of bark-dust with its eyes shut. Maya tried not to let her disappointment show. Her father had always taught her that she should approach all jobs with seriousness and respect.

"I adopted him a few seasons ago, on a trip to the edge of the country," Tenic said. "So, what do you say? Will you watch him for me? I should only be gone a few weeks."

"He's very cute," Maya said, staring at the hamster through the bars. "He looks shy too."

"He is," Tenic said. "Be warned, he is not very friendly with strangers. If you wish to pet him, it's best to get him used to you slowly, so that he knows you do not mean harm. Other-

wise, he may bite. But even if he does bite, he has small teeth so it would not hurt very much.”

Maya nodded. “I’ll watch him, sure,” she said. “It sounds like fun.”

Tenic smiled. “I hope it will be,” he said. “You can take him home now. I am leaving for my trip tonight. Just make sure that he gets water every day, food in the morning and at night, and clean his cage when it is dirty.”

“Understood,” Maya said, doing her best to think of this as an important task. Even if watching a hamster wasn’t very hard work, she reminded herself that it wasn’t about how cool the work was, it was about proving herself.

“And if anything goes wrong or if you have any questions, you may ask Katherica. Jozin introduced you, I assume?”

Katherica smiled at Maya, looking up from her knitting.

“He did,” Maya told Tenic.

“Do not worry, unlike the hamster, I do not bite,” Katherica said.

Tenic chuckled.

“Any questions for me, Maya?”

“Just one,” Maya said. “Where are you going?”

“That, Maya, is a secret,” Tenic said.



Maya’s school was located at the edge of town, flanked by sparse trees and looking out on open skies. Nestled into a clearing in the forest, it was a simple one-story building with big glass windows, constructed largely out of wood. Maya slid into her seat on one of the large rugs in the classroom, next to her best friend Carla. The other students were chatting among themselves, waiting for the teacher to show up. She told her

best friend about the job that Tenic had given her. She had made sure to do everything he said, giving Ronmach fresh water and food in the morning, and she was feeling positively excited about taking care of the hamster.

“This could be my big chance!” she whispered to Carla. “If I do a good job, he’ll have to give me special consideration when it comes time to take the entrance exam.”

“That’s great,” Carla said, staring back at her with a silver coin shining in her forehead. Maya’s entire class was made up of Silvers like her. “It sounds as if you’ve stumbled upon some luck.”

“I have,” Maya said. “And Serpentine Jozin did say I would need luck in order to pass the entrance exam. Now, I must make sure to study and get a good night’s sleep as well.”

“What will you do once you’re a Serpentine?” Carla asked.

“Fly around on my dragon, of course,” Maya said. “I’ll fly over the whole kingdom. Imagine what that will be like. Doesn’t it just make your skin tingle?”

Carla shrugged. “A little, I suppose,” she said.

“Hey, I have an idea,” Maya said. “If I do a truly great job, I could ask Tenic to help you get into Serpentine school also. Then we could both become Serpentes together!”

Maya expected her best friend to be excited. Instead, Carla stared back at her with a nervous look in her eyes.

“I am not sure about that,” she said.

“What?” Maya said.

“Actually, I have been thinking about it lately, and I have changed my mind,” Carla said. “I do not wish to become a Serpentine any longer.”

“You can’t be serious,” Maya said. She felt hurt.

Carla nodded.

Maya was silent in response, and the feelings of hurt grew

worse. It felt as if Carla was saying their friendship was over. After a moment, Carla spoke again.

“I am sorry,” she said.

Maya gritted her teeth, growing hot as she let out her feelings. “You were the one who convinced me to become a Serpentine!” she said.

Carla shrugged. “I know.”

Maya continued to ache for a while after that, but she didn't feel angry at Carla. Instead, she just felt a deep longing for the two of them to share a common goal again.

AL HARDIN

AL REACHED FOR HIS MUG OF ALE, DOWNING A QUARTER OF THE remaining amount in one large sip. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, setting the mug back down on the counter-top with a clang. The little girl's words about the Three Scoundrels filled his head, even as she wandered away from the bar, moving back towards her mother and father.

Al looked around, feeling uneasy. There weren't many Punchers in the saloon, and those who were present were quiet and lounging in the dark, posing little immediate threat to anyone. A general sense of calm was in the air, accented by the gentle music coming from the piano, but to Al it felt like the calm before a storm. Even inebriation couldn't settle his nerves.

As the night wore on, he finished his first mug of ale and moved onto a second. Eventually, the music transitioned to faster-paced tunes, and the patrons of the saloon got up and danced. Al himself wasn't much of a dancer, but he observed the others with shy interest. Many middle-aged men populated the crowd, most wearing wispy mustaches or thick beards. A

pudgy woman with a yellow cowboy hat swung dangerously close to Al as she danced with one of the men. She shot him a smile as she twirled around.

Al looked away from them, eyes wandering back to Orin and his wife, who wandered onto the dance floor with their daughter by their side. Orin's eyes caught his, and he waved at Al, as if inviting him over. Al thought about it, then shook his head. It would be too awkward. Orin seemed to forget Al shortly after that. Besides him, only a sprinkling of people were avoiding the boisterous dance, and most, if not all, were Punchers.

Al's eyes moved back to the dancers again. After a while, the crowd was a sweaty, jubilant mess. Al glanced over at the piano. He watched the young lady as she played, bobbing her head to the music. She swayed with the tune, completely caught up in the exuberant feeling of the moment. Just one look at her made Al feel like he was missing something. He'd never been entranced by anything before; she looked as if she was throwing her whole soul into this passion of hers. What must it be like to abandon oneself to music? If Al could achieve a state of bliss like hers, would he finally be able to forget the hurt he felt over what had transpired in Coiltan City?

One part of Al wondered if anyone would ask him to dance. He kept glancing at the crowd, watching the men and women, boys and girls, as they moved to the exciting music. Each time a song ended, a few among the crowd scattered, going back to their tables, but a few songs later, they were often up and dancing again, usually with a new partner. Despite the fact that Al was obviously lonesome, nobody came up to him. It was probably for the better. He was a lousy dancer anyway.

As the dancing and excitement hit its apex, Al realized just how much he wanted to be part of the crowd. Even though he

couldn't summon up the courage to stand up and join in, he could still see plain as day that Inico Town was filled with good people. People worth something. It wasn't just Orin and Maro.

The night ended slowly, with townsfolk shuffling out of the saloon one by one, drunk and happy. Eventually, the loud *tap-tap-tap* of dancing shoes on the hardwood floor faded, as did the high-paced music, leaving only hushed voices and slow, quiet footsteps. Al had stopped drinking long ago, but he wasn't quite ready to leave yet. He'd been through so much in the past few seasons; he didn't want to be alone again. More than anything, he wanted someone to hug. He wanted to talk and laugh until his cheeks hurt, and he wanted to cry into a comfortable shoulder, with someone who made him feel like family.

He frowned, looking at the ground again, and remembered that he had no family anymore.

"Hey Al, we're closing up in ten," Orin said.

Al nodded his understanding. The barkeep walked past him, heading through a set of swinging bat-wing doors and deeper into the saloon, towards what Al assumed was the kitchen.

Despite Orin's warning, Al stayed put. He was scared of what would come next. At the same time, however, the dead quiet of the saloon bit at him, and as the last of the patrons shuffled out, he felt as if he were occupying this space uninvited. The townsfolk had left a mess behind, chairs scattered in a haphazard manner, empty mugs of ale occupying the tables, and swaths of sand coating the floor, accompanied by dirty boot-prints. The young lady at the piano had long since ceased her playing, but she still looked nearly as relaxed as she had been when she was playing. Her head rested against a wall. She put a cigarette to her lips, drawing on it with a long, deep sigh.

After a few moments, Orin came out of the kitchen, holding a broom and dustpan.

“Hey Soya!” he shouted, and the girl at the piano straightened immediately, waving the cigarette out. Orin motioned her over to him. She came slowly, tossing the cigarette in a wastebasket on the way.

“Get this place swept up, please. I’ll fix the chairs.”

“Sure,” Soya said, taking the broom and dustpan from him. She turned towards Al, eyeing him with a sly smile. “Should he still be here, sir?”

Orin followed her gaze. A startled look came over his face as he saw that Al was still seated at the bar.

“Dude,” he said. “You all right? You did hear me say we’re closing, didn’t ya?”

Al nodded. “Um, yes, I’m going,” he said, though his legs didn’t want to move.

“If you need a place to sleep, I reckon the hotel down the street will give you a good rate,” the young lady, Soya, said.

Al nodded. Finally, he convinced his feet to move, and he stood up.

“Good to meet you both,” Al said.

“Likewise,” Soya said, and she got to work sweeping the floors.

Orin, however, remained watching Al, a look of concern on his face.

“You travelin’ with family, dude?” he asked. “Friends?”

Al shook his head.

“You have money?”

Al touched his belt pouch, thinking through how much money he had in it. He’d paid Orin earlier in the night, using half of what little money he’d brought to Inico Town. That left him with a few hundred Eros. Truth was, it wasn’t enough for

much, and he felt uncertain about whether it was better to pay for a roof over his head, or keep what little he had for food the next day.

He shrugged. "A little," he said.

He must've looked nervous, because the man came over to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"It will be all right, man," Orin said. "I've been in your shoes, struggling to put two sticks of jade together for a meal. Don't worry, Inico Town takes care of its visitors. And as it happens, I've just had a position open up at this bar. It's usually a lass's job, waiting tables, but if you don't mind that I'd be happy to give you a shot."

Al looked at Orin, feeling a bit uncertain about if he could trust the man. Orin seemed to pick up on the uncertainty. He backed up and the soft smile on his face turned into a frown.

"Well, you can think about it if you like. Just don't think too long," Orin said. "I reckon I'll see you 'round here tomorrow, then?"

Al nodded, and he took that as his cue to leave. He was already overstaying his welcome by a long shot.

He tipped his hat to the barkeep, then shuffled out of the place. After a glance over his shoulder at the piano girl, he was out of the saloon, and into the cool, night air.



Al's horse, Hera, was happy to see him. She nickered as he approached, lowering her head for him to pet her. He greeted her with gentle hands, feeling at home with the mare. She was the closest thing to family he had.

"Good girl, Hera," Al said. "Hey there, it's very good to see you too."

She shuffled back and forth, letting out a soft neigh. After untying her from the hitching rail, Al moved to her side, clambering up onto her back.

The two of them set off down the sandy street, passing dark buildings on either side, with only the moon and starlight to see by. The town was dead silent. Al didn't spot a single soul on his way down the street, and as he reached the hotel that Soya and Orin had mentioned, he decided that it would be better to forego the roof over his head, even if he was likely to accept Orin's offer of a job. Al had slept in the desert on his way to Inico Town and he had no problem doing it again for one more night. Still, as he wasn't about to go laying down in the middle of the street, he kept on riding, making for the edge of town, where he might be more welcome to lay his head and sleep for the night.

In the end, Al ended up settling down on a side-street far away from the town square. Another man was sleeping two dozen paces away with his horse by his side, and that made Al feel a bit more welcome as he lay down. The horse was midnight black from head to tail. The man was somewhere between Al and Orin in age, with a clean-shaven face, plain brown clothes, and a thin figure. Al took him to be of the common folk variety, rather than a Puncher, given he had no weapons on him. Though, he had to admit there was something off about him, even if he wasn't sure what it was. The man just didn't seem like he belonged in this town.

Not that that's any of my business, Al thought. Most of the south operated on the premise that people worked alone, and one person's business was better left to them. A breeze gusted over the street, and Al lifted a hand, waving his fingers. The wind calmed instantly.

He rarely used this strange power of his. He wasn't even

sure where it had come from, but a few years ago, shortly after he'd joined his old Puncher gang, he'd discovered his ability to control the wind. He largely kept the magical power hidden, though. He didn't want to be known as a freak, and he had no doubt that revealing his power to the world would attract all sorts of attention from Punchers and northmen alike. Northmen were a type of man nearly worse than Punchers. On the whole, they were much smarter, and many commanded vast quantities of wealth, enough to hire a dozen or more southerners if they desired.

No, it was best to keep in the shadows, away from the attention of seedy criminals and the Arus government. Al shut his eyes, letting sleep take him in the wind-less street, as Hera nuzzled up next to him, falling asleep with her warm body against his.