

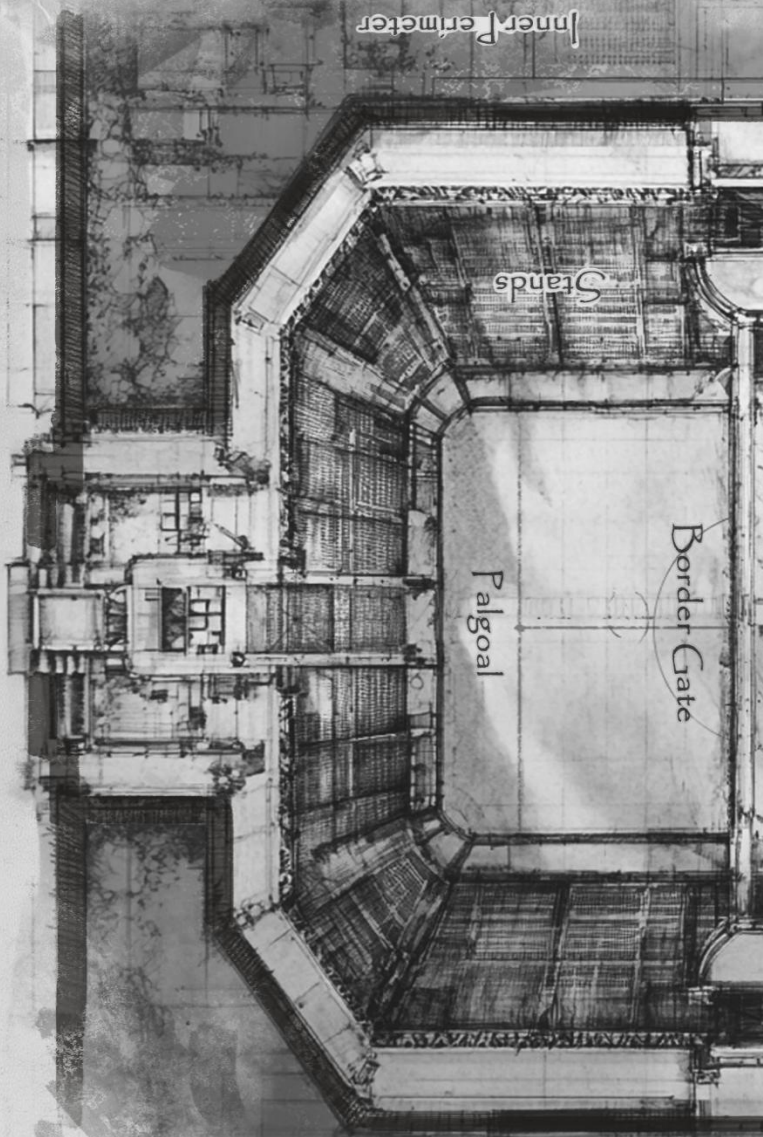
Arena Entrance

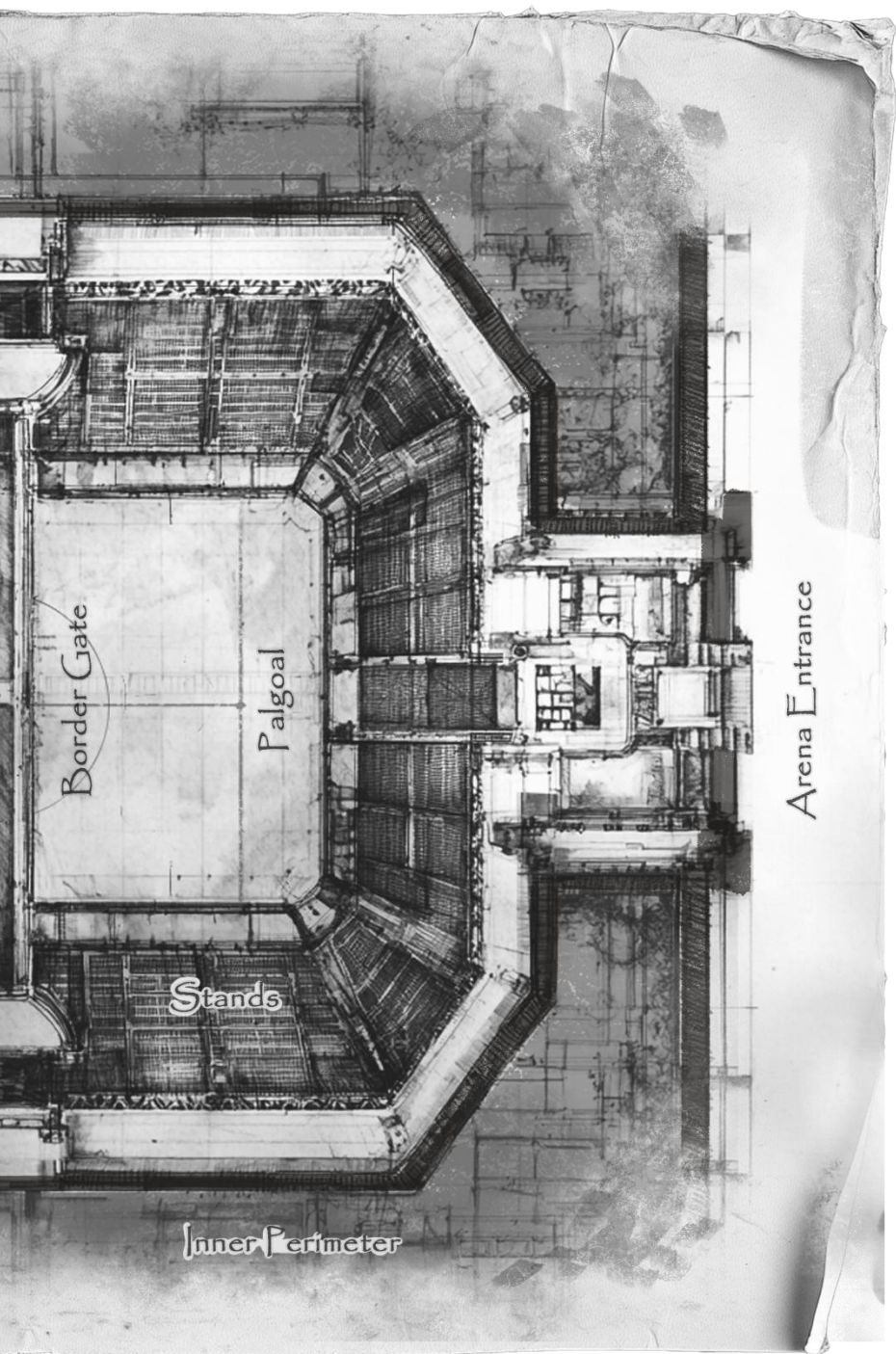
Palgoal

Border Gate

Stands

Inner Perimeter







## CHAPTER ONE



# THE THREAT OF DRACARX

I clutch my Palthor tightly, the ball slightly yielding under the pressure of my fingers. Its texture steadies me, bolstering my courage to stand my ground. Three figures stare me down with dark eyes and twisted faces, barely human. They're short, stocky, and dressed in black uniforms I know all too well—these guys don't look like they're here to talk.

Decaying brick walls, faded and pockmarked with tiny, grimy windows, trap me on three sides. My only way out is the narrow alley behind me, the one I came through. I drop the ball to the ground and stop it under my right foot.

I won't run.

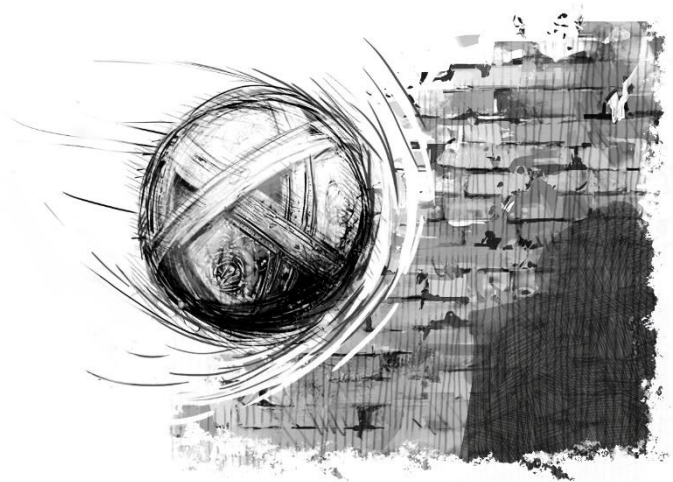
The three figures don't move, their faces locked in the same blank expression. What are they waiting for? Why aren't they pulling out their Palthors? There's only one explanation: They're underestimating me. Their arrogance will be their downfall.

"You'll regret this!" I shout. *All of it.*

I nudge the Palthor forward with the tip of my foot and take a few steps back for momentum. The first one I'll take out is the one in the center, closest to me. My strides lengthen as I approach the ball, and I strike it with all the strength I have.

The ball rockets forward, the leather panels morphing as protective steel plating unfolds from the aluminum and brass bands interwoven along its seams. The Palthor transforms into an armored sphere, flying in

a low arc before slamming into the target's chest. The figure, making no effort to dodge, crumples to the ground with a metallic thud.



As I predicted, the Palthor bounces back toward me. The armor retracts into the metal bands, revealing the soft leather panels once more. The two remaining figures still don't move, their vacant stares unchanged. Maybe I've caught them off guard.

I sidestep to the left, positioning myself for another shot. Before the ball hits the ground, I strike again. The Palthor zips diagonally, curving midair to hit the opponent to my right. He, too, collapses with a loud, hollow clang, rolling away.

This time, the ball bounces forward. I sprint after it, overtaking my fallen opponent to position myself where I know it'll land. Watching its trajectory, I anticipate its fall and strike with my heel as hard as I can. The Palthor smashes into the last rival's metallic body, shattering him into pieces. The ball lands softly in front of me, and I stop it with my foot.

*It's over.*

I catch my breath but then notice a strange black shape leaning against the wall. There's another one! I take a closer look—no, not *another*. This one's different. Bigger. Meaner. It's him.

*Tythun.*

He's the one who haunts my dreams at night and consumes my thoughts during the day. I've been waiting for this moment, and I won't waste it.

I take a running start, the Palthor—my weapon, my vengeance—lying just a few steps ahead. Tythun isn't even looking at me, as if I'm not worth his attention. The same mistake his men made.

I kick with all my might. The ball hurtles toward him in a straight line, but halfway through, it veers upward, soaring past his massive white face and smashing into a window with a loud crack.

The sound of shattering glass echoes through the courtyard.

The Palthor lands a few feet away, and I grab it, pressing against the metal bands to shrink it down until it fits snugly in my hand. I hook it onto my belt and crouch low, hoping to stay unseen. If anyone catches me using a Palthor out here, I'll be in serious trouble.

I crawl forward through shattered glass, rotting scraps, and the rest of the trash scattered on the ground—left behind by what I imagined were my three opponents, now nothing more than overturned black metal barrels. Reaching the mouth of the alley, I glance around. No one seems to have noticed what just happened.

Tythun—just a stack of straw-filled sacks leaning against the wall with a monstrous face scrawled in white chalk—watches me retreat with his crooked black eyes.

I'd better head home.

I round the crumbling corner of the alley and pick up speed. My feet hit the ground in a rhythm that matches my pounding heartbeat. The

oversized doors of the neighborhood buildings blur past, faded smudges of color in my peripheral vision.

Above me, in the sliver of sky between the towering buildings, red Hoverail cabins glide along suspended cables, packed with passengers. The streets are choked with carriages, and the sidewalks are bustling with people dressed in their finest clothes. Today is Ludis—the weekly day of rest and, more importantly, the *day of footbrawl*.

I can tell by the crowd that most of them are heading to the Arena. How I wish I could join them.

A little boy walks hand in hand with his father, his face lighting up with excitement. For a moment, I imagine myself in his place, sitting on one of the metal benches high in the stands. Below, on the vast dirt field enclosed by steel grates, champions from two rival city-states step onto the pitch, each clutching their Palthors, ready for battle.

A flash of red snaps me back to reality—a cat darting across my path. I swerve to avoid it and slam into something hard. A wall I hadn't noticed? A pole that appeared out of nowhere?

I tumble backward and hit the ground, my head throbbing. Tiny white sparks flicker in and out of my vision.

"A Flea like you shouldn't leave its hole unless it wants to be squashed."

It's not a pole. It's a boy—tall, muscular, and towering over me like a giant. I know that voice. I know the laughter that follows his every word.

Among the strands of his black hair, Kayn's icy eyes bore into me.

"What do you think, guys? Should I crush him?"

He's flanked by two hulking goons, both with round faces and shaved heads. They're good for nothing except playing henchmen, hoping to gain his favor. Kayn lifts one foot, and I instinctively scoot backward on the ground, pushing with my hands.

"Hold him!"

I try to stand, but the two brutes shove me down and grab my arms.

“Let me go!” I shout.

“Let you go? And who’s to say you weren’t running away after causing some trouble in my territory?”

“This territory isn’t yours!”

“And whose is it, then? Yours?” He crouches, his face just inches from mine. Even his breath feels cold, like his gaze. “Remember this: You and the rest of your worthless kind have a hole to live in only because people like my father allow it.”

I lash out, kicking him hard in the stomach. As he stumbles back, Kayn swings a punch at my face. I duck, but the blow grazes my forehead, leaving a stinging scrape. My skin burns where his fist made contact, and I want to reach up to soothe it, but the iron grip of the goons on my wrists makes that impossible.

Kayn gets back to his feet. “You little Flea!”

He lifts the hem of his shirt, revealing a small, dark sphere attached to his belt: his Palthor. I’ve seen him use it before, launching it at helpless targets for fun—or punishment. It works differently from mine. When thrown, it doesn’t transform into armor but bristles with countless sharp spikes. Anyone unlucky enough to be hit by Kayn’s Palthor carries the scars for life.

He grips the ball, ready to detach it from his belt.

“You know it’s illegal to threaten someone with a Palthor, right?” That voice... *Lia*! “Especially if you haven’t passed the Trial yet. They could confiscate it for good, and honestly, they’d be doing everyone a favor.”

Kayn shifts his attention to the new arrival. She’s tall, though not as tall as him, with caramel-colored skin. Her pink hair falls to her shoulders, her bangs covering her forehead. Her eyes have an elongated shape, their irises so dark they nearly blend with her pupils. Like me and Kayn, she just turned fourteen, but she looks older than either of us.

Kayn doesn’t release his grip on the Palthor. “And who cares if I use it

on this insignificant flea?”

“I care.” Lia’s eyes flick to the ball in his hand. “You’d better put it away and walk off.”

“Or what?”

“Or we’ll find a quiet spot where you can fight me instead.” Lia opens her pale blue jacket, revealing her own pink Palthor at her hip. “But I wouldn’t want to embarrass you in front of your buddies.”

Kayn sneers. His lackeys, not wanting to seem clueless, join in with exaggerated laughter, even though they don’t get the joke. As they laugh, their hold on my wrists loosens just enough for me to wriggle free.

I spring to my feet and take off running as fast as I can.

Sorry, Lia! The laughter fades, replaced by the noise of the street.

“He’s getting away!” a voice calls out behind me, distant and faint.

There’s no reply—or maybe I’m too far to hear it. I slow down. Just as I thought, no one’s chasing me. Kayn, the pampered heir to one of Aracnyr’s most prominent aristocratic families, would never stoop to chasing the fatherless son of one of the many poor families crammed into the city’s suburbs. And his henchmen are too bulky and slow to catch me. For once, I’m glad to be small. And insignificant.

I duck under a stone archway, and my heartbeat gradually settles into a steady rhythm. *Home*.

The rusty balconies; the blackened stone; the tangled wires and cables crisscrossing overhead, connecting buildings like giant stitches; the faded plaster—sometimes red, sometimes yellow; scattered wooden boards abandoned in the street; the uneven pavement; the stench of waste: This street is as familiar to me as the inside of my own house. They’re almost one and the same—two parts of the same body. Which is why every day, I hope I never have to see either of them again.

I push open the front door and step inside. The wooden stairs, warped

enough to hold the imprint of every footstep, creak under my weight as I climb. On the landing, I reach under the doormat for the spare key Mom always hides there.

Inside, the apartment is dark, despite the clear day outside. There are no windows here, and to save money, Mom only turns on the lights when it's absolutely necessary. I shuffle down the hallway, hands outstretched, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. A strong smell of stewed meat fills the air.

At the kitchen doorway, a dim, dusty beam of light spills into the corridor. Inside, Mom stands on a stool, her hand rummaging inside the overhead cabinet. Everything in this city is too tall for the two of us, starting with the furniture.

"Hi, Mom!"

"Ren! I didn't hear you come in." She finds the jar she was searching for, closes the cupboard, and steps down from the stool. "Lunch is ready. Sit down."

She turns to me. Her hair is tied back, but a rebellious strand of brown falls over her face. She blows it away with a distracted smile—until her smile fades.

"What happened to your forehead?"

Now that she's mentioned it, the spot where Kayn hit me begins to sting again. I touch it but pull my hand away quickly to avoid worrying her.

"It's nothing. I tripped in the street." It's not that far from the truth.

She doesn't seem convinced and frowns. "You didn't get into trouble again, did you?"

"No!" I blurt out, my voice less steady than I'd hoped.

Mom grabs my hands, and her face suddenly transforms into Kayn's, glaring down at me. My wrists aren't held by her anymore but by his two lackeys.

“Let me go!” I scream, running to my room.

Mom finds me lying on my unmade bed. She stands in the doorway, looking worried, holding a glass bottle of antiseptic in one hand and a strip of white cloth in the other.

“Ren, I’ve told you before: We need to stay as invisible as possible. If anyone finds out who we really are, we’ll be forced to leave this city.”

“Well, good!”

“Don’t be foolish. You know that would mean falling into Tythun’s hands.”

She lowers her voice as she says his name, as if even speaking it aloud might make it true.

“When the power of my Palthor reveals itself at tomorrow’s Trial, I’ll go after him myself and destroy him.” I grip the ball still strapped to my belt.

“We’ve already discussed this. You’re not taking part in the Trial.”

I sit up straight.

“If I don’t compete in the Trial, I’ll never become a footbrawl champion, and I’ll have no chance of defeating Tythun.”

Mom places the bottle on the nightstand and sits beside me on the bed.

“At least I wouldn’t have to pray every day that you don’t end up like your father.” She strokes my hand, but I pull it away.

“Better that than the life we’re living now.”

She stands abruptly, her expression hardening. “How dare you say that? Your father died so we could live, and that’s what we’re doing. To honor his sacrifice, we must stay hidden until things go back to normal.”

“Nothing will go back to normal unless we fight to make it happen.”

“You think fighting is all about that stupid ball they use in footbrawl? I fight every day to give us some semblance of normal life. All I’m asking is that you don’t throw it all away. If you won’t do it for yourself, at least do

it for your father's memory. And for me."

She turns to leave. "Your lunch is on the table. I have to get to work. I'll see you tonight."

She walks away, her footsteps echoing down the hallway until I hear the door close behind her.

I collapse onto the bed, drained of all energy. My head sinks into the pillow as I stare at the ceiling, counting the patches of mold that have spread across its surface. Slowly, the dark spots fade away, and the ceiling begins to glow with a warm light I haven't seen in years. The dull walls around me shift, transforming into murals of the most iconic footbrawl plays from the Zortum team. The room expands, my mattress softens, and everything feels lighter.

The door creaks open, revealing a short man with a lean, wiry frame, his muscles toned and defined. He's wearing a crisp white uniform and leather armor—the kind you'd expect from a seasoned footbrawl player. A cascade of silver curls falls over his face, which is etched with scars from countless battles.

"Dad!"

I jump up, disbelief flooding my voice.

"Ren!"

I point to the fresh gash on his cheek. "What happened to you?"

"We fought today."

"Oh, right! Today was the match. Did you win?"

He shakes his head, his voice low and heavy with exhaustion. "Not this time."

"What? No way. You're Zortum's champions!"

My fists clench. I can't accept that Dad and his team could lose.

"Do you think a champion always wins?" His amber eyes bore into mine, searching for something deeper.

"I... I think a champion is a champion because they win."

“No, Ren. A champion is someone who’s more familiar with defeat than victory.”

He walks slowly around the room, his gaze lingering on the posters covering the walls. He stops in front of one that features him mid-kick, his Palthor glowing with streams of white light that arc toward an opponent.

“People think I’m different because I was granted my power during the Trial,” he says, not looking at me. “They assume it makes me unbeatable, like I was destined to win. But they haven’t seen the mistakes, the setbacks, the losses that are still a part of my life. It’s those struggles that made me into the champion they admire. The victories they celebrate are nothing more than the result of sacrifices they’ll never notice.”

“Will I ever be a champion like you?”

“Are you ready to sacrifice more than anyone else?”

“I... I am! I’ll do whatever it takes to beat Tythun and become a champion!”

“Then you will.”

He places a hand on my head, gently ruffling my hair. “But now I have to go.”

When I open my eyes, the glow is gone. Above me is the same old ceiling, stained with mold. The walls are small and gray again, the footbrawl posters nowhere to be seen. It was just a dream.

On the nightstand, Mom’s bottle of disinfectant waits where she left it. I grab it and walk over to the mirror. Sweeping aside a strand of white hair, I reveal the cut left by Kayn. Soaking a cloth in the disinfectant, I press it against the wound. A sharp sting shoots through me, making me flinch, but I keep at it until the pain fades to a dull ache.

A grumble from my stomach reminds me I haven’t eaten.

In the kitchen, two clean plates sit on the table. I grab one and ladle stew from the pot on the stove—rat stew, my favorite. My mouth waters as I fill the plate and sit down to eat.

If Mom were here, if we hadn't argued before she left, she'd have asked how I spent the morning now that school's out. I would've told her everything except the part where I practiced footbrawl all day. She worries too much.

*Footbrawl!*

I rush to the kitchen radio, fumbling with the dial, hoping to catch the day's match results.

"...*We interrupt...* bzzzz... *this program...* bzzzz..." A broadcaster's voice crackles through static.

After some fine-tuning, the signal clears.

*"...breaking news: Tythun, president of the city-state of Dracarx and commander of Dracarx Footbrawl Team, has today conquered the city-state of Bukephalos. His advance shows no sign of stopping."*

The fork freezes in my hand, halfway to my mouth.

*"There is now nothing standing between us and the Black Dragon's Fire. Soon, it will be our turn to face Dracarx, defending the freedom of our city-state. To our champions, months of grueling battles lie ahead—months of blood, sweat, and tears. For us citizens, it will mean hardship and sacrifice. Tythun has already crushed countless city-states, but the Empire of Dracarx is never satisfied. To Tythun's challenge, we will respond with one word: victory! Stay tuned for further updates..."* bzzzz."

I turn off the radio and leave the kitchen. My appetite is gone.

Tythun might invade Aracnyr...

The broadcaster's words swirl in my head. If Aracnyr falls, Mom and I won't be safe here anymore. There's no choice but to fight. This time, though, I'll be ready.

Grabbing my Palthor, I step outside.

## CHAPTER TWO



# A DANGEROUS GAME

The streets are deserted. I reach the intersection with South-Southeast Street, the road where I first ran into Kayn. I scan the area for any sign of him, but there's no trace. The road slopes upward toward High Borough, the district crowned by the temple at the city's highest point. People like us from the Outer District aren't allowed up there unless it's for work.

My mom works in one of those grand houses, though she's never told me which. "It's grown-up stuff," she always says. I wonder what she's doing right now. I don't know much about her life in High Borough, just like she doesn't know much about mine here in the outskirts. She thinks I break her rules just to spite her, but that's not it—I don't really have a choice.

I cross the street and head toward the intersection with South Arena Street. I won't be going back to my usual training spot, at least not until tomorrow. Better not risk anyone still being mad about that shattered window. Scarecrow Tythun can rest for another day.

The Street is wide and lined with imposing old buildings, their columns relics of a glorious past that refuses to be forgotten. The banners of Aracnyr, red and white with a massive black spider at their center, flap in the breeze. They hang from building facades, stretch across tram cables above the street, and even adorn the lamp-posts.

The road slopes downward toward the Perimeter, a massive wall that encircles the city in a perfect hexagon. It's thick, towering above every other structure, casting a shadow over the city. The southern section of the Perimeter faces Wurmherth, a city-state that Aracnyr has never struggled to defeat in footbrawl. They're playing them again today. Maybe I can catch the final minutes before finding a place to train.

The grand buildings slowly give way to the skeletal remains of abandoned aristocratic mansions, their columns blackened and windows shattered. These ruins stand as decaying masks, hiding the slums that sprawl behind them—the Hollows, where no respectable citizen would ever set foot. The people there are treated even worse than we are in the outskirts. And just like us, they don't deserve it.

The sky, a brilliant blue just moments ago, narrows into a thin strip, swallowed by the gray walls as I approach the end of the Street. A deafening roar echoes in the distance. Did one of the teams just score? I quicken my pace and step through the grand archway leading to Arena Square, crowned by the Aracnyr banner.

A paved road splits the grassy plaza, which is surrounded by semicircular arches. At its center stands the statue of Arakn, Aracnyr's Animidol, spinning its web around a bronze Palthor. Its eight legs anchor to the ground, forming an opening through which the footbrawl team parades after every victory. The road continues straight to the Perimeter, where the Arena's entrance gleams in gold-trimmed stone.

There aren't any guards patrolling the entrance, but that doesn't mean they're not nearby. I pause and survey the area. Federation guards are required to monitor the Arena during matches. Maybe they've stepped away for a moment to catch the end of the game. After all, who would try to sneak in now?

I peer inside. It's dim and dusty. Flanking the gate, twin staircases lead up to the stands—that's where I need to go. I glance around one last time, then dash inside and take the first few steps up the stairs.

"Where do you think you're going?"

I freeze. "I... uh..."

A guard steps out of the shadows, his short hair and thin mustache illuminated by the faint light. The Federation emblem—a crown above a tower—shines on his tan jacket.

"Well? I asked you a question."

"I just wanted to see the end of the match," I replied, trying to sound confident.

"How old are you?"

"Fourteen. Just turned." Puffing out my chest, I quickly add, "And tomorrow's my Palthor Trial."

"Minors aren't allowed in the Arena without an escort," he says, placing his hands on his hips. His fingers brush the leather holster of his standard-issue Palthor.

The Trial isn't easy to pass, and even if you do, making it onto your city-state footbrawl team is even harder. For most, it never happens. The luckiest of the rejects end up in the Federation's armed corps, like this guy here. Their Palthors are weaker than those used by footbrawl players, and they're required to retake the Trial using those downgraded weapons. The unlucky ones who fail? They're stuck in some musty old office, stamping forms all day. Just thinking about it makes me shudder.

"Come on, Rufus," a younger guard calls out, appearing from behind the stairs. His hair is cropped short like the other's, but his face is clean-shaven. "The kid just wants to watch some footbrawl before his big Trial tomorrow. Let him in."

"No!" Rufus snaps. "Rules are rules. Footbrawl isn't a game."

It's obvious I'm not getting in.

"Aracnyr's winning, and the game's almost over," the younger guard says, his tone softer. "If you wait, you'll see the team parade down the Arena Road."

I nod, disappointed, and turn away, my head hanging low. I should find somewhere to train instead.

"Hey, kid!"

I spin back, a flicker of hope igniting.

The younger guard gives me a wink. "Good luck tomorrow."

"Thanks," I mumble, masking my disappointment.

I wander back to the center of the plaza. Beyond the arches lining the perimeter, the crooked houses of the Hollows press against the wall, barely hidden by the scrubby bushes at the base of the massive columns. Maybe I'll train on the old platform—if it's still standing.

A blaring trumpet announces the match's end. Fans spill out of the Arena, draped in red-and-white banners, celebrating Aracnyr's victory. Federation guards cut through the crowd, shoving people aside to clear a path for the victory procession. I slip through the forest of legs, squeezing into the front row just behind the guards. No one seems to notice me.

"*Aracnyr!*" a fan yells, thrusting his arms in the air.

Another waves the banner. "*Its venom will spread to Ludor's gate!*"



*"And freeze each mighty city-state!"* someone else shouts.

I glance across the crowd and stop. Two men with shaved heads and red-and-white scarves are cheering wildly. Kayn's goons.

Luckily, they're on the opposite side of the guard line. Too distracted by their celebration to notice me. I step back, bumping into someone's leg.

"Watch it!"

"Sorry!"

I weave deeper into the crowd, finding a hiding spot behind a couple holding hands. Another trumpet blast cuts through the air, this time melodic. The noise dies down, and the fans place their right hands over their hearts, fingers splayed like spider legs. The Aracnyr salute.

I steal one last nervous glance at the shaved-head goons. Relax. There's no way they'd remember me—I'm just another one of their countless victims.

*"Aracnyr!"*

The team captain, Neahr Kneyd, is the first to appear.

*"Aracnyr!"* the crowd roars back.

Neahr Kneyd towers over everyone, his broad shoulders making him look even more imposing. His black hair and beard glisten with sweat, and thick tufts of hair cover his arms and legs. His red footbrawl uniform is streaked with dirt, torn in places and patched in others. The Palthor strapped to his hip swings with each step. In his hands, he carries a heavy wooden chest overflowing with coins and bills—the trophy, the price Wurmhart had to pay to avoid being conquered. A reminder of the ancient days, when losing meant surrendering everything.

*"In the shadow of the night jumps the Spider,*

*Weaving the Web of Deception tighter.  
When its prey falls down in defeat,  
The Anthem of Victory rises to greet!"*

The excited chant of the fans echoes through the square as the players march by. At the head of the procession, the captain walks alone, his presence larger than life. Behind him, the team marches in rows of three, their steps steady despite their battered appearance. Like their captain, their uniforms are torn, their bodies marked with bruises and scrapes. Yet, they carry themselves with pride, their Palthors gleaming at their sides.

I can't help but wonder what kind of powers their Palthors unleash during a game. Ever since I arrived in Aracnyr, I've never seen a live footbrawl match. Mom has always refused to take me. She can't stand footbrawl.



*“Arakn, our enemies have no chance,  
 When you fight with us in the deadly dance.  
 Arakn! Arakn! You’re our greatest pride,  
 With your mark on our hearts, we stand unified!”*

At the back of the formation, two players carry a stretcher bearing an injured teammate. He lies flat, waving to the crowd with his free hand. A white bandage covers half his face, and when he grins at the applause, you can’t help but notice the gap where two—maybe three—teeth used to be.

The parade is almost over now. Neahr Kneyd has already reached the red carriages waiting at the edge of the square. These carriages will carry the team toward the temple, drawn by white spidhorses—a rare breed of eight-legged horse unique to Aracnyr.

But as the last stretcher comes into view, the mood shifts. Unlike the grinning player earlier, the figure on this stretcher doesn’t wave. They don’t move at all. A shroud in Aracnyr’s colors covers the body from head to toe.

*“Together with you, to eternal glory,  
 We’ll fight for victory, writing the Story.  
 And if we fall in battle’s embrace,  
 Grant us the honors we’ve earned in this space.*

*One single cry, in our hearts, we’ll say:  
 Aracnyr, fight without dismay!”*

The crowd raises their right hands, placing them first over their hearts, then extending their fingers downward, mimicking the legs

of a spider climbing an invisible thread. This is Aracnyr's final salute. I lift my hand and join in, my fingers trembling slightly.

The stretcher passes, and the crowd falls silent. All eyes follow the shrouded figure—except one pair. Kayn's.

He's watching *me*.

I duck down, heart pounding. When did he get here? I know he wasn't there before—I checked. Did the Baldheads tip him off? I was sure they hadn't noticed me!

What do I do?

For now, Kayn can't reach me. He's still stuck behind the line of Federation guards holding the crowd back. But that won't last long. The parade is already winding down, and the team is boarding the carriages.

I glance back toward where he was standing—only to find the spot empty.

Was it just my imagination?

The crowd begins to disperse. The couple in front of me, still holding hands, heads toward the carriages for one final glimpse of the team. With them gone, I have no cover left.

I slip into a group heading toward the lawn, then break away when we're close enough to the boundary arches. Pressing myself flat against a column, I peer around.

The square has mostly cleared out now. The last few fans wave hands and flags as the carriages set off toward the temple. There's no sign of Kayn.

Taking a deep breath, I dart into the shadows of the Hollows.

Here, the light barely filters through the tangled mess of aerial walkways crisscrossing above me. The looming wall casts a permanent gloom over this part of town—a near-constant night I haven't experienced in a while.

It's been years since I last came here. Not since I lost touch with Phyn, my best friend back then.

*"The Perimeter Wall was built a hundred years ago. My grandfather was there!" Phyn's voice practically bursts with pride, his eyes sparkling as he speaks.*

*"Really?"*

*"Yeah, he was one of the builders." He grabs my hand and pulls me toward a house with a red-painted door. "He used to live here. It was one of the first houses built in the settlement."*

*"Whoa!" I stare at the house, amazed to see something from such a distant past. "But why'd they build houses?"*

*"To live in while they were working on the Wall," Phyn explains.*

*Phyn doesn't look like most people in Aracnyr. He's shorter but stocky, with long hair tied back in a ponytail and warm, olive-toned skin.*

*"Was your grandfather from Aracnyr?"*

*"Nope. He was from Bukephalos. That's why he was so determined to help build the Wall."*

*"Why's that?"*

*"Because he said it was his chance to give back to the city that took him in." Phyn fidgets with a small rubber ball in his hand.*

*"So before your grandfather's time, there weren't any walls? Why do you think they decided to build them?"*

*I can't imagine a city without walls. I pull out my own ball and start juggling it between my hands. One day, I'll have a real Palthor, just like my dad.*

*"I don't know. My grandfather said the Federation ordered the construction."*

*The ball slips from my hands after just three tosses.*

*"And what were the footbrawl Arenas like before that? Did your grandfather ever see them?"*

*Phyn picks up my ball and tosses it back to me.*

*"Yeah. But he said Ludor became a better place after the walls were built. Before, no one felt safe. There were constant battles and invasions. He didn't like to talk about that time."*

*His face darkens, as if he can picture that dangerous world all too clearly.*

*"Did you know people live inside the walls?" I blurt out.*

*Phyn perks up immediately. "No way! Who?"*

*"All kinds of people. They call themselves the 'Grays' because they all wear gray."*

*"Wow! How'd they end up living in there?"*

*"They didn't have anywhere else to go."*

*"Didn't they like living in a city like this?"*

*"Maybe not. Or maybe the city didn't like them."*

*I wonder why Mom and I didn't end up inside the Perimeter with the Grays.*

*"How do you even know all this?" Phyn asks, catching me off guard.*

*"I... well..." I stammer, struggling for an answer. I can't tell him. I promised Mom. "It's a long story."*

*Phyn doesn't push further, but the silence between us feels heavy. I wish I could tell him everything. Isn't that what friends do? Even if I can't, Phyn is still my friend—my best friend.*

*"Come on, I want to show you something."*

*He grabs my hand and takes off running down a narrow alley that twists between crooked buildings. I have no idea how these places haven't collapsed yet. We climb a narrow stone staircase wedged between two leaning houses and reach the second level of the district.*

*Up here, wooden walkways crisscross between buildings, forming a maze above the streets below. Phyn and I love running across these paths. He once told me that every time the district expanded upward, the walkways were added so people on higher levels could get around without going all the way down.*

*The materials change with every level. At the ground, buildings are made of stone; on the first level, they're wood; on the second, metal. According to Phyn's grandfather, they built with whatever they had at the time.*

*"This way!" Phyn calls out, leading me across a walkway.*

*Hidden behind the ruins of an old archway, there's a massive wooden platform pressed against the Perimeter Wall.*

*"This was part of the builders' scaffolding. It's part of the neighborhood now." Phyn leans against the wooden railing and points down. "Look!"*

*We're standing directly above Arena Square.*

*"This is incredible!" I say, breathless at the view. "Why's everyone so scared of this neighborhood?"*

*Phyn's smile falters, shadowed by something darker. "The legend."*

*"What legend?"*

*Phyn looks surprised. "You don't know it?"*

*I shake my head. Phyn leans heavily against the railing.*

*"If I tell you, will you promise we'll still be friends?"*

*How could a story ruin our friendship? "I promise!"*

*Encouraged, Phyn straightens up. "My grandfather told me this one. You know those abandoned villas?"*

*"Yeah."*

*I've passed them on the way to the Arena.*

*"When the Wall was being built, the villa owners realized the Perimeter would rise so high it'd block the sky over their homes, leaving them in shadow forever. They complained to the Federation, but no one listened. The height of the Wall—eleven hundred and ten feet—was nonnegotiable. Then, one night..." Phyn takes a deep breath. "The villa owners and their families vanished."*

*My mouth falls open. "Where'd they go?"*

*"No one knows. And that's the point. The story goes that their spirits were cursed to haunt this place."*

*I laugh, but Phyn doesn't join in. I stop.*

*"But... how's that possible?"*

*"According to the legend, the builders, working in the Wall's shadow, turned into monsters. They ate the villa owners and their families alive. Since then, the ghosts of those families wander here, looking for revenge."*

*"That's ridiculous! I don't believe it."*

*Phyn doesn't seem reassured. "Of course it's ridiculous! My grandfather wasn't a monster, and he definitely didn't eat anyone. But back then, people believed it. Some still do. That's why we're stuck here."*

*"I don't care! I like this neighborhood." I clap a hand on his shoulder. "And I like you. We'll be best friends forever."*

*Phyn's lips twitch into a smile. He drops his rubber ball onto the wooden platform.*

*"Let's see if you still say that after I crush you in footbrawl!"*

It feels like a lifetime has passed since that day. The wooden platform is exactly as I remember it. I lean over the side railing. The square is empty, and the carriages pulled by spidhorses are little red dots halfway down Radial Road.

The creak of the old wooden planks beneath my feet pulls me from my thoughts. A hooded figure appears out of nowhere on the other side of the platform, staring at me. How long has he been there?

“Who are you?”

The hooded figure takes off running.

“Stop!” I shout after him.

I don’t bother chasing him. It’s obviously someone from the neighborhood who knows the tangled web of alleys better than I ever could. Chasing them would be useless—and I don’t feel like it.

Did I scare them? It’s not just outsiders like me who feel uneasy here. The locals of the Hollows are quick to distrust anyone new. They assume anyone venturing this deep has bad intentions—and they’re usually right. But I’ve never felt unsafe here.

I need to focus now. The sun is setting, and I don’t have much time before Mom gets home. I unclip the Palthor from my belt and unfold it. The metal bands stretch out, revealing its leather pentagon panels. *Click*. The locking mechanism snaps into place, and the ball reaches its full size.

I place it on the ground and take a few steps back. There’s no one here to act as an opponent, so I’ll settle for kicking a few shots against the Perimeter Wall.

I pick a small patch of peeling paint as my target. That’ll do. The distance between me and the Palthor is perfect. I’m ready to kick.

The platform shakes beneath me. That hooded figure again?

I spin around. “What do you want?”

Kayn smirks, his lips twisting into a cruel grin. A spark gleams in his eyes.

“What do I want? I want to play with you.”

How did he find me? Did the hooded figure tip him off? Is Kayn powerful enough to have people helping him here, even in the Hollows?

The two Baldheads behind him follow like loyal shadows, but Kayn waves them off.

“Stay back.”

Kayn’s gaze lands on my Palthor lying on the ground.

“Footbrawl’s a dangerous game.”

He flicks the hem of his shirt aside and pulls out his black Palthor. With a sharp, practiced motion, he unfolds it and places it on the ground. He’s a kicker, too.

I step back to grab my ball. “I don’t want to duel you!”

“I’m not asking.”

Kayn winds up and kicks his Palthor. I duck just in time as it whizzes past my head, slamming into the Perimeter Wall. A chunk of the wall cracks where it struck, and the ball lands at Kayn’s feet.

There’s no way out. Even if I could dodge Kayn, the Baldheads would trap me. Kayn knows I’m cornered.

“Well? Pick up your Palthor. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

I crouch to pick up my ball, clutching it tightly. The braided leather feels ice-cold against my hands, but I don’t care. Holding it helps me keep from shaking too much.

“Hurry up! I don’t have all day,” Kayn snaps impatiently.

*Come on, Ren.* I’ve been training every day since I got this Palthor. I’m the son of one of the greatest players ever. I can do this. I just have to stay focused and avoid his shots.

I set my ball back on the ground. I can do this.

I run toward the Palthor. Kayn charges at the same time. My plan is simple: Kick the ball and sidestep to dodge his attack. Yes, that’ll work!

I sprint forward, pull back my leg, and strike—but I hit the ball too low. My Palthor shoots upward. My leg’s momentum carries me too far, and I can’t stop myself. I lean back to try to balance, but I’m already off-kilter.

As I stumble, Kayn’s Palthor grazes past my head, slamming into the wall again. My ball ricochets off the roof of a nearby building, bouncing back erratically.

I hit the wooden planks hard, knocking the air from my lungs.

Kayn and his Baldheads burst into laughter.

“Nice shot, Flea!”

Pain shoots up my lower back as I prop myself up on my elbows.

Kayn strides toward me and drops onto my stomach, pinning my arms with his knees.

“Ahh!” I yell.

“Stay still!” he growls through gritted teeth.

The Baldheads rush over, holding me down.

“You know what I’ve figured out?” Kayn sneers. “The floor suits you.”

“Why won’t you just leave me alone?” I choke out, tears stinging my eyes.

“Look at this! The Flea’s crying!”

The Baldheads laugh like it’s the funniest thing they’ve ever seen. Kayn grabs my hair, forcing my face toward his.

“You don’t think your tears will soften me up, do you?” His bloodshot eyes bore into mine. “White hair, tiny as an insect... You don’t think I know where you’re from? Zortum, right? You’re not as sly as your Animidol. You thought you could blend in here with us Aracnyrians, show up at the victory parade, and nobody would notice?”

“There’s no rule against it!” I protest. “Anyone can watch footbrawl and the parade.”

Kayn yanks my hair harder, and I squeeze my eyes shut against the pain.

“Oh, sure! ‘Footbrawl is for everyone,’ right? Is that what you think? Well, here in Aracnyr, we don’t like sharing the stands with animals like you—traitors who abandon their city and their team to pretend they belong here.”

“I’ve never turned my back on my team! I never will!”

“Hmm. I don’t know. What do you guys think?”

The Baldheads shake their heads, grinning like fools.

“See? Nobody here’s convinced you’re still loyal to your city. And that’s a problem, don’t you think? Because if you keep hanging around, you might start believing you’re one of us. And we can’t have that, can we?”

I thrash my arms and legs, trying to break free. It’s useless.

“You’re not getting away this time. Not until I make sure you remember exactly where you came from.”

He pauses, then his face lights up.

“Actually, I’ve got a brilliant idea!”

Kayn slams his Palthor onto the ground. Metal spikes sprout from its surface.

I scream, kicking and struggling. “What are you doing? LET ME GO!”

“Stay still, Flea. It’ll hurt less.”

The Baldheads grip my face, forcing me still.

The first icy prick of the spikes on my forehead makes me cry out. The pain grows as he drags them down my face, leaving a deep, burning cut across my cheeks. Tears stream down, mixing with the blood dripping from my wounds.

Kayn finally pulls the Palthor away, satisfaction gleaming in his eyes.

“What do you think?” he asks the Baldheads.

One of them squints, tilting his head to examine me. “Cool. Uh, what is it?”

“You idiot. Can’t you tell? It’s a fox. Zort.”

“The Animidol of Zortum?”

“Exactly.”

“Boss, you’re an artist!” One of them claps Kayn on the shoulder.

Kayn flinches away, disgusted. “I know. But don’t touch me.”

He grabs my face, forcing my lips shut. “You can’t see it yet, but when you do, you’ll thank me. I went off memory—it’s not a symbol we see much here—but you’ll forgive a few imperfections, right?”

He stands, admiring his handiwork. “We’re done here.”

The Baldheads release me. My face burns as I press my hands to the wounds, feeling my fingers come away sticky with blood.

“Oh, wait. Almost forgot—payment for my services.”

Kayn turns back, crouching to grab my Palthor.

“You didn’t think I’d work for free, did you? Don’t worry; I’m not as greedy as the trash from Zortum.”

I reach out to stop him, but he stomps on my hand.

“Relax. I’m doing you a favor. You wouldn’t have lasted through tomorrow’s Trial anyway.”

I can’t reply. The pain silences me, and my ragged breaths make my chest ache.

Kayn spins my Palthor in his hands, sneering.

“This thing’s worthless. The Arakn seals are barely visible! But I guess that makes sense—no Aracnyrian craftsman would waste

their skills on someone like you. Still, I'll take it. Consider it my good deed for the day. Must be the victory high."

With my Palthor in hand, Kayn and his Baldheads walk away, fading into the blur of my tears.

## CHAPTER THREE



# THE PALTHOR SHOP

A shadowy figure leans over me. “He’s here!”

I rub my eyes, wiping away the tears: It’s the hooded figure I saw earlier. They reach out a hand toward me, and I flinch. The hood falls back, revealing the round face of a girl. Behind her, Lia appears and rushes toward me the moment she sees me.

“Ren! What happened?”

“It... it was Kayn. He... he stole my P-Palthor!”

“So, he’s the one I saw running off. Why would he do this to you?” Lia hesitates as her hand brushes against my face.

Am I in that bad of a shape?

“He was after me b-because... because he saw me at the parade after the battle with Wurmhert.”

My voice is shaky, strained by the cuts that tear so deeply into my face I can feel their shape on the skin.

“That bastard!” Lia’s lips curl into a scowl of disgust.

“H-How did you f-find me?”

“Tash said she saw you wandering around here alone.” Lia gestures to the girl kneeling beside her. “You should know by now I’m always keeping an eye on you.”

So, the hooded figure wasn’t one of Kayn’s spies as I’d feared.

“But now we need to get you somewhere safe and clean those wounds. Can you walk?”

I nod, though my back muscles ache from the blow I took when I slipped. With Lia's help, I manage to stand and follow her and Tash down the alley, weaving between the narrow houses of the lower district. From their conversation, I gather we're heading to Tash's home.

We stop halfway down the alley, where Tash unlocks a door with peeling red paint. I recognize it immediately: It's the old house of Phyn's grandfather. Tash pushes the door open and steps aside to let us in.

The house is small, a single open room with no walls to separate the spaces. The "rooms" are defined only by their furniture: a small stove surrounded by battered pots in one corner, two mattresses on the floor with white sheets in another. Tash pulls out two stools stacked by the kitchen wall and motions for us to sit.

"My mom's not home. She won't be back until Twenty-Third Hour. Make yourselves comfortable."

That's the same time my mom gets home...

"What does your mom do?"

"She's a healer. She goes house to house in the Hollows, bringing medicine and care to those who need it."

"A healer? Where did she learn?"

Tash's smile wavers, barely hiding the sadness behind it. "She used to be the medic for the Cabrakuhl Footbrawl Team before she was forced to flee the city."

The medic of a footbrawl team holds one of the most respected roles in any city-state. To earn that title, one must hold the rank of Grandmaster in the Healing Arts. Zortum's medic, Doctor Ulpis, was said to possess incredible powers; he could heal my father's wounds from battle in seconds. No one would have dared to exile

him—my father would have fought such a decision to his last breath.

Something terrible must have happened to Tash's mom to force her to leave, though it couldn't have been related to the Dracarx invasions; Cabrakuhl is one of the few city-states still free, alongside Aracnyr.

"Why did you flee? What happened to your dad?"

"I never knew my dad. And my mom... she's never told me why she had to run."

Suddenly, I feel like I understand Tash better than anyone else. It's as if I'm looking into a mirror, seeing pieces of myself reflected in her. I study her, searching for the sorrow that should weigh her down or the anger that should consume her. But instead, her green eyes shine with light, and her smile radiates calm. When she moves, it's like she's dancing, gliding effortlessly as if untouched by the burdens of life.

She opens the doors of a wide cabinet, nearly as long as the wall, filled with bottles of all shapes and sizes. Her finger hovers over each label until she picks a vial of thick red liquid. Kneeling in front of me, she removes the cap and dips her finger in.

"This will sting a little at first, but try to stay as still as you can."

I close my eyes as her finger gently traces the wounds on my face. The liquid burns, sizzling on my skin like boiling oil. My muscles tense, but I don't dare move, afraid of disrupting her work.

In seconds, the searing pain fades into a soothing coolness. My head feels lighter, as if emptied of every thought, and my body no longer feels like my own. When I open my eyes, it's as though I've just awakened from a long dream. Tash studies the marks on my face, then meets my gaze.

“How do you feel?”

A strange warmth spreads across my cheeks. It’s not the wounds or the salve she used—it’s *her*. I hadn’t realized how beautiful Tash is. Her freckled cheeks blush softly, and her brown hair, tied into a braid, drapes over her shoulder.

“Better. Though this is the second time today I’ve had to treat wounds after running into Kayn.”

“That’s pretty common for anyone unlucky enough to cross his path. Do you want some tea?” Tash stands and sets a kettle on the iron stove.

“I—I... I want to see myself in a mirror.”

Both Tash and Lia turn to me at the same time. “Ren...”

“Please. I need to see what Kayn did to me.”

Lia’s face twists with worry, as though I’ve just gone mad. Tash retrieves a small mirror from a nearby shelf and hands it to me, ignoring Lia’s disapproval. “He’ll have to face it eventually,” she says to calm her. “Better here, with us.”

Lia doesn’t protest, though it’s clear she trusts Tash deeply—something she doesn’t grant to many people. Tash is older than us by a few years, though I can’t tell exactly how many, and carries herself with a maturity that goes far beyond her age.

“Ren, before you look, there’s something you should know: I don’t think the scars on your face will ever heal. I just want to be honest with you.”

I appreciate her candor. My hands tremble as I take the mirror. I hesitate, torn between fear and curiosity. Finally, I muster the courage and lift the mirror to my face.

Two jagged lines curve across my cheeks, meeting at the tip of my nose. They rise up to my forehead, forming pointed ears. The

face of a fox—the symbol I’ve seen everywhere in my old city—is now carved into my skin.

As I stare at my reflection, I don’t know what to feel. Should I rage against Kayn for what he’s done? Or should I accept that I’ll see Zort staring back at me every time I look in a mirror?



I trace the scars with my finger. They’re smooth, as if the wounds have been absorbed into my skin, leaving no trace of blood. Tash and Lia watch me nervously, waiting for my reaction.

“Ren...” Tash falters, guilt flickering across her face. “There’s no medicine that can erase those scars. I could ask my mom when she gets back if she knows of—”

“No. It’s fine.”

I hand the mirror back to her. The kettle whistles softly, and Tash pours tea into three cups, setting them on the low table in the center of the room. She rummages through the pantry, pulling out a jar of round cookies to fill a small plate.

“Take one! My mom made them using a special Cabrakuhl recipe.”

I take a bite. “This is delicious!”

“It’d be even better if the cricket flour came from Cabrakuhl!”

*Cricket flour?!*

The diet in Cabrakuhl is supposed to be pretty similar to Aracnyr’s, but I’ve never eaten anything made with insect flour before. I have to admit, though—these cookies are amazing.

Tash sips her tea. “Ren, how did you know about the platform?”

I swallow my bite, finishing the cookie. “I used to play there when I was a kid, with an old friend of mine.”

“Was your friend named Phyn, by any chance?”

I nearly choke when Tash says his name. “Why? Do you know him?”

Tash grips her cup with both hands. “Only by sight. This house used to belong to his grandfather.”

“If you didn’t know him, how’d you figure out it was him I was talking about?”

“Because he was the only kid in the Hollows who went to the platform every single day.”

“I know. We always played footbrawl there together.” It was the last place I saw him, too.

“He didn’t just go there to play. That place meant something to him.” Tash finishes her tea and sets the cup down on the table between us.

“Why?”

“It’s where they found his grandfather’s body.”

*His grandfather’s body?*

“Was he murdered?”

“No. He died of a broken heart.” Tash refills the plate with more cookies. “The builders of the Perimeter were mostly immigrants—people who volunteered, hoping for a better future. Phyn’s grandfather was one of them. When the wall was finished, things improved for a little while. They received Medals of Honor from the Federation, and there were even rumors that the government in Aracnyr might offer all of them honorary citizenship. But the powerful aristocratic families here fought back against the idea. One family, in particular, stood out: the Reins.”

My blood boils. “*Kayn’s family!*”

Tash nods. “Especially his father, Atrax Rein. He’s the one who started the rumor that the builders were man-eaters.”

The legend Phyn used to tell me!

“How could anyone believe something so ridiculous?” Lia exclaims.

“People are easily influenced—especially when their fears are being stoked.”

“But why would they spread a rumor like that?”

“All you need to know is that when those rumors started circulating, most Aracnyrians turned against the idea of offering citizenship and housing to the builders. In the end, they were left trapped here, with no rights and no work. The same wall they’d built to protect others ended up being their prison.

“They were banned from leaving the Hollows or attending city events, except for footbrawl games. The betrayal was too much for many of them. Phyn’s grandfather was one of those who couldn’t bear it anymore and died of a broken heart.”

Every time Phyn talked about his grandfather, his voice was tinged with sadness. Now I understand why. He knew the weight of his grandfather’s heartbreak and saw firsthand the toll it took.

The room falls silent. I turn my teacup in my hands, hesitating to ask about Phyn. But I know I have to.

“Do you know where he is now?”

Tash gets up and places her cup in the sink. “He and his family moved back to Bukephalos when he turned twelve. His father wanted him to have a chance at a footbrawl career—a dream that would’ve been impossible here in the Hollows. I hope they’re safe and that the Dracarx invasion hasn’t put their lives in danger.”

Phyn’s life is at risk because of Tythun, too...

I stand up from the stool. “Thank you, Tash. I owe you one. But I have to go now.”

“Ren!” Lia senses what I’m planning. “What are you going to do?”

My back still aches, but the pain is bearable now. “I have to get the Palthor back.”

“And how do you plan on doing that?”

“I don’t know yet. But I’ll figure it out.”

Lia steps in front of the door, blocking my way. “Even if you could find Kayn, which is unlikely, how do you think you’re going to make him give it back?”

She’s right. There’s no way I can convince him. But what else can I do? Just go home and pretend nothing happened?

“I have to try. Or what—should I just give up on tomorrow’s Trial?”

Lia crosses her arms, leaning against the door. “Then I’m coming with you.”

“Not a chance!”

“If it weren’t for me and Tash, your face would still be a bloody mess right now.”

I don't need the reminder. I already know I owe them. Lia always shows up when I'm in trouble. She's been like that ever since... Well, ever since that day.

"Kayn lives in a fortress in High Borough. You know as well as I do that no one gets into High Borough without authorization."

"I know."

My mom has a work pass she has to show every time she enters.

"And the only way to get past the guards is to be accompanied by a resident."

I sigh. "Yes, I know."

Lia smirks, knowing she has me cornered. "And who's the only person you know, besides Kayn, who lives there and could get you inside?"

"You always have to win, don't you?"

"I do." Lia's smirk widens into a grin. "You should know I'm always right."

*I pick up the Palthor from the ground. No one's ever explained how to activate its mechanism. Phyn once told me you have to strike it in a specific way, but I never had the chance to try it out with him. He left right before I received the Palthor, and I have no idea where he is now.*

*"You're hitting it wrong."*

*I spin around, hoping it's Phyn. But instead, it's a girl with bright pink hair, watching me with her legs crossed as she sits on a stack of old wooden crates.*

*"Who are you?" I've never seen her around before.*

*The girl hops down and walks toward me. She's wearing a white blouse and tight brown pants. Where's her Palthor?*

*"Did you hear what I said, or are you deaf? You're striking it wrong!"*

*Pink Hair grabs the Palthor right out of my hands.*

*"Hey! Give it back!"*

*She silences me with a glare and points to the leather pentagons on the ball.*

*"You've got to hit it here! That's the only way to create the vibrations that activate the mechanism, got it? If you keep kicking it along the outer seams, the impact will always be absorbed. You really don't know anything about how Palthors work, do you?" She shoves it back into my hands and keeps staring at me with her sharp black eyes. "Well? Are you gonna try kicking it the right way or not?"*

*I nod, setting the Palthor on the ground. I aim for one of the white pentagons and then glance at the barrel sitting against the far wall. I take a deep breath, then launch forward and strike the ball.*

*For a moment, I think I feel the leather surface shift under my foot—just for a second, like it's alive. Or maybe I imagined it.*

*The Palthor shoots forward, and thin plates slide out over the white leather, covering it entirely. The ball slams into the barrel, knocking it over with a loud crash before bouncing across the ground.*

*It worked!*

*I turn back to Pink Hair, and for a second, I want to hug her.*

*"See? Told you so!"*

*"Thanks."*

*It's the only word I manage to say. Pink Hair flashes a big grin.*

*"Well, I've gotta go. See ya!"*

*"Wait!" I yell after her. "What's your name?"*

*"Lia."*

*"Nice to meet you, Lia," I whisper under my breath.*

*We leave Tash's house and find ourselves in Arena Square.*

"The sun's already set. We're not going to make it to the Hoverail in time to get to High Borough."

"There's an Underail stop just outside the square," I suggest.

"Great idea!"

We pass through the archway marking the square's entrance and head toward what looks like a giant hole carved into an ordinary concrete wall. We climb a short set of stairs and step into the opening, above which hangs a glowing sign of a spider with its legs bent into the shape of a *U*.

We follow a tiled tunnel until we reach the turnstiles, then take a wooden escalator that, using a complex system of pulleys, carries us deep into a narrow brick-lined gallery.

At the bottom, an enormous underground city stretches out before us. We walk along a narrow street bordered by glowing shopfronts: cafés with wooden tables, tailors with oversized signs, florists, butcher shops, and fruit vendors. It's a parallel marketplace to the one aboveground, bustling with life. Thousands of travelers use the Underail every day, which has given rise to this thriving subterranean economy.

We stop in front of a map to locate the line connecting the Arena to High Borough.

"There it is! Fifth upper level," Lia says, pointing to a tiny dot in the middle of a tangle of colored lines.

The Underail is still crowded with fans celebrating their team's victory over Wurmherth. Many are wearing red-and-white scarves and toasting each other outside taverns.

We take another escalator up to the fifth level and wait for our carriage, standing on a platform suspended in midair.

Lia looks thoughtful. "What if Kayn isn't in High Borough?"

I've wondered the same thing, but something tells me he took off there after stealing my Palthor.

"He's there. I'm sure of it."

"Ren, Aracnyr is massive!"

"No one knows better than I do how big this city is! But sooner or later, he'll have to go home, right?"

"You're probably right."

"Do you know where Kayn lives?"

Lia nods.

A strong gust of air sweeps across the platform as a carriage, pulled by a cable as thick as both of my legs put together, slows to a stop in front of us. The wheels screech against the suspended rails.

"Arena South stop!" calls out the conductor in uniform.

A group of people steps off the carriage. Once the last passenger—a little boy in knee-length shorts and a cap pulled low over his face—descends the metal steps and joins his mother, the conductor gestures for us to board.

"Go ahead, get on!"

The carriage is nearly empty; only a couple passengers sit in the back rows. Lia and I take seats on the red velvet benches in the front row and fasten our safety belts. The conductor does a quick sweep to ensure everyone is secured, then knocks twice on the metal door leading to the driver's cabin.

I lurch back as the cable jerks us into motion, and the carriage gradually picks up speed, gliding smoothly along the rails. The wind rushes through the open windows, so strong I have to close my eyes.

It's almost impossible to talk while the carriage is moving, so the ride passes mostly in silence, in the darkness of the tunnels beneath the city.

When I open my eyes again, a distant light grows larger, transforming into a platform with a glowing sign: *High Borough*. The carriage slows, jolting us back and forth as it comes to a stop.

“High Borough!” the conductor announces.

I unbuckle my seat belt and hop out. The platform is empty. The conductor taps twice on the cabin door, and the carriage whirs back into motion, retreating into the tunnels without passengers.

We step onto the escalators and rise back to the surface. The sun has vanished behind the Perimeter’s towering walls, and darkness has fallen over Aracnyr.

“Stop right there!”

Two militia officers—the city’s police—head our way, their crimson uniforms bright under the lights, gold spider-shaped epaulettes glinting.

“Papers, please.”

“We don’t have papers. We’re fourteen. We haven’t taken the Trial yet,” Lia answers, unstrapping her Palthor and handing it to the officers.

The woman pulls a pen-like device from her belt. It lights up at the tip, emitting a thin beam of blue light, which she inserts into one of the small openings on Lia’s Palthor.

“Lia Physt,” she reads from the device. “High Borough.”

She hands the Palthor back to Lia and turns to me. “Your Palthor?”

“He’s with me,” Lia replies before I can. “He left his Palthor at my house, and we’re heading back to get it.”

The officer glares at me. “Name and origin, kid?”

“Ren Harden. Outer District.”

The officer continues to study me in silence.

“Fine. Move along.”

The two officers walk away, and I let out a breath of relief. We’re in High Borough now. Specifically, in Temple Square, the heart of the city.

The Nest of Arakn, a massive tower of red marble, is illuminated by torches placed at various heights. They burn through the night and are extinguished at dawn. Beyond the square lies High Borough, with its rows of three- or four-story houses capped by sloping roofs.

“So? What’s the plan?”

“We’re going to Kayn’s house.”

Lia doesn’t seem convinced. “What if he’s already inside, nice and cozy?”

“Then I’ll sleep outside his gate. If he won’t let me take the Trial, he’s not taking it, either!”

I don’t know where this sudden confidence is coming from. The only two times I’ve crossed paths with Kayn, things didn’t go well. But I have to believe this time will be different.

“Fine. This way!”

A wooden kiosk shaped like a ball, its windows dark, catches my eye.

“The Palthor shop!”

“Where are you going?” Lia shouts as I start running toward it.

“I know this place!”

“Ren, obviously! Nearly everyone gets their Palthor here.”

“Not me.”

“Oh, really? Where’d you get yours, then?”

I don’t answer. Lia doesn’t know that I’m lying to her.

When I was little, every time I left the city temple and saw Zortum’s Palthor shop, I’d dream of the day I’d go inside with my dad

to pick out my own. That dream never came true—at least, not there. It was here where I finally got my Palthor, without my dad by my side and with no one I could tell about it.

I press my hands against the window next to the shop's entrance. The light from the square barely penetrates inside; only the long central counter is visible from here, the very spot where I first met Mr. Pysaur two years ago.

I circle the round perimeter of the shop until I find a wooden fence—it must be the backyard. I grab onto the planks and hoist myself up to see what's behind them.

The ground is littered with a chaotic mix of discarded objects and scraps from old Palthors: wood shavings, rusted metal fragments, and tattered pieces of leather and fabric scattered everywhere.

"Ren, have you lost your mind?" Lia grabs my ankle.

"I just had an idea! Let me go, and I'll figure out a way to get my Palthor back."



*"Welcome, ma'am and young man!"*

*A tall, thin man with a long face and delicate fingers greets us as we step into the shop. Mom lets go of my hand and pulls a piece of paper out of her purse.*

*"We're here to get a Palthor for my son."*

*She doesn't look happy to be here. In fact, if it were up to her, she'd have avoided this entirely. But she made a promise to my dad before he passed away.*

*"Well, you've certainly come to the right place!" The old man gives us a wide smile, takes the paper from Mom's hand, and begins reading it.*

*"Good, good..." he murmurs.*

*Every wall in the shop is lined with shelves stacked with balls of every shape and size: Palthors that are oblong, spherical, small, large, narrow, long, crafted from a variety of materials and in countless colors.*

*The man—Mr. Pysaur—walks around the counter and beckons me over. "Come here, Ren."*

*He's incredibly tall.*

*"So, what technique will you use with your Palthor? Have you decided yet?" His voice is soft, like a whisper that never changes tone.*

*"I'll use the Kick."*

*"Ah, interesting! A powerful choice, no doubt." Mr. Pysaur scribbles something with a pen on the paper Mom gave him. "Would you mind taking off your shoes and stepping up here for me?"*

*Barefoot, I step onto a small circular platform. Mr. Pysaur pulls out a measuring tape and begins taking the measurements of my feet and hands.*

*"You're a little small, Ren. But don't worry—you'll grow some more, I'm sure!" he reassures me while jotting down the measurements.*

*From one of the shelves, he retrieves a chalky Palthor with strange black markings on it and starts scribbling calculations on another sheet of paper, comparing my measurements to the marks on the Palthor.*

*"All done."*

*I quickly put my shoes back on.*

*"Now, Ren, I'd like you to tell me, without overthinking it, which of these balls feels easiest for you to handle."*

*He hands me a small black ball that I can barely lift with my foot.*

*"Not this one!"*

*A golden ball, lighter but still too heavy.*

*"Not this one, either!"*

*A gray metal ball, far too light this time; a reddish one that nearly crumbles on my foot; and then another dark gray one that slips out and clatters to the wooden floor.*

*Mr. Pysaur bends down to pick it up. Where the ball hit, there's now a dent the exact size of the Palthor.*

*"S-sorry!" I stammer, embarrassed.*

*But I must not be the first one to drop something—the floor is littered with similar dents and scratches.*

*"Don't worry, you're doing just fine!" Mr. Pysaur says warmly as he marks the final notes on the paper.*

*"When will it be ready?"*

*"Right away, Ren! Just a few minutes, and you can take it home with you." Mr. Pysaur heads back behind the counter. "Shall I proceed?"*

*Mom pulls a small object wrapped in brown paper out of her purse. "I was asked to give you this."*

*Mr. Pysaur unwraps it, and his expression shifts immediately. "Oh!"*

*I can't see what it is from where I'm standing. Mr. Pysaur carefully rewraps the mysterious object and holds it firmly in his hands. "Mrs. Harden... you know this isn't common practice—neither here nor in any other city-state of Ludor. But out of my deep respect for your husband, I'll make an exception. If anyone ever finds out, though, please never mention this shop's name."*

*"You have my word, Mr. Pysaur. And my son's. What you're doing for us makes us indebted to you for life."*

*Mom and Mr. Pysaur exchange a look, like they're sealing a promise without words. What did Mom give him? And why hasn't she told me about it?*

*"You won't owe me, Mrs. Harden—you'll owe Arakn. Please wait here!"*

*Mr. Pysaur disappears behind a curtain.*

*I run to Mom. "What did you give Mr. Pysaur?"*

*Her expression doesn't change. "I can't tell you, Ren. Don't speak of it to anyone, understand?"*

*"Okay."*

*The curtain behind the counter flutters from bursts of hot air coming from the room beyond, giving me quick glimpses of what's inside. I flinch at the sound of a hammer strike, followed by roars of fire and heavy, rhythmic clanging.*

*In my mind, I picture a massive figure working in front of a roaring forge, crafting my Palthor under Mr. Pysaur's guidance. The curtain lifts again, revealing a cluttered workbench covered in bent metal bands, hammers, and other tools I don't recognize. Another*

*gust of air lifts the curtain farther, and I catch sight of the forge itself, flames roaring inside.*

*I step back as Mr. Pysaur reappears, holding a small ball in his hands.*

*“Ren, here is your Palthor. The outer bands are crafted from aluminum mined from the Nurag Caverns and brass forged by the blacksmiths of Araneid. The leather is the finest quality, sourced from the grazing arachnids of the Northern Plains. If you use it wisely, this Palthor could change the fate of Ludor!”*

*I reach out and touch the ball’s metallic surface, almost afraid I’ll wake up from this dream. The Palthor is covered in white leather pentagons, bordered by interwoven gray metal bands with golden edges. It’s lightweight, and the metal is still warm from the forge’s heat.*

*“How many aracnees does it cost?”*

*The question slips out before I can stop it. It feels like such a valuable object that I’m afraid Mom won’t be able to pay for it. Mr. Pysaur smiles kindly.*

*“Palthors don’t cost anything because they’re gifts from Arakn to its children, offering them the chance to wield its immense power. But they’re not ours forever. One day, they’ll return to Arakn—just as we will. That’s why stealing a Palthor is one of the gravest crimes you can commit. It’s like stealing from Arakn itself. Do you understand?”*

*I nod.*

*“Never do it, Ren. And guard your Palthor as if it were the most precious thing you own.”*

*“I will!”*