
Repute

VARGAS had just knocked out the king of Figaro himself. He felt rather proud of it. He had no idea why the king had decided to climb the mountain, or what the girl thought she was doing trying to set his bears on fire, but if he was to have to leave Figaro, the circumstances would be a little brighter for knowing he'd just punched the king's lights out. He'd never been much of a fan of the king, especially since –

“Vargas! Stop this!” a voice roared. He looked up.

It was Sabin; he could hardly believe it. Three years since they had last spoken: three years that he had spent trying to pretend he never wanted to speak to Sabin again. From the look of him, Sabin was even stronger than he had been at their last encounter. Perhaps the dojo would be placed in his care now, after all.

“Sabin!” he exclaimed, not sure what to think. Sabin looked furious – the rumour must have spread already –

“Vargas, why?” Sabin pleaded. “Why did you kill Master Duncan? You, of all people! His own son!”

So Sabin had indeed heard, and he really did believe it.



Ten years earlier

Sabin had arrived when Vargas was fourteen, and Vargas had suddenly found himself having to share his bedroom despite frequent complaints to his father about his new roommate’s obvious emotional instability. Duncan had seen him off with a chuckle every time, and the excuse became more and more difficult to maintain as Sabin gradually calmed down. He had an extraordinary gift for hand-to-hand combat, and with Duncan’s help, was soon managing to channel his emotions into physical release.

That, Vargas quickly realised, was the root of the real issue. Duncan was the most skilled martial artist in South Figaro; the most skilled on the whole continent, according to most of his house guests. Vargas, being his son, was expected to follow in his footsteps. He was tall, and everyone insisted that he would fill out in a few years and thus gain the perfect build for a pugilist. Moreover, he had trained several times a week with his father almost since before he could walk, and most importantly (in his opinion) he was a meticulous student of the techniques of fighting. He’d read every book on combat

in the Figaro library before the age of twelve. There was no reason why he should not take after Duncan.

That is, until Sabin arrived, with his outrageous levels of pure talent. Duncan took a shine to him immediately, giving him just as much one-on-one time in the dojo as he'd ever accorded to Vargas. Sabin never read a single book on technique – Vargas might have thought he didn't even know how to read if he hadn't been aware of Sabin's upbringing – and yet he instinctively grasped all the correct procedures, and even the more appropriate of the incorrect procedures. Vargas watched him train sometimes, hoping nobody would notice his attempts at taking notes.

Vargas couldn't get angry with Sabin, though; he was just too nice. Once he'd been with them a few weeks and got over the crying, it turned out that he was an excellent companion, who seemed perfectly content to leave Vargas to his books when necessary, and to keep him entertained with conversation the rest of the time. The two of them would go on long walks together to feed the wild chocobos, stopping on the way back for a few bouts of sparring practice; they both liked animals and the outdoors, and it seemed that they liked each other too. Sabin was far from an uncultured musclehead, of the kind Vargas normally assumed the rest of his father's students to be – he wasn't into reading the way Vargas was, but he was fascinated by nature. He loved both the wild chocobos and those in service, and all the dogs in South Figaro, and the lit-

tle white flowers that grew by the road on the way east out of town.

As Vargas's friendship with Sabin grew, his relationship with his father began to deteriorate. Both his parents had begun acting very secretively when Sabin had arrived, and he couldn't help holding it against them: he knew Sabin was a prince, the new king's brother, and he didn't understand why they made such obfuscatory references to the fact, as if they thought he wasn't aware of it. Furthermore, Vargas couldn't help being jealous of the way Duncan spent so much time with Sabin at the dojo: none of his father's other students had ever got to train nearly as much as Vargas did, until Sabin arrived. Vargas had already realised he couldn't be angry with Sabin about it, but he could certainly resent his father, who determined the timetabling, and who now spent approximately half of every mealtime waxing lyrical about Sabin's prowess while Sabin accepted the compliments with a modesty that was never so overdone as to become wearing (which seemed to be another natural talent of his).

Along with this, there was a more fundamental matter that threatened to ruin cordial relations between Duncan and Vargas completely. Vargas was beginning to realise that there was a world outside the dojo. His conversations with Sabin, their walks together, the books he had read: all these things started to tempt him into thinking more about other possibilities, other directions in which he might take his life. If it hadn't

been for his friendly rivalry with Sabin, and his need to at least try to better him in combat, he might have lost interest in the martial arts entirely. As it was, he persisted, but he couldn't help thinking of the other avenues that had always been resolutely closed to him, by virtue of his birth, but which, if he tried extremely hard, he might be able to force open.

After all, Sabin had done it. He'd left the castle and come here, to this unassuming neighbourhood in South Figaro, and become an ordinary person. He would go out to fetch the groceries and nobody would so much as try a "your highness". If he could transform so radically, surely Vargas would be able to as well.



On what initially appeared to be an ordinary afternoon, a few months after Sabin's arrival, Vargas noticed something odd as he sat reading in the living room at the front of the house. His father, normally irritatingly jolly, had hastened in and begun to peer through the window, frowning. Vargas didn't see the point in asking him what was going on – he would probably brush him off, as usual – so he sat there pretending to concentrate on his book until Duncan said sharply, "Vargas, make sure Sabin stays in his room for a while."

Our room, thought Vargas, but without the bitterness he'd felt about that not so long ago. "Sure," he said, and went up-

stairs.

He poked his head into the bedroom; Sabin was darning a shirt that he'd caught in a thicket the last time the two of them had ventured outside town together. "Don't leave the room until I say," Vargas said.

"What?" said Sabin, looking up from his careful handiwork. "Why?"

Vargas shrugged. "Dad said so."

"All right," Sabin replied, seeming to accept the poor excuse for an explanation. He was so compliant, thought Vargas, even when the orders came from Duncan and were inevitably somewhat questionable, like most things Duncan said. Fortunately, his father had issued *him* no such command, and he had every intention of going back downstairs to find out what the fuss was about.

Vargas left the room and crept halfway down the stairs until he could see what was going on: Duncan was being paid a visit. There were two stout, serious-looking men hanging back by the front door, and a taller, much younger man standing in the hallway who appeared to have engaged Duncan in conversation. Vargas realised, at once and with some surprise, that it was the king. He had seen his face in the newspaper and on the newly minted coinage, and quite apart from that, he bore a striking resemblance to Sabin, although the way he held himself and the way he spoke were quite different.

"You are a target," he was saying to Duncan.

Vargas always tried not to judge others prematurely, but he had already decided he didn't like the king. He was too much like Sabin, and too much unlike Sabin, in a combination that somehow seemed unpleasant.

"Your majesty," said Duncan, "I appreciate your concern, but your late father's messengers have been telling me the same thing for the past ten years, and I'm still here."

"Our relationship with the Empire has deteriorated since my father's death," said the king, his voice wobbling a little. "My advisers tell me I should expect the terms of our treaty to be renegotiated within weeks. I would not want to be the cause of any collateral damage –"

The way the king spoke was ridiculous, Vargas thought. He didn't speak like that himself, despite the number of books he read. Sabin didn't speak like that, and he'd grown up with the king, with the same playmates and the same tutors.

"Your majesty worries too much," said Duncan, crossing his arms. "I know how to defend myself, thanks. You really didn't have to come in person, at any rate – the late king did just fine sending his men here to bother me on his behalf every couple of years."

"Yes, well," said the king, and his gaze flickered up towards where Vargas was crouching, although he seemed not to notice him. "I wanted to see the place that I'm told a good tenth of my treasury is being diverted to."

Duncan made a small noise of amusement. "That's fair

enough.”

“You realise that this will increase the price on your head,” said the king.

“Well, listening to you, your majesty, it sounds like I’m doomed anyway,” said Duncan, smiling.

The king’s expression twisted briefly, and he said, “Is he – I’m not going to ask to see him. I know you wouldn’t –”

“I’m sure your spies will have let you know,” Duncan replied.

“Yes,” said the king, and his voice sounded different now, almost whining, more like a boy. “But – their reports are terribly sterile, you see –”

Duncan inclined his head again. “Well. He’s doing splendidly in his strength training, he’s just about worn out the needle on the gramophone with some jazz record from Narshe, and he eats so much we’ve had to buy a second shopping basket. Will that do?”

The king was grinning in a way that looked decidedly unregal, and he ran a hand through his long hair in what seemed to be an unconscious gesture. “Yes,” he said. “I – I strongly suggest that you heed my warning. It might be prudent, for the sake of your family, to consider relocating to somewhere less prominent. The location of your dojo is hardly a secret.”

“Is that it?” said Duncan.

There was a pause, and then the king said, “Thank you for your hospitality,” and hurried out through the front door, fol-

lowed by his men.

Duncan waited until they had gone, shook his head minutely, and bolted the door.

Vargas, meanwhile, sat on the landing trying to come to terms with what he had heard. The parts about Sabin were unremarkable enough, but he couldn't help returning to the rest of the conversation, replaying what the king had said in his head: *you are a target ... our relationship with the Empire has deteriorated ... consider relocating to somewhere less prominent.* His father had implied that he'd heard similar things before from the previous king's advisers, but Vargas had never been party to it; he'd never been around, or had perhaps been too young, to eavesdrop on any of those conversations. And as much as Vargas's relationship with Duncan was getting difficult, he hardly wished any harm on him. What would the Empire do, if they got hold of one of the world's finest martial artists? Torture him, most certainly, to ensure they learnt all his secrets. The papers in Figaro never reported anything particularly untoward about the Empire – there was an alliance, after all – but everyone knew the rumours, and indeed the evidence. The town of Latima on the southern continent, torched to cinders just a few months ago; the huge Magitek machines that traders told stories about in the marketplace and that were unquestionably designed for war, for invasion and suppression.

Vargas could feel his heart racing. He crept back to his and

Sabin's bedroom.

"Was that someone visiting? Who was it?" said Sabin.

Vargas just about managed to gather his wits. "A messenger from the king," he said; it wasn't a total lie.

He watched as Sabin's mouth narrowed to a thin line.

"Oh," Sabin said, his voice quieter. "Did they – was it about me?"

Vargas looked at the floor. "It was about Dad." There was a strange feeling in his throat, as if he had swallowed something too large. "The king" (he tried to show no sign of noticing Sabin's slight flinch) "thinks he's in danger from the Empire. They said he should go into hiding. Abandon the dojo."

"At least he has some warning," said Sabin. His face was white.



Small families were the norm in Figaro: Vargas was the only son of two only children. He couldn't begin to imagine what it was like to have a sibling, let alone a twin. Someone of one's own age with whom to share a peculiar kind of intimacy, an understanding that surpassed even that between best friends – he knew he would never comprehend what that was like. The idea of having a lover seemed much the same. His mother had started to make remarks about the girls he went to school with, and he found them irritating, playing along only because it

seemed to keep her amused.

He began to wonder whether his parents had doomed him to a life of solitude. Maybe, as an only child, not having that intimate connection with another at an early age, he would never be able to form one of any kind with anyone. Forgetting that his mother and father had managed it with no trouble, he brooded on this concern, and the grudge he had begun to hold against Duncan grew in intensity. Everything Duncan had done for Vargas was an attempt to groom him into taking over the dojo when his time came. Fathering only one child, so there would be no sibling who could possibly relieve him of the task; spending more time training his son than any of his other students, of course; and most recently, bringing this other boy into the house so Vargas would be inspired by having someone to compete with. A boy who was naturally both charming and gifted in combat, and who happened to be the king's brother.

Vargas began spending more time in his room, partly to avoid his father, and partly because, having turned fifteen, he found his attention turning to certain matters more often than they had done previously. As much as he enjoyed sharing his bedroom with Sabin, there were certain inconveniences that were starting to become particularly acute. From the books he had read, he suspected himself a late bloomer, and he therefore decided he had a significant amount of catching up to do; but it was more difficult, now that he shared his bedroom, to be sure of having time to himself that might allow him to get to know

the nature of his newly pressing desires. Sabin, perceptive and discreet as he (maddeningly) was, seemed to put two and two together and announce his entrance with heavy footfall and the occasional loud cough as he came up the stairs, to give Vargas appropriate time to sort himself out, although it was more difficult at certain stages of the process. Sabin would sometimes walk in and catch the end of what was initially a furtive wipe of the body part in question, although after a few such near misses Vargas had come to realise, with what he considered a detached academic interest, that he rather enjoyed the thought of Sabin intruding on his activities.

As a result, he became less concerned about hiding himself away when Sabin walked in – quite the opposite. He wasn't exactly brave enough to keep brazenly touching himself after Sabin had entered the room, but just about managed to sit there on full display, in such a way that his roommate would surely be unable not to notice. The first time he convinced himself to do this, Sabin looked down at his erection, making no attempt to avert his gaze; and then he caught Vargas's eye, smiled at him, and sat down on his own bed without saying a word.

That smile haunted Vargas for days afterwards, flitting back into his thoughts at unexpected moments during training or while he was reading. What could that smile have possibly meant? It wasn't like Sabin to be so enigmatic; that was more Vargas's style. And, indeed, the smile itself had been totally open, almost encouraging, as if Sabin had for some reason

wished to indicate his approval of Vargas's activities. The strangest part was the fact that Sabin had then turned away and made no mention of the entire thing, as if the sight of a companion's most private area was utterly unremarkable to him.

A few weeks later, Vargas decided he needed to be still more obvious in order to break this intriguing stalemate. The next time Sabin walked in on him, he lay back theatrically, and let out an enormous sigh, continuing to cradle himself with both hands.

Sabin looked him over carefully, and then remarked, "Having trouble?"

After that, the matter of getting what Vargas wanted was simple enough. It was only a question of a coy but eager response to Sabin's enquiry, and soon enough Sabin was upon him with both hands, running careful strokes down his shaft as Vargas whimpered with pleasure. Sorting himself out was one thing, but, it turned out, having somebody else do it was more effective by a previously unimaginable factor. He lay there, giving the occasional twitch of delight, and Sabin said, "Works better when it's someone else, huh?"

Vargas nodded, barely distracted by the fact that Sabin had said that as if he had experienced the same thing himself – this clearly wasn't his first time touching someone else, either, but Vargas could consider the implications of that later, when he wasn't half-delirious with the fog of approaching release. Not

long afterwards, he knew he was close, and pushed Sabin's hands roughly off himself to take charge of the last moments, before he emptied onto his own hands and the bedsheet, with Sabin watching calmly all the while.

That was the first time that Sabin assisted Vargas, and Vargas was happy to discover that it would certainly not be the last. After a few iterations of the process, Vargas managed to communicate that he would enjoy returning the favour, and the arrangement became mutual: they would lie on Vargas's bed together, stroking each other to release, and Vargas was gratified to find that Sabin seemed to enjoy it just as much as he did. Indeed, Sabin seemed to act as if occasionally coaxing one's roommate to orgasm was the most normal thing in the world, appearing entirely unaffected by this unusual turn in their relationship. Vargas did his best to react the same way, attempting to quash the feelings of shame and confusion that stole up on him when he thought about it too deeply.



At the age of twenty-one, Sabin moved out. The significance of the age was purely ceremonial in Figaro – Sabin would have had the right to own property as soon as he left the castle at seventeen – but back then, he'd needed the protection of living with Duncan and his family, and, he told Vargas, he hadn't wanted to offend anyone by insisting on leaving them behind

too soon. When he turned twenty-one, though, he discovered a newly vacant cabin at the base of the mountains, and the opportunity was too good to miss: he had always wanted to live in the countryside, and at this time, Duncan was happy to let him go, confident that he was sufficiently mentally stable.

Vargas was eighteen now, legally an adult, and having finished his schooling had become a part-time instructor at the dojo, teaching bratty children to land weak punches. As soon as it was made known that Sabin was moving out, he realised he would have to do the same as soon as he could for the sake of his own sanity: living under the same roof as Duncan, without the presence of Sabin and his innate ability to effortlessly diffuse tension, would be a recipe for disaster. By this point, the strain in their relationship was so great as to be a matter of public knowledge. Vargas wasn't quite making the money to rent somewhere, though, so he would be forced to stay for a while longer, and would just have to avoid his father as much as he could.

The day that Sabin moved out felt like a strange sort of holiday. They all travelled out to the cabin in a chocobo-drawn cart that also carried a small selection of hastily acquired furniture, and carried it into the place making loud remarks about how Sabin would be able to have his breakfast in this particular spot if the bed was against that particular wall, and wouldn't it be lovely to be woken by the sunrise and birdsong every morning. Sabin cried a little when the others were to leave, because

of course he did, but they were tears of happiness; Duncan laughed at him for it, but kindly. It was hardly the last time Sabin would see any of them: he would still be visiting the dojo for training. But the house would be quieter and emptier – his presence would be fleeting, not constant.

Sabin said goodbye to Vargas with a hug, the kind of quick and light hug normally exchanged by men: he pounded Vargas briefly on the back and released him with a grin. Vargas did his best to return the gesture even as he bit back a thousand questions: was this it? Were they not even going to make plans to meet again – would they just be trusting the vagaries of the dojo schedule to allow them to run into each other? And most importantly of all, was nobody going to mention the connection they had formed?

They had laid hands on each other just last night, after all. It had been the same procedure that they had followed for three years now: no discussion beforehand, no contact higher than the waist, and certainly no acknowledgement of it afterwards. Sabin had grinned his usual grin when it was over and each of them had retired to sleep in his own bed, on opposite sides of the room that was now wholly Vargas's once again.

Now, taking leave of each other in Sabin's new home, neither of them spoke of it. They wouldn't, of course, with Vargas's parents standing there behind them, but he had imagined there might at least be a flicker of understanding, a minutely longer touch when they hugged goodbye. Instead, he climbed

back into the cart with a superficial smile plastered across his face, ready to return home as part of a family with one member lost, and the relationship between two of the others extremely fragile.



Sabin's departure brought a final windfall from the king's treasury, although Duncan and his wife had little need of the money; after much discussion, it was decided that it should be given to Vargas, and it was enough to allow him to move out of the family home not long after Sabin had. It couldn't have come sooner – he'd already had a number of unpleasant arguments with Duncan since Sabin's departure, over the most trivial things. They ought to have been easy to avoid, but Duncan had a knack for winding Vargas up without even seeming to realise it, which served only to make Vargas even more annoyed. Things were different in the dojo, where the whole point was that they were supposed to fight physically, but at home there was an ugly tension that never entirely managed to dissipate, building up again instead until Vargas and his father ended up yelling at each other over something as ridiculous as how many eggs were left for breakfast.

So moving out came as a relief. Vargas secured a small flat on the edge of South Figaro, not especially far from the dojo, and quickly grew accustomed to living alone, being a naturally

solitary person. His interactions with his father became limited to training and the occasional time his mother invited him over for lunch; that was much easier to deal with. The desire he had long since harboured to give up on training entirely and do something else made its way to the forefront of his mind. Living alone, not having to think about fighting except when he was at the dojo, having control of his own time: all those things reminded him that another life might be possible.

He found a second part-time job, just a few hours a week in one of the pubs, where he persuaded them not to put him behind the bar – chatting to patrons would not have been his natural strong suit – and settled in behind the scenes, washing the used glasses and bringing in deliveries. Most of his colleagues in the same position were about twelve, and he privately thought that his own intellect more than matched those of everyone else working at the pub put together, but he was grateful for the extra money and the feeling that he was able to have a place in the world that didn't entirely depend on fighting, and on Duncan.

Vargas would have therefore been broadly content with his life, if not for the matter of Sabin. They ran into each other at the dojo perhaps once a fortnight or so, but only fleetingly, when one of them was leaving and the other arriving. On each occasion, Sabin greeted him with a friendly wave and smile, and Vargas always tried to do the same, making the expected small talk about their training before hurrying off to wherever

he had to get to.

“We gotta meet up properly, yeah?” said Sabin on more than one occasion. “Go for lunch or something.” Vargas indicated what he believed to be enthusiastic agreement every time, but somehow their plans never became any more concrete than that, and months passed with only these fleeting encounters – and the memory of the closeness they had once shared accordingly began to fade, until Vargas began to forget why he had ever liked Sabin in the first place. He was just another brawler after all, like everyone else who visited the dojo; they had some interests in common, but Sabin had never fulfilled Vargas’s need for more cerebral discussion. He had discovered a while after moving into his flat that one of his neighbours ran a bookshop, and had begun to have conversations with her about the stock that were quite unlike any he’d ever been able to strike up with Sabin, or his father, or anyone connected with the dojo. Those conversations had stopped after a while – she had always seemed incredibly busy – but they had given him a taste for a more intellectual kind of friendship.

As the months turned to years, Vargas started to expect that he would soon forget about Sabin completely.



Duncan’s fiftieth and Vargas’s twenty-first birthdays were in the same month, and Vargas’s mother arranged a small party

for both of them, where there was a lot of jovial talk about how Duncan would have to retire from the dojo and let Vargas take the place over immediately. He accepted the jokes in good humour: this wasn't the occasion to let them get to him. Inside himself, though, he was still as confused about the whole matter as he had been when he was fourteen. He was a better fighter now, at any rate: with some warning, he might have been able to develop the skills necessary to take charge of the place, if he had to. Something within him still automatically resented the thought that he would be doing it just because it was what Duncan wanted, but three years of living alone had made his animosity towards his father less acute, even if everybody at the party seemed to be carefully avoiding drawing the two of them into the same conversation.

Sabin turned up towards the end of the afternoon, when most of the guests had already left. He had a graze on his cheek, the result of a fight with some monster in the mountains, and laughingly let Vargas's mother fuss over him with a potion; he'd changed his hairstyle recently too. Vargas had got a few glimpses of it on the last few occasions he'd briefly seen Sabin at the dojo, but now he was able to take note of it less urgently and observe how the small ponytail emerged at the nape of Sabin's neck. Oddly enough, it went well with the spikes that Sabin had long since cultivated at the front.

Vargas turned away; he was looking too much. Sabin was here for Duncan, not for him, and he hung back while the two

of them chatted, swigging beer (provided for the party at a discount by his workplace) at a rate that was probably faster than advised, but he needed to look busy with something. A couple of bottles in, he was beginning to think about walking right over there and getting straight to the point, but he turned out not to have to: having taken his leave of Duncan, Sabin was heading towards him, empty wine glass in hand, a huge grin on his face.

“Vargas!” he exclaimed, and slapped Vargas on the back a little too hard; Vargas tried not to fall forward. “Haven’t spoken to you properly for months!”

Years, Vargas thought. “I suppose not,” he said. “It’s been busy, you know? Working at the pub and the dojo, got to pay my rent.”

“Yeah, Master Duncan was saying,” Sabin replied enthusiastically. “Even though you don’t get on, he’s still concerned about his son, you know! Hey, you should come and visit me though, huh? Come and see the mountains. Are you free tomorrow?”

That had been the first direct invitation to meet that either of them had made to the other in three years. Vargas noted Sabin’s flushed face and the way he was gesturing with significantly less finesse than might be expected of the heir to the throne, and concluded that he was drunk, so maybe even this didn’t count. But he was well matched: Vargas certainly wasn’t completely sober himself, and so he said, “Sure. I can

come to your place tomorrow.”

“Great,” said Sabin. “That’s great. See you then, OK?” And he walked off, smiling the same smile that had long since tortured Vargas – a fact he would deny to himself as soon as he was sober.



Vargas set off early the next morning: it was a long trip to the mountains. As he took the road eastwards out of town, he noticed the white flowers growing at his feet, and remembered: they were Sabin’s favourite. Perhaps, he thought, it would be an appropriate gesture on the part of a house guest to bring him a small bunch that he might be able to put on display. He gathered a few, a number that he estimated would appear neither stingy nor ostentatious, and made his way on, clutching them firmly. But as he got closer to the hills, he realised it was incredibly presumptuous of him to think that Sabin wouldn’t have been able to decorate the house himself: if he took a notion for some flowers, he would be perfectly capable of getting them of his own accord.

He bent down and carefully left the flowers by the roadside.

When Vargas arrived at his destination, Sabin welcomed him with an embrace and a substantial lunch, and he soon began to feel at ease. Sabin had always been the kind of person anyone could get along with, and despite Vargas’s misgivings,

he soon found himself being as open with Sabin as he ever had, as if three years apart counted for nothing.

After lunch, Sabin suggested that Vargas might like to see the mountain. “I go up there to train,” he informed him. “There’s some pretty strong monsters to fight. Fancy it?”

They made their way to the lower slopes, the area where Sabin told Vargas that he normally trained, but then they climbed further towards the summit, through caves and over bridges, fending off attacks from various creatures as they did so. By the time they reached the top of the mountain, Vargas was exhilarated: fighting monsters was always something he found more engaging than the predictable practice sparring that formed most of what went on in the dojo. Not following a routine, actually having to think what to do, was an intellectual challenge of the kind he relished; and a proper fight, where the other party actually had designs on one’s safety, actually meant something. Fighting alongside Sabin was equally motivating: he’d forgotten the raw energy that Sabin used to throw into his attacks, quite different from Vargas’s own calculated blows.

“You’ve got stronger,” Sabin said, after they had dispatched a couple of wild bears.

“So have you,” Vargas replied as he wiped the sweat from his face.

“I guess,” said Sabin. “Training here helps. All these monsters are really powerful – you should try it sometime.”

He sat down by the stream and scooped his hands into the water, throwing it over his face; Vargas sat next to him and watched. A few droplets had made their way into the spikes of hair that framed Sabin's face and brought a couple of them down to stick them to his forehead in untidy clumps. The remnants of water reflected from his cheeks as he beamed at Vargas. "Those bears were tough, huh?"

"Yeah," said Vargas, and now that he was so close to Sabin, now that they had shared something more visceral than anything in years, he had to ask. "You remember," he said, "when we used to –"

He hoped not to have to say anything more, but the flicker of Sabin's eyebrows told him he hadn't been sufficiently transparent, so he tried to clarify. "In our room, when we – on my bed –"

"Oh," said Sabin, and he smiled again, a guilty sort of smile that inexplicably made Vargas's heart race. "Yeah. I kind of miss that."

Vargas could barely trust himself to nod.

Sabin looked straight at him, cocked his head to the side, and said, "You do too, right?"

Then, before Vargas could understand what was happening, Sabin had leant towards him, and covered his lips with his own, and Sabin was gently pressing into him, his rough fingers caressing Vargas's jaw with surprising tenderness; Vargas let Sabin push him slowly down until he was lying back

flat on the grass, and he reached out to cling to some part of Sabin but found nothing that would correctly convey the magnitude of this moment, so he let his hand wave uselessly in the air for a second before retracting and trusting Sabin to lead. Sabin seemed to know what he was doing, anyway. His tongue teased its way across Vargas's teeth with confidence; his hands tenderly framed Vargas's head. Vargas wondered how they were managing to avoid bashing into each other's noses, and how long the fizzy feeling in his stomach would last.

And then Sabin drew back, laughing in delight, and ran a hand through his hair.

"Wow," he said. "Why'd we never do that before?"

Vargas reflected on it. Sabin's hands on his face, Sabin's mouth against his, making contact with such confidence and grace, quite unlike Vargas's own helplessness, that it was quite obvious he *had* done this before, with some other person. And inevitably, that put Vargas in mind of the other matter: the faintest trickle of jealousy that had simmered away inside him since he was fifteen.

"You used to do it with the king, didn't you," he said. "What we did back then."

The smile vanished from Sabin's face instantly. He was silent for a moment. Then he said, "He wasn't king then."

"That's –" said Vargas. It should have been easy to say it, now that Sabin had all but admitted to it: to accuse him of doing something unnatural, disgusting even. He could let

Sabin believe that that was what he cared about, when really his concerns were elsewhere. But hiding the truth was impossible. “So, when we,” he said instead, “when we used to – it wasn’t because of anything you felt about me. It was just – I was just a replacement.”

At that, Sabin’s grim expression flickered with surprise. “No,” he said forcefully. “No – you’re not my brother.” He looked Vargas right in the eye, and then turned away again, running his hands over the grass as if to seek comfort from it. The earnestness on his face and in his voice seemed genuine, and Vargas was more cheered by it than he might have anticipated – he felt a strange frisson in his chest. Not being Sabin’s brother: did that mean he could be something else to him – a lover, even? Or did it mean Sabin’s heart was closed off, forever denied to him, the preserve only of the twin he had known since birth? And would it be so bad if it was – wouldn’t it mean he would be able to move on from this strange indescribable remnant of teenage lust, which still haunted him when he least expected it?

“We should talk about this,” Sabin remarked.

Vargas laughed involuntarily, a short and bitter cough of a sound. “Should have talked about it years ago.”

“Yeah,” said Sabin. “Let’s go back down to my place – I’ll put the kettle on, and then we’ll have a proper chat, yeah?”

They made their way down the mountain, peaceful now that they had dispatched most of the monsters. It was start-

ing to get colder, Vargas realised, and the sky was taking on a duller tone. The two of them made little conversation during the descent, and Vargas felt his thoughts begin to turn sour again: Sabin would no doubt invite him into his house and then confirm that it had all been meaningless fun, two kids fooling around with no expectation of anything that might last. By the time they reached the cabin, it was almost dusk, and Vargas had decided he didn't really want to speak to Sabin about this after all.

"Actually, I should go," he said. "Don't want to be walking back to South Figaro in the dark."

"You can stay the night, if you want," said Sabin.

Vargas suppressed a bitter laugh. He'd seen inside Sabin's hut, on the day they had all moved his furniture in: it was entirely open-plan, with the one single bed inches from the edge of the kitchenette. "You think that's a good idea?" he said. "After that?"

"Oh," said Sabin. "OK. Come back first thing tomorrow, yeah? Promise? We'll talk all this over."

Sabin wasn't good at talking about this kind of thing, Vargas knew, and he himself was hardly the world's best conversationalist. "Sure," he said. "Tomorrow, no problem."



Vargas meant to go back and see Sabin in the morning; he really did. He even got up at dawn to ensure he'd get there in good time. But as he picked his way between the traders setting up in the market square, he unexpectedly ran into his father.

"You're up early, son," said Duncan cheerfully. "Actually, I need to talk to you about something. Let me take you out for breakfast."

They sat down in the only cafe whose owner had the questionable sense to open the place so early, exchanging pleasantries as they waited for their order to arrive. Talking to his father had somehow got easier as he had grown older, Vargas reflected. He had a better grasp, now, of how not to say the wrong thing and let his old resentment come to the fore.

"So," said Duncan, between mouthfuls of poached cirpius egg. "I've been thinking about what's going to happen to the dojo, when I retire –"

Vargas must have looked surprised, because Duncan chuckled. "It won't be for a while. But fighting's a young man's game, you know? I can't hold onto the dojo forever – I need a successor. I wanted to check if you were interested."

"Interested?" Vargas echoed. It wasn't what he had expected: he had assumed his interest was taken for granted.

Duncan furrowed his brow. "The thing is, I hope you don't mind if I say this, but at the moment I don't think any of my students are really worthy – you included. And I understand

that you're into other things, your" – he hesitated for a moment – "reading, and – well, you have other interests, don't you? If you don't want to make a career of it, you can just say so."

Vargas was at a loss. All his life, his father had trained him to follow in his footsteps, and Vargas had always assumed that was his only real option, or certainly the only one that Duncan would allow. But it seemed that somewhere along the way, his father had expected him to realise that he had the right to make the decision for himself. The vastness of his future was suddenly frightening.

"So, if I do want to take it on," he said carefully, "I have to, what? Prove my worth to you?"

"In a few years, yes," said Duncan.

"And I'd be competing for this against your other students?"

"Well," said Duncan, "there's only one other student anywhere close to your level, as I'm sure you know."

"Sabin," said Vargas, and he felt his stomach clench: yesterday's feelings of shame and desire were back, at the mere mention of the name.

Duncan nodded. "That's right. Although I suppose it's fitting. He's practically your honorary brother, isn't he?" he said, with a nonchalance that Vargas found extremely distasteful. They might have been able to have a conversation without shouting at each other these days, but Duncan still really didn't

understand him at all. That particular suggestion, at this specific time – it was something that Vargas very definitely did not want to think about.

“What if you don’t think he’s worthy either?” he asked, saying the first thing he could think of to avoid having to react to the question.

“Then I’ll turn it over to the town,” said Duncan. “The council can deal with it if you boys can’t – just a bit of paperwork and then it’ll be property of the crown.”

His last few words seemed to flick some kind of switch in Vargas’s mind. If he didn’t train hard enough to be able to take over the dojo, the place might end up belonging to Sabin. And if neither of them managed to meet Duncan’s expectations, it would belong to the king. He could still remember the king from that day seven years ago, standing casually in the doorway of the house where Vargas had grown up; he could remember Sabin’s expression, when they had spoken about him; he could remember the way Sabin had touched him the way he used to touch his own twin brother; and as he remembered all those things, he felt that vast future closing off to him again, as if someone was gently shutting a heavy wooden door right in his face. The king had already taken enough from him: he couldn’t take this too, the inheritance that Vargas had expected all his life, even if he still didn’t know whether he really wanted it. And Sabin couldn’t take it from him either. Vargas was sure now, surer than he could ever remember being, that he did not

want to go and speak to Sabin that day, and that he quite possibly didn't want to see him ever again: certainly not at the dojo.

"I'll go for it," he said. "I'll do my best to make you proud."

"Are you sure, son?" said Duncan. "I really don't mind if you say no – but you do need to tell me."

Vargas shook his head. "I'm sure."

His father smiled, and reached across the table to give Vargas a light thump on the upper arm. "That's my boy. I'm glad you've agreed to this – there'll be some hard work ahead, but I hope I can pass the place on to you when the time comes. Good to keep it in the family if I can, you know?"

"Yeah," said Vargas.

"Want to do some training this morning?" said Duncan. "I know you're not scheduled in for a couple of days, but I haven't got anyone else booked until later."

"Sure," said Vargas.



Vargas left his job at the pub later that week; the latest batch of twelve-year-olds kindly gifted him an engraved tankard in recognition of his years of service, and reminded him that there was always a place for him if he needed to get away from Duncan. He had resolved that from now on he would concentrate entirely on becoming a worthy successor to his father: he

would increase his hours at the dojo, both receiving instruction and passing techniques on to his own students, and when he wasn't there, he would head out of town to train. The best place to do it, going by his experience of just a few days earlier, seemed to be at the very top of Mount Koltz: it appeared that that location was where he would find the strongest monsters of the region. Training on the mountain slopes had clearly made Sabin stronger, these past three years, and so Vargas would be sure to benefit at least as much until his father saw fit to pass the dojo on.

Sabin had told Vargas he trained mostly on the lower slopes of the mountain, below the caves. This information made it easy to avoid him. On days where he had no duties at the dojo, Vargas would head out early so as not to come across Sabin on his way up the mountain, make his way through the caves towards the summit, and stay up there until late afternoon, at which time Sabin always seemed to have headed off already. His route took him past Sabin's hut, of course, but he made a conscious effort never to look towards it.

Climbing the mountain alone made it very clear that it was a tough place to train. On the first few occasions, Vargas almost didn't think he would make it to the highest area: the monsters attacked relentlessly, and without the understanding of when a person was about to be injured that a human opponent would have. But as he became used to the journey and to the atmosphere, he became more and more accustomed to

it. After a few weeks, he began to notice the occasional human corpse on the slopes of the mountain, and realised that the strength of the monsters in this area was far beyond the level that an ordinary person would be able to deal with.

At some point, too, Vargas's resolution to avoid looking in the direction of Sabin's hut began to fade, and he found himself giving it a quick, guilty glance as he passed by on each visit. Sometimes he could make out the shape of a figure through the window – on those occasions he made sure to turn away again quickly.

Avoiding the temptation was easier at the dojo. Vargas kept an eye on the schedules, and was able to modify his own to ensure that he would never encounter Sabin as one of them was leaving and the other was entering. That way, he would be able to work on his technique without distractions: and so, he settled into the routine that would form the basis of his life until Duncan's retirement. In time, the other students got to know of the challenge that Duncan had set the two of them, seeming to take it as proof that the relations between Vargas and his father were still at rock bottom: if Duncan had any respect for his son, Vargas would overhear them saying, he would pass the dojo on to him without needing him prove his worth. That wasn't quite true – Vargas knew that Duncan's decision had nothing to do with his feelings towards him, and everything to do with his pride in maintaining the highest standards at the dojo – but he could never be bothered to put them

right. In addition, the students had begun to speculate about which of the two competitors would get to inherit the dojo: each of the two young men seemed to have his own supporters, although Vargas found it easy enough to ignore his. The only thing he cared enough about now was training.



The atmosphere in South Figaro was changing; it was impossible not to notice. Figaro had been in an alliance with the Gestahlian Empire for some years, which had meant the occasional presence of Imperial soldiers in the town on business, but in the past they had mostly kept to themselves and seemed fairly non-threatening. These days, the soldiers came more often, wearing big Magitek suits, and, when innocently questioned, normally declined to tell anyone else what they were doing. Rumours of clashes with city-states in the eastern continent did little to quell anyone's fears.

Vargas paid little attention to it: politics was not his concern. His only interest was honing his fighting technique, which had improved immeasurably since his decision to make it his sole focus. It had been about three years since that day when his father took him aside after a long session at the dojo, and said, "Can I have a word?"

Duncan seemed nervous, as if he thought someone was watching him. "What is it?" asked Vargas, following him into

his private office.

“I’ve had news from the castle,” said Duncan, and even after all these years, Vargas’s mind went immediately to Sabin. “The king is planning to break the truce with the Empire – he’s just waiting for the right moment, apparently.”

Vargas forced his thoughts away from Sabin and towards the news from his father. “What will happen then?” he asked, although he suspected he already knew the answer.

Duncan sighed. “There’s a price on my head. Has been for years, and the king’s men always used to warn me about it, but I didn’t think the Empire was really a threat back then –”

His father was unaware that Vargas had eavesdropped on that particular conversation, Vargas realised.

“As soon as Figaro turns they’ll come after me,” Duncan was saying. “And you know I won’t betray our techniques to anyone. So –”

“So they’ll kill you,” said Vargas.

Duncan blinked. “Yes. Probably.”

Vargas was at a loss for words; Duncan reached towards the key to the dojo’s main door, which was on the table between them, and pushed it towards him. “Here,” he said. “The dojo’s yours. There’s nothing between you and Sabin – you’ve both come on magnificently since I suggested this – you’re both more than worthy. But you’re my son. I was planning a presentation ceremony, but –” He was still pushing the key

towards Vargas's hand, as if trying to get Vargas to take hold of it.

Vargas made no move to do so. "We can't let them kill you," he said.

"I'm not betraying Figaro," Duncan countered.

"Then," said Vargas, "get out of here before they come for you. Go and live in the mountains or something –"

"They've got spies everywhere," said Duncan gently. "They control most of the world now – you think they wouldn't find me? And that Magitek, who knows what it can do – if they know I'm alive, they'll be able to pursue me –"

"So let's convince them you're dead," said Vargas.

Duncan looked sceptical. Vargas went on, thinking out loud. "We'll fake your death – make it look like someone killed you. Then you can go into hiding, and they won't be looking for you, because they'll think you're dead. Right?"

"But who would want to – to kill me, apart from them?" Duncan asked, hesitating a little at the mention of the deed. "I don't think I have that many enemies." He let out a sound that was probably supposed to be a laugh, but sounded more like an aborted hiccup.

Vargas looked down at the key to the dojo, and thought of the way Duncan's other students still always seemed afraid to mention their master in front of Vargas, as if his name alone would send him into a rage. For reasons he didn't understand, the attitude he had held towards his father as a teenager had

somehow become cemented in everyone's perceptions of him, evolving in their minds from the overblown grudges of an adolescent into the pure hatred of an adult. In truth, it was nothing like that, but nobody had seemed to realise: their collective imagination had taken precedence over reality.

"Me," he said.



Duncan had remained doubtful, but Vargas had managed to convince him to go along with his spontaneously formed plan, pointing out that as a last resort, it was worth trying before the Empire captured him. He felt much less confident about the plan than he let on to his father: it seemed hugely risky whenever he gave it more than a moment's thought, and relied more than anything else on the townspeople's lack of intellect (which Vargas did not doubt, however). To ensure the greatest chance of success, he persuaded Duncan not to breathe a word of it to anyone: not even his mother; not even Sabin.

On Vargas's part, it couldn't hurt to plant the seed while he waited for certain materials to become available. When his own students came for their lessons at the dojo, he made sure to act sullen and resentful – he wasn't a particularly brilliant actor, but had spent enough of his life being sullen and resentful for it to come naturally anyway – and, as it were, let slip to each of them the news that his father had supposedly de-

cided to pass the dojo on to Sabin, and that he was struggling to accept the decision. With the way rumours spread in Figaro, it wouldn't be long before everyone in the town thought they knew what had happened. He continued to meticulously avoid Sabin himself: it was better to continue trying to forget about him, as he had been unsuccessfully trying to do for the last three years, than to catch a glimpse and risk ruining the whole plan.

Vargas spent the next few days undertaking his usual training on the mountain. The fearsome bears that he had fought with Sabin on their first visit to the summit were no longer worthy opponents: he could overpower them in a matter of minutes. In fact, he had even begun to train some of them to fight beside him against the other monsters he encountered: he had been surprised to discover he had a knack for it.

On one of these visits, he discovered the newly deceased body of an unfortunate trader on the mountain, and brought it back to South Figaro with him: it was time. He called in at the dojo once he had stowed the corpse in his flat, and said to Duncan, "Tonight. Pack your things and get Mum out of the house."

Duncan's face contorted with worry. "Are you sure, son?" he said.

"Of course," said Vargas, infuriated by Duncan's continued reluctance to accept what they had to do. "I've thought it through – you know we have to try. I don't want to see

them kill you, Dad.”

He stormed out of Duncan’s office, not bothering to hide his frustration: the students would notice and arrive at entirely the wrong conclusion, but that would fit with the plan nicely. He returned home, and waited for nightfall.



Nightfall took a long time to come, and Vargas found himself increasingly worried. The fact that he was storing a corpse in his own living quarters was hardly conducive to staying calm: that, the knowledge that he was going to have to leave Figaro, and the fact that everyone would think he had murdered his own father, conspired to make him feel nauseous from the anxiety. He experimented with drinking a bottle of beer to calm his nerves, but it didn’t seem to help much, so he drank another, and before too long his supply was significantly depleted: not that he would have had a chance to drink any of it in the future, he reflected.

The alcohol made him feel detached from the situation, which helped, although that detachment ended up being so great that it had already been dark for several hours before he realised that he actually had to go to his father’s house and do the deed he had committed to. Struggling out of the flat with the sack in which he had hidden the dead body, he made his way there and let himself in with the spare key he carried.

Duncan was lying in bed, wide awake. “Did you get Mum away?” said Vargas.

“She’s at her mother’s,” he said. “Vargas –”

“We have to do this,” Vargas insisted. “Have you packed a bag?” The look of weary disbelief on his father’s face told him otherwise. “Come on, I told you to. Just a few clothes and a bit of gil, not too much.” He stood over Duncan’s bed and pounded the blanket with his fist to provide some impetus.

“Have you been drinking?” said Duncan. “Look, son, we don’t need to do it this way. Let’s wait until you’re sober, by the gods, and talk about this properly –”

“No, it’s happening now,” said Vargas, and he set down his sack and began to go about hauling out the corpse, dragging it out by its untidy limbs. He turned back towards his father once the body was sufficiently revealed. “See now? I’m serious about this –”

Duncan had recoiled in shock, and Vargas noted it with a certain satisfaction. “What’s the matter?” he jeered. “Haven’t you seen a dead body before?”

“Of course I –” Duncan snapped, and then cut himself off, an expression of horror slowly stealing over his face. “Vargas – did you –”

“What?” said Vargas. “I didn’t kill him.” Something in his mind urged him to be more upset by the assumption – one made by his own father, no less – but he wasn’t sober enough to dwell on it. “Found him – it – er, him on the mountain.

That's why we need to do this now, see? This might be our only chance. Give me your pyjamas, we need him in them."

Duncan disrobed without a word, and headed to his wardrobe, small and naked, to put on some day clothes. Vargas turned his attention to removing the dead man's own torn and bloodstained garments, replacing them with his father's pyjamas. They were lucky that he seemed to be of a similar build to Duncan; even the way his hair was styled bore a resemblance. The face, of course, was clearly not his, but Vargas hoped to be able to disguise that, although he would leave the dirty work until his father had safely departed.

Duncan had left the room in the meantime, evidently in search of a bag to pack, for he returned with one slung over his shoulder. "I'm ready," he said, with a grim expression.

"Did you pack your toothbrush?" Vargas blurted out. "Because – you shouldn't have, it would look suspicious." It was an idiotic thing to say, and he felt extremely embarrassed as soon as he had finished saying it. It was most unlike him to babble – it must have been the beer.

"I – I didn't pack my toothbrush," said Duncan warily.

"Leave through the back door," Vargas said. "You'll have a few minutes before I start making a fuss. I'll meet you on the other side of Mount Koltz, like we arranged."

Duncan nodded, and left without a further word: Vargas had expected more protesting, but his father had seemed subdued, as if he was afraid of him. There was something odd

there – at what point had Duncan’s attitude changed? – but the beer made it difficult for Vargas to have any success in analysing the situation and had perhaps clouded his judgement regarding Duncan’s behaviour anyway, so there was no point dwelling on it.

He turned back to the corpse. The plan was to bash its face in enough to disguise the dead man’s features and make him appear to have been killed by a bare-handed assault: that would point the finger of suspicion his way. He threw a few punches and realised: the man was almost a day dead, and would no longer bleed. It would be no problem to mangle the facial features, but the lack of resulting blood would make the scene unconvincing.

Miraculously, he was both sober enough to think of a solution and drunk enough not to shy away from the thought of it. A kitchen knife sufficed to let him draw the required quantity of blood from his own hands and smear it onto the face of the corpse: the alcohol dulled the pain enough to make it bearable. It wasn’t inconceivable that he might have sustained injuries from the assault anyway, although anyone with his level of skill in the martial arts ought to have been able to avoid making such a mess. He continued his work until the corpse was sufficiently unrecognisable, and then opened the bedroom window, leaving a bloody handprint on the frame. Good, he thought: if someone recognised the shape of his ungainly long fingers, that would only add to the evidence.

“That’ll teach you, you old fool!” he screamed into the night, his voice hoarse with drink and unacknowledged terror. “Leaving the dojo to him instead of me – how could you? Forsaking your own son!”

He continued with a few variations on the same theme until he saw lights begin to come on in the houses opposite. That was his cue: the neighbours had heard, and hopefully interpreted the message as he intended. He grabbed the sack with the dead man’s clothes and hurried downstairs, leaving through the back door and running as fast as he could through the town, slowing only when the last of its buildings were out of his sight. He entered a wooded area, stumbled against a tree root, and slammed face-first into the ground.



Vargas was woken by the early morning sun and the chirp of birds. Slowly, he willed himself to sit up and let the memories of the previous night come back to him. His head was throbbing and his hands stung, sticky with dried blood; he began to regret drinking so much beer before he had headed out. Before too long, though, he recalled that the act itself had been accomplished with no major problems, and that had he been sober, he might not have been able to see it through. Duncan would be on the other side of the mountain now, and would hopefully have found somewhere that he could wait for Vargas before

the two of them reunited and sought a new life incognito. He would get to see a different part of the world, he reflected. That, at least, was worth looking forward to.

He made his way to the mountain, trying to refrain from sparing the usual glance at Sabin's house, but failing: from what he could tell from a brief look, it seemed still and empty. The dead leaves crunched under his feet as he began the ascent. Everything was still, but not quite in the right way, and soon enough, he realised that someone was following him.



That was how he found himself at the top of the mountain, facing down the man he had once seen very differently. Sabin seemed to believe everything Vargas was spouting about how angry he was, and that made it still easier to convince him: because he *was* angry, that Sabin and so many other people would be so quick to be taken in by the flimsy façade he had constructed – that Sabin clearly cared nothing for the connection they had once had. The resentment Vargas had once felt towards his father had clearly come to define him, even to those who claimed to know him well. Sabin had never really understood, he thought as he looked him in the eyes. Never.

It was easy to lie to Sabin, now that he knew Sabin didn't have the decency to question what he had heard. "He snubbed me," he growled, and blew off Sabin's protests with further in-

sistence on the point. Just a little more arguing, and soon they were in battle, fighting properly against each other for the first time instead of demonstrating some point of technique as they would have done years ago in the dojo. Vargas still felt hungover and was exhausted from having dispatched the king and his hangers-on, but he gave it his all: this was the most meaningful fight of his life.

Things could have gone differently, he thought, if not for his own failure to communicate. He and Sabin might have formed a proper connection, one that wasn't built around inferences and supposedly shared understandings that were really nothing of the kind – if they hadn't slowly lost touch over the last six years, and if Vargas had done something about the fact that the memory of Sabin's lips on his was still vivid in his mind, instead of hoping it would one day recede.

As he lay on the ground, incapacitated by Sabin's faultless technique, he knew he deserved his fate.