

THEY MET
IN A
TAVERN

a novel

Elijah Menchaca

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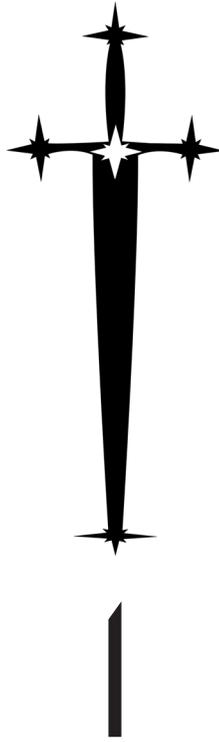
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To my Wings, who makes me feel like I can fly.







THE CONTRACT

As the crackling fireplace kept away the last chills of the dying winter, the Handler made a show of examining a stack of papers in front of the client. He'd already read them, had aides read them, and read the aides' notes on them before this meeting started. He'd kept his job as long as he had by being thorough. But for some reason, clients never believed it unless they saw him doing it.

The Handler didn't mind; showmanship was his favorite part of the job.

"Well, it would seem everything is in order," the Handler stated, straightening out the stack of papers. "I'm certain we can make all the necessary arrangements to move forward with your contract."

Silas shifted uncomfortably in his seat on the other side of the Handler's desk. He probably thought he did a good job of hiding it, but the man may as well have been proclaiming his emotions in song. The poor soldier—and even without any heraldry, his posture gave him away as one—was almost adorably lost in the unfamiliar territory of criminal enterprise. All the more reason to make him feel at ease with whatever pageantry and pleasantries were necessary.

“Thank you,” Silas said. “And you can keep my name out of this?”

“All contractors will conduct their business through us,” the Handler assured with a sweeping wave. “Your hands will be clean right up until the targets are handed off to you.”

“Good.”

“There is one minor problem I'd like to address now,” the Handler said.

“What?”

“There are a few names on the list you provided . . .” The Handler leafed through the papers until he found the one in question and plucked it from the stack. With a dry quill he pointed to the offending names. “These five here. I would advise you to *double* the reward for each of them.”

The client frowned, and the Handler knew he felt like he was being conned. The Handler took no offense. It was only natural for someone of the client's background to distrust someone like the Handler. They were from opposing worlds. And, even if they weren't, it was an obscene amount of money they were discussing.

“Why?”

“I advise this purely out of a desire to ensure satisfactory results,” the Handler said. “Simply put, if you want to capture the Starbreakers, you're going to need the best. And the best won't bite for what you're offering.”

Silas's frown deepened as he stared at the names. The Handler waited patiently for him to see sense.

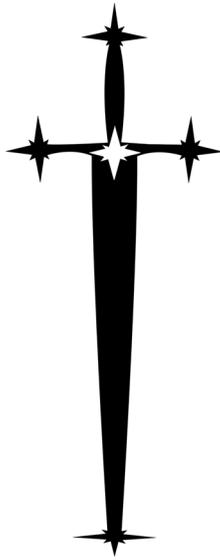
“I thought they were failures.”

The Handler chuckled softly. It wasn't an inaccurate assessment. But it wasn't the full picture either. He wondered where Silas must have been from, to not understand who they were dealing with. Or maybe he was younger than he looked.

"The Starbreakers toppled the tower of the Hegemony when they were children. They've slain things from other worlds and found some of the Old World's greatest marvels," the Handler said matter-of-factly. "Even *now*, anything less than the very best won't be enough to touch them."

Silas continued to stare at the list and the five offending names. Brass. Phoenix. Snow. Church. Angel. Securing other names from the list would be beneficial. But these five could be the key to everything.

"You have a deal."



2

BRASS

Brass woke up lying naked on the floor of what was either an expensive inn or a pretentious brothel. His first thought was that the place had incredibly lush carpeting in its rooms. His second thought was that his head hurt. A lot. But that was nothing new, and, if he could find his things, easily fixable.

He just had to wait for the room to stop spinning.

Slowly, fighting his hangover's protests, he sat up and blinked. Thick curtains pulled shut over the windows were blocking the early-morning sun, leaving the room dimly lit. There was an excess of red velvet in the room's decor, which told him most of what he needed to know about where he was and what he'd gotten up to last night.

The bed, which he seemed to have missed by a few feet last night, was occupied by a woman with smooth caramel skin and flowing dark hair that spread out over the sheets and obscured her face. Somewhere, deep in the back of his mind, fighting to be heard over a stabbing pain in his temples, alarm bells were going off. He gingerly searched for her wrist under the sheets. When he found it and felt a pulse, what little concern he had evaporated, and he returned to looking for his things.

Finding them was easier said than done. Besides the bedroom the suite had a bathroom, a kitchenette, and a living room, and absolutely all of it was a mess. Dozens of room-service trays were strewn about, stacked with half-eaten plates of cold food and empty bottles. That wasn't even touching the unconscious strangers scattered in every room with about as much dignity as Brass had woken up with. Actually, slightly more, given that most of them seemed to have managed to collapse onto a piece of furniture instead of the floor. There were six people in the suite, and Brass had absolutely no memory of meeting any of them. Brass wouldn't have had a problem with that, except their clothes thrown all over the suite made it harder to find his.

It took about ten minutes of stumbling and searching before Brass finally spotted his pants and belt in the kitchenette, draped over the back of a chair. He took about two steps forward before he tripped over his own feet and fell face-first onto the floor.

"Oops," he muttered. Rather than repeating the incident, he opted to crawl the rest of the way.

From the floor, Brass rummaged through his pockets until he found a small pouch and a book of matches. He made his way to the nightstand, which was the closest flat surface he could find. From the pouch he took a generous pinch of specially blended herbs, deposited them in a neat pile on the nightstand, and lit a match.

The blend burned, releasing blue-gray smoke into Brass's face. The smoke smelled like blueberries and driftwood. Brass breathed it in for a

few minutes, feeling his headache evaporate with every breath. He sighed in relief, then sniffed again. The smell had changed. Now it just smelled like burning wood as the smoldering herbs scorched the nightstand.

“Shit!”

Brass frantically slapped the still burning herbs until the flames were out, stinging his hands in the process. As the herbs finished their work, the last traces of distracting pain receded from his skull, paving the way for a sudden rush of stark clarity to take its place.

“Probably shouldn’t have done that on the table.”

Feeling significantly better, Brass grabbed his pants off the chair and tugged them up to his waist. He found his vest shortly after and slipped that on as well. But he could only find one of his boots.

That’s irritating.

Single boot in hand, Brass toured the living room again with freshly sobered senses. Most of the men and women there wore makeup that gave them away as escorts or dancers, and the skimpy clothing Brass found lying around backed up that guess. But one woman didn’t fit the look at all. Her haircut was too sensible, and out of everyone in the room, she was the only one still wearing anything, even if it was just her underwear and a blanket.

Brass made a mental note to take another crack at finding a blend that could help with memory blackouts. He went back to the bedroom. Without a splitting hangover sucking up his attention span, something about the woman he’d found when he first woke up was making him uneasy. Trying not to wake her up, Brass brushed some of her hair out of the way so he could get a better look at her face.

“Fuu—”

In the bed was none other than Diane Recpina, one of the princesses of the City of Orm. On a hunch, Brass peered from the bedroom to take another look at the other woman who didn’t fit the bill of an escort and tried to picture her holding a tablet and quill. It was easy to do.

He still wasn't entirely sure what had happened, but he was fairly certain he was going to be in very big trouble soon. Foreign princesses were pretty high up on the list of things he wasn't supposed to sleep with.

As if to punctuate that thought, a knock came from the door.

"Who is it?" Brass asked, hurriedly tucking the princess in.

"Brass?" a gruff voice came from the other side of the door.

The alarm bells came back when he heard his name. Someone knew he was here, which meant they probably knew who else was here.

"Ah, one second!" Brass called out, rounding up spare blankets and towels from the floor as he drafted a perfectly innocent explanation for the scene his visitors were about to walk in on.

He ran around the room, throwing the towels and blankets to cover up the escorts, all the while trying to keep an eye out for his other boot. There was a second, more impatient knock at the door.

"Be with you in a moment!" Brass yelled back.

The search for his boot was getting him nowhere, so he gave up on it and made a beeline for the door just as the person on the other side knocked again. Brass could practically hear how many seconds of patience his caller had left. He combed his hands through his hair, threw his single boot off to the side, and opened the door.

"How can I help you?" he asked with a smile.

Brass was expecting Iandran royal guards, here to collect the princess—dark hair, steel rapiers, colorful robes, and engraved breastplates. The two men waiting outside were not that. Their skin was tanned from time spent in the sun but still unmistakably white. They wore rough traveler's cloaks over piecemeal leathers.

Instead of rapiers, they were holding shortswords.

These men were not here for the princess.

"Sorry, wrong room," Brass apologized, slamming the door in their faces while they were still staring at him. Before he could reach the bolt to lock the door, it exploded open, and both men charged in.

Brass threw himself just out of reach of the men's first swings and hit the floor. Without thinking, he rolled away until he collided with a chair, which he immediately hurled at the intruders to buy time.

Brass sprang to his feet just as one of them got closer. Luckily, their swordplay was pathetic. Unarmed, Brass swatted aside the first stab that came his way, and as the second guy came in, Brass grabbed his offending wrist and redirected his attack into his friend's arm.

The attacker snarled, "Watch it!"

"Yeah!" Brass agreed, pointing to the guy he had used as a weapon. "Watch it, Greg!"

"What?" one of the men asked.

"Well," Brass explained as he dodged another stab from one of the intruders, "you gentlemen neglected to introduce yourselves, even though you know my name. So, until you learn your manners," Brass warned, pointing at the two men, "you're Greg, and you're Wallace."

Wallace circled around, trying to get behind him. At the same time, Greg lunged at him again. Brass twisted on his heel and in one motion dodged the stab while kicking the man behind him in the stomach.

"Shut up!" Greg roared, charging again.

Brass sidestepped his attack and jabbed Greg in the eyes with his fingers. While he was distracted, Brass took his sword. With a burst of speed, and a quick turn to the side, he jammed the stolen weapon into Wallace's shoulder. Just as quickly, he pulled the blade free and opened the man's throat.

One down.

Greg tackled him to the ground, and Brass lost the sword. The two of them struggled, with Greg getting solid hits in as they tumbled across the floor. Their roll came to a stop near the door, Brass on the ground, Greg's hands around his neck.

"Bastard," Greg spat, getting blood on Brass's face. "You're gonna pay for that."

Out of the corner of his eye, lying on the floor underneath a small end table, Brass spotted his boot. He was confused, thinking he'd thrown it somewhere else, until he realized it was the one he'd been looking for all morning. Brass tried to laugh, but all that came out was a strangled gargle.

"Save your breath for the devils, you sack of shit," Greg said, squeezing harder.

Brass strained every muscle in his throat as he reached for his boot. Feeling on the cusp of passing out, he managed to croak, "What's your shoe size?"

Feeling along the heel of his boot, Brass found the small, concealed button and pressed it, deploying a blade from the toe end. He grabbed the boot and jammed it into the side of Greg's head. The tension around Brass's neck disappeared, and Greg collapsed. Brass coughed and wheezed underneath the man's bulk before shoving him off. He staggered to his feet as stillness took the room. The only sounds were occasional mutters from the escorts as they blissfully slept on, too deep into their drug- and drink-induced morning comas to have even noticed the racket.

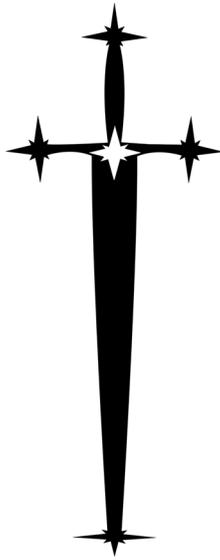
"No, no, I'm fine, don't get up on my account."

Hearing the sound of a door creaking, Brass whirled around, still brandishing his boot.

Princess Diane stood in the bedroom doorway, clutching a sheet around herself, a look of utter horror on her face. Brass looked around the room, at the two bodies, and at the blood that was soaking into the carpet.

"Well. Good morning." Brass greeted her breathlessly. "Would you like to get breakfast?"

The princess screamed.



3

OLD HABITS

A rman walked the streets of the Pale, grateful that not too many people were out this early in the morning. It had been a long time since he'd come to this part of Olwin, and his rumpled old coat made him stick out enough on its own without him also looking like a lost tourist. The Pale was the playground of the city's richest citizens, full of high-end clubs and restaurants that generally didn't see real business until later in the day. His memory wasn't the problem—his mental map was out of date. There was a music hall where the theater used to be, Nathan's Bakery was completely gone, and somebody had the brilliant idea to rename some of the streets. Strangest to him was the new tenant housing building that looked like it had been converted from an old hotel. People didn't live in the Pale, except

for a few business owners with rooms above their establishments. Well, not the last time he'd been here anyway.

Finally he found his way to the place he was looking for. The Crimson Lilac was a large three-story inn painted dark brown with red accents. On a second-story dining balcony, a few guests were enjoying a light breakfast. It was a higher-end establishment with a reputation for "expanded hospitality." Exactly the sort of place he would have expected to find Brass.

He stepped through the front doors and was greeted by an extravagant interior. Expensive woodwork, fine paintings, bright red carpet. The lobby was a simple space, mostly built to exhibit art and sculptures. But there was a front desk and an inviting lounge visible just a room over that was currently almost empty. Like the rest of the Pale, it was the kind of place that didn't really come alive until the sun went down.

The woman at the front desk was absorbed in a book and didn't greet him.

Arman approached her.

"Excuse me?"

She looked up, quickly closing her book as she straightened her posture, brightened her eyes, and flashed a wide, apologetic smile. He always had a hard time telling real smiles from the professional ones.

"How can I help you?"

"I'm looking for someone who might have stayed here last night," Arman explained. "A man named Brass?"

"I'm . . . afraid I can't give out guest information."

Arman had expected the rebuttal, but he hadn't expected the delivery. The woman said it like a question. She sounded surprised. No, not surprised. Confused maybe.

"If you'd like, I can . . . take a message for him, when or if he comes here." The woman blinked, reading from a mental script as her mind worked. "Is this Brass someone . . . important?"

"Not exactly."

Not in the way most people were important anyway. Arman was sure now that Brass was somewhere in this place. It was just a matter of figuring out where. He could try to convince the woman to tell him, but he wasn't really sure how. Or he could try getting a look at the hotel's books somehow. That could get complicated, but it would involve less talking.

He missed having an invisibility belt.

He realized he was overthinking the issue just as a piercing scream from upstairs interrupted his thoughts.

"I think that's him."

The woman's disapproval of him going up the stairs was written on her face, but she didn't say anything out loud. On the way up, he tried to prepare himself. It had been years since he'd seen Brass, and the last time they'd spoken, things had ended . . . poorly. He told himself he could handle this. He wasn't trying to make amends or hold a conversation. It was just a job.

He got lucky when he reached the top of the stairs. There was only one room along the hall with its door open.

Arman cautiously made his way to it.

"Brass?"

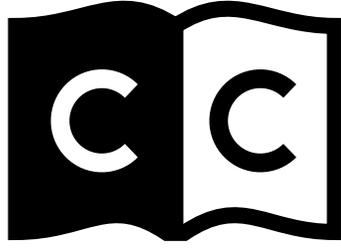
He peeked in. He didn't see anyone, but there were signs of a struggle. Furniture overturned. Objects scattered. He was starting to get worried.

"Brass, you in here?"

Arman took another step, and a sword point was at his throat. It was a thin, shining rapier with an ornately swept handle. Wielding it was a wiry man with short, dark curls, finely groomed facial hair, and brown eyes that were accented with just a hint of eyeliner. He was wearing pants, an open vest, and nothing else, exposing a chest of scars and more than a few tattoos.

"Brass?"

Brass blinked, smiled, and sheathed his rapier. "Phoenix? Seven hells, what are you doing here?"



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THEY USED TO BE HEROES

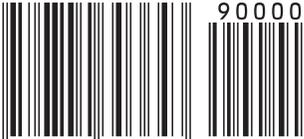
The Starbreakers were your classic teenage heroes. Using their combined powers and skills, they were the most successful group of glintchasers in Corsar. But that all changed the day the city of Relgen died. The group went their separate ways, placing the blame on each other.

Brass carried on as a solo act. Snow was one of the most notable assassins. Church became a town's spiritual leader. Angel was the owner of a bar and inn. And after years stricken with guilt, Phoenix started a new life as a family man.

Years after their falling out, a new threat looms when bounty hunters attack the former heroes. Phoenix tries to reunite the Starbreakers before everything they have left is taken from them. But a lot can change in seven years. And if mending old wounds was easy, they would have done it a long time ago.


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