

McCallister Chronicles

*Based on J.M. Harrison's
Carthim's Cross*

AP Schreckenberger

*Night Suite
Book 2 - Episode 18*

“Are you thirsty?” Wing exclaimed in response to the welcomed reprieve. He beamed at the leather-bound Winchester before spinning out of the aftershock stare to deliver his parting words to the Second Congress. “Because right now, the doubters can drop some shots of shut the fuck up!” Secreting shades of Trigger’s sarcasm, McCallister bowed to the council, saluted each member, and exited the chamber. “Peace out, bitches!”

D. Cato, Raden and Laura gawked as their idol strolled towards the stairwell. His oculars, drenched in the ochre dye of the Battle Flame, besieged Frost’s crouched outline. The cadet reasoned that his drilling words had reached his mother’s ears, for her astounded expression was a twisted mess of guilt and pride. He would not waste his energy deciphering the enigma. Will’s outburst had given him all the motivation he needed to leave the members of the R.O.K. dumbfounded. “Hurry up!” Wing barked. “I want my damn blade.”

“Oi!” Kit cried. He grabbed Uther and scrambled after McCallister. “You can’t run off like that! I still have a message from Harmony that needs to be delivered!” The captain disappeared along with the group of youngsters that were funneled down the steps.

No sound filled the conference room until Ector’s laugh obliterated the awkward pause. “I really like that kid,” the feline remarked. “He’s got a pair of his own and doesn’t need a charity bag of nuts from the likes of any fellow here. Perhaps he walked in a boy, but based on your stunned looks, he is obviously a man now. Woof!”

Jetting through the compound’s corridors, Lukainy searched for Lara von Alsyne. She could no longer restrain the unbridled snapshots that littered her imagination. Teasing pictures of an immobilized Wing projected shivers upon her spine. His scent and taste loitered at the forefront of her brain, and it became difficult to distinguish whether the sweat that dissipated her surging heat sprang from her confident sprint or the succubine cravings.

Turning a corner, Marrok collided with Harmony. Having found herself engulfed by the Life Flame’s alabaster garments, Luky abruptly recoiled and peered into the woman’s one visible core. The acting monarch and heir apparent held their breaths as the blossoms of apprehension spread their petals to bask in a rich sea of vitality and prosperity. The elder was willing to let the moment slip into the clutches of history as the young royal moved to pass, but she quickly altered her decision.

“Faith,” the First Child spoke. “It’s returned to you, hasn’t it?” She flipped through the dozens of illusory pages that recounted Lukainy’s troubles and described the turbulent cluster of emotions that fashioned girl’s surprise. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, but I can

already tell that he must have said something incredible to rekindle your spirit in such a short time.”

“He’s an idiot,” Luka replied, “a stupid, careless idiot!” She slammed her heel to the stone and unloaded. “He refused the crown because of me. All he ever wanted was to be accepted by those people. What kind of moron turns down what he’s always wanted?” Her head rolled from side to side with each point that shot past her lips. “If he’s going to act like such a jerk,” she spoke, her pupils rising to find the familiar curl of her mother’s smile, “then I don’t have time to be sad.”

“The two of you have certainly been through a lot together, so it’s not really all that shocking to hear you say that he turned down the throne. Real men give up on fame when they realize they’ve already got what they want. Either way, I’m happy that you have recovered your self as there are a few things that I’ve been withholding until the moment seemed right. I guess Kit’s assessment won’t be needed after all. I know a ready woman when I see one.”

The princess would have none of the Life Flame’s bullshit psychological puzzles. She had grown weary of the distracting riddles and the awkward quirks that put a maternal twist upon a stranger’s countenance. There were far more important matters to address, particularly those involving the actions of her knight. “I have other pressing engagements,” Marrok bit. “I could already spend a lifetime asking questions. I think I can hold my tongue for another day.”

Swagger pierced Lukainy’s essence as she brushed Harmony aside. There was no looking back now. She was all-in – committed to the simple concept that the House would once again howl through even a moonless night. She would do it for her father and for the boy whose glass heart relied upon her strength. “Lukainy Adelaide de Marrok!” The icy wind swept beneath the hem of her silks and froze the girl in her tracks.

She despised the way her name leapt from the First’s tongue. It was a violation of a secret bond shared between daughter and mom. Yet neither the stern tone nor the additional encroachment upon Jeanine’s domain brought the same volcanic ire that Luka threw upon her own faults. She had broken her empowered vow before taking a second step; she had turned around. “Can you make time to listen now?” Harmony continued. Her patch had been pushed up, allowing access to the intimate coalition of colors that adorned the eye.

The bland vanilla walls of the barracks failed to soothe Fox’s frenzy. For years, the young teen had reluctantly followed *their* orders while the well of his affections slept. He had taken lives for selfish reasons, and he had been severely punished for sparing the few that had absentmindedly wandered onto his path. Finally, the animal of the field had been freed from his cage. Opportunity had given him the chance to become his own master, and he already knew what had to be done.

Erzse tracked the boy as he paced about their tiny abode. It was more of a cell than a residence, but Batory did not object to the conditions. In truth, she had expected far worse considering the crimes that had assailed her aura, but her former enemies had shown her nothing but kindness. Whether the hospitality stemmed from genuine empathy or ignorance, the Blood Countess could not discern. She appreciated it all the same.

Her young companion, however, was less than pleased with their circumstances. Stealthy obscenities flew under his breath while fate’s fire desperately clawed for fuel. He could picture her smiling face, frozen by the emerald curse that leached upon her crown like a vile parasite. “I must return to Hapsburg,” he informed himself more so than Erzse. “Taoza could free the people from his illusions.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Batory countered. She glared at the child and shook her head in disbelief. Ende der Nacht would strip him down piece by piece, grind his bones into dust, and sprinkle the revered powder about the Kingdom of Oblivion. His rigid posture did little to conceal the seriousness of his claim. He meant what he said, and Erzse knew it. “At least speak to the McCallister kid before you run off to play sacrificial lamb. He’s like you, right? Maybe he’ll talk some sense...”

“I don’t need him,” Fox replied impatiently, “and he doesn’t need me. Why should I sit here and bide my time when Taoza does? No one here needs me. I’m a refugee, not a knight! The solution is trivial: Conrad invades, and I get an opening.”

Batory turned around. She wouldn’t berate his suicidal antics any further. It was pointless to argue when Hohenzollern was involved. After all, her secured safety was the only reason why the pup submitted to the viper in the first place. The fallen countess sighed and stared at the floor. She bit her lower lip, hoping to silence the sniffles that paired with swelling sinuses and budding tears. She already knew that he’d leave regardless of what she had to say. Constraints no longer mattered. “I need you,” Erzse whispered past the hesitation.

Wing could barely see the glimmer of Daizer’s core. He was on all fours, hunched over the bowl-turned-tomb that cradled his katana’s essence and a pint of his own vital brew. About him, friends gathered while Raden painted the floorboards of the smithy with the same mix. The child was drawing a blood seal – one very similar to the contours Trigger had scribed to return Kouenza from the grave.

The paladin lifted his head and eyed Amora, whose stern stare even iced the rifts that cratered Wing’s bare chest. “Just over a pint,” she stated matter-of-factly. “We haven’t even neared the point of no return yet. You could back out now and I could fix the wounds with ease.”

“Bitch,” he replied through coarse laughter, “like hell I’m backing out now.” Hunter could hear the burden in his voice. Winchester’s words had spurred her patient to tackle what a sane person would undoubtedly dub treacherous. Eventually, his body would ignore the stubborn pest that controlled his chivalry-craving psyche. It would collapse even if his mind still refused. Then again, he had proven her wrong once before. Perhaps he was poised to do it again. “Just do me a favor,” he coughed, “and make sure Lukainy doesn’t see me like this.”

“We’ve covered this lesson already,” Ams answered. “You can’t keep her out of things like this. Besides, her abilities would be useful here, and you know it.”

“Dai is my responsibility,” Wing spoke quietly. “You heard what the kid said. It’s my sacrifice that matters. Abusing Luky’s talent is the same as cheating.” McCallister squinted and wheezed. The gashes that had been carved into his torso with the broken edges of his own blade hurt even more than he had anticipated, but the reward was worth far more than the risk.

“Let the records state that Patient Zero is a moron,” Hunter retaliated. “You’re letting a child’s fable jeopardize your life. What if it’s wrong? What if restoring the contract doesn’t heal your wounds? Luky could take care of it in the blink of an eye.”

“Patient Zero?” Wing chuckled weakly. “I didn’t know that I had become such an important figure. I thought I was just a filthy peasant.” He curled his lips slyly and examined the flickers of light that reflected off her irides. “You can do whatever you want once I pass out. You’re a smart girl. I’m sure you can handle the idiotic things I do in the meantime, sans Lukainy.”

“You still are,” the frustrated medic responded. “Although, I am starting to think that perhaps brat would be the better term. How the princess puts up with your antics is a mystery

that anatomy will never solve.” She sighed angrily and fixated her rage upon the unprepared Will. “Are you done with that thing yet?” she snapped. “He’s almost to two pints, and my services could be directed towards substantially superior tasks.”

Raden flinched as he drew a pair of overlapping stars around the cadet. Having grown up apart from the demanding members of the aristocracy, Winchester possessed none of the social skills required to overcome the quickly mounting fears of failure. “I’m almost done,” he answered meekly while his hands steered Daizer’s steel to the proper position. “You’ll have to channel Trigger’s flame through both the sword and the core. Once the contract is restored, your blood will be used to repower his soul, and the act of kindness should rebound.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Hunter interjected. “Do you know what happened the last time I saw Wing channel that fire? He went bat-shit crazy and cremated someone, alive.”

“I’m one-and-one, Amora,” the soldier responded. “I wasn’t in the right place the first time.” He clenched his fists and winced as his nerves endured another wave of ignitions. “The second was for Luky, and this one is for Dai. I am committed to bringing him back to us. There is no way I can fail!”

“Did you feel that?” D. Cato whispered to his friend as the confidence diffusing from McCallister’s essence filled the barn. The child jumped when Wing’s head snapped up, for the amber flares that enveloped the knight’s irides leapt forth with uncontrolled grit.

Winchester responded to his companion with a curt nod while his eyes swept the room. Silence crept over the few observers as though Death’s wicked shadow had brought its scythe to the necks of those who dared utter another word. The dramatic pause made Wing’s weighty gasps all the more noticeable. They were saturated with a murky mix of dispositions that the teen expelled to make way for desire’s spark.

He drew his fingertips against the lumber’s grain before nails nestled into a network of chasms and valleys. Those gasps intensified into groans as more red rain descended upon cold steel from searing lacerations. “For fuck’s sake Trigger, do it already!”

The echo of his voice straggled into a climactic pause. The audience, awed, gazed upon the onyx fire that boiled away the portrait sketched by Wing’s offering. On cue, it emerged from the confines of the great hidden cathedral to immerse the small collection of bystanders in the Battle Flame’s magnificence. The demanding tongues, gobbling up each fresh, sanguine drop, scratched at the paladin’s injuries for more fuel. They coated the young soldier in a glowing obsidian finish that expanded its dominion through haunting arcs that cast their own particular spectra of midnight shades.

Outside the circle, William paid close attention to the transpiring events that were far more miraculous and inspiring than the meager ideas Raiga had planted. The tints, agony, heat and hope coalesced into single act of desperation. Emotional screams traversed the sacred space as Wing called for his special blade, but no matter how many times the knight beckoned his partner, Dai did not appear. Something was missing.

Just beyond the inferno’s reach, Adam’s book quivered. It embraced the chaotic coherence strung by contrast and feeling, and it eagerly opened its worn gates to page after page of dormant memories. Indeed, something necessary had been stolen from the artistic vision once Trigger’s midnight blaze had erupted. The absence provided incentive to the sweeping monochromatic curves that annexed whatever they could touch. Finally, one took hold of the parchment and uncovered the glint of truth. It decoded the enigma and delivered color.

About the black bands, violet strings of light danced as synchromatic wings burst from the hero’s shoulder blades and ascended through roof of the structure. Whispers began to surface

as McCallister glanced at his fist with widened eyes. He could only estimate the magnitude of confusion that conquered his companions' thoughts, but he doubted that it came close to his own level of bewilderment.

Concealed by the pack, Laura scavenged intermittent glimpses through gaps in the wall of silhouetted physiques. She did not need much to reach a conclusion, for her auburn orbs saw Wing with unmatched clarity. She could already sense the brother he truly was. His hand need not be examined or touched. She already knew that Trigger's runes had been replaced with the markings of another.

She kept her composure when the floor beneath her sibling bled the hues of rainbow. Whereas the others were clueless, she was aware of the journey that Wing would be forced to take. The other side of the portal awaited him, and it was there that he would restore his agreement with Dai.

Laura slid through the crowd as Amora reached out for the sinking knight. His knees had just slipped below the glossy membrane that had stretched to the edges of the seal. There was no stopping him now. It was too late, and far too dangerous, to interfere. She wrapped her fingers around the medic's bicep and pulled as hard as her muscles would allow.

"Go!" McCallister demanded as she clung to Hunter's limb. "Your sacrifice won't burn forever!" She quickly checked the condition of his book and let out a short sigh of relief when she realized that the rogue flare had not damaged it in the slightest. The brief reprieve, while welcomed, did little to confront the chilling repercussions that stalked Wing from the shadows of failure, yet Laura could not suppress her smile when he stared at her.

He wore a smug look that was fitting for a proud hero, but somehow, he still nurtured that familial, humble warmth throughout all the adversity and disorder. Laura wondered what he would think of the scene – *the way in which his steady frame danced with the light, the way in which he played his part* – if he managed to uncover a bit more of himself.

"No worries," the cadet called. "I won't take long." He gave a thumbs-up to his friends, grabbed Daizer's charm from the bowl, and traveled through the radiant threshold to an inconceivable universe.

"The two of you clearly fit together and complete a larger puzzle." Harmony's elation bubbled. Words spilled from her lips in uncontrollable waterfalls that drowned Lukainy in farfetched conjectures.

Still, the heir believed that the Life Flame was speaking the truth. The story pushed her through the suffocating sea of potential myths to the surface, where she could breathe a different brand of vitality. It cemented the meaning of her bond with Wing. It demanded personal growth and sacrifice. Most importantly, it repaired what had been thrown into disarray. The princess still had her family, even if it could not be touched. Her father had escaped Conrad's grasp, and her mother secretly remained at arm's length. The disturbing maternal vibe that had once crept from Harmony's shell was identified as a façade. Luka got the message. Her parents were safe, which meant that there was one less burden to bear. "That doesn't answer my question," Marrok answered. "What do you want Wing and me to do?"

"The chimeral cathedrals are more than just sanctuaries. In addition to protecting your memories, they also seal off vast amounts of information that are ripe for the picking. Given the time they've had to explore, I'm sure Lutti and Trigger have both found the libraries. They just need to find the Thirteens. I believe those volumes were tailored to fit the strengths of their hosts. It is absolutely essential that you and Wing learn whatever is held within those pages."

“Lutti is already on it, and I will tell Wing the next time I see him. Although, I wouldn’t get my hopes up if I were you. Trigger isn’t exactly a bookworm. If he has discovered the stacks, then we’ll have to spend our time praying that he hasn’t used the literature for target practice.”

“Don’t remind me!” Harmony blurted. “My little brother can be a total pain in the ass when it comes to poise and tact.” She laughed as nomadic digits spun pink bands into tightly wrapped coils. “Boys tend to be that way...” Transmuted by glyphs of remorse, the sunny lyrics lost their innocence to the quiet odes of indecision. Harmony had survived practically two lifetimes, a feat which fragmented the woman’s persona into two strikingly different creatures.

One, aged by the foundations of knowledge and experience, stood triumphantly atop the cold grounds of reason; while the other, driven by passion, yearned for the warm allegro winds that whipped about her departed youth. It was this trapped child that wondered if waiting was the right choice. “I’m sorry for taking so much time,” Harmony continued, exposing her softer side.

Lukainy was ready to bolt. The unbelievable tale had left her feeling rejuvenated. Destroyed was the dam that had contained her sea of sorrows. That ocean had fled. No! It evaporated under the star of the Life Flame’s melody, and only puddles remained in the plot’s wake. “There’s no need to apologize,” Marrok answered. “No one will ever know if the delay was a good thing, and I am not going to waste time trying to figure it out.”

The First Child, relieved by the teen’s response, nodded affirmatively. “There’s more,” she added after retrieving Ereint’s letter. “Your father left you his parting words.” She watched as Luka’s eyes meandered about the curly script, and she immediately recognized the swelling, sorrow-dipped joy that clasped the girl’s essence. “I don’t know how you wish to proceed. Tistal is expecting...”

“We won’t mourn deaths that didn’t happen,” the heir replied, having filled in the blanks rather quickly. “We will celebrate their lives instead. The people must recognize that their king and queen bet their futures to protect our country. We have to come through for them. We have to survive, and that is the message that must be conveyed.” Luky spun around and held her head high. “No more distractions! I’m going to have to triple my efforts now. After all, I have to live up to the expectations of my new prince.”

You raised her right, Jeanine, Harmony thought while the royal stepped down the corridor. The image of Lukainy’s phoenix charm painted a stunning portrait upon the canvas of the woman’s mind. It depicted a brilliant sunrise horizon that threw thick bands of light over the ruins of despair. “It’s a sight she’ll have to find for herself, but the fact that you didn’t reject her means that things are bound to get interesting. Isn’t that right, Caliburn?”

The roar of the cosmos transcended every limit set by McCallister’s imagination. He tumbled through galactic arcs of every pitch and hue, where stars born of youthful dreams survived amidst the darkened, demonic howls of doom and discord. Beneath him, a congregation of disfigured creatures assembled to await Wing’s touchdown. They stood, with decrepit arms outstretched, upon the glass pedestal of their world and wept.

Their drones stabbed the knight’s nerves with jagged icicles that haunted him to the core. Except for the dragged-out descent that sent him towards their withered limbs, the cadet was barred from motion. His heart raced as he drew near enough to separate their collective wails into individual pleas. In all his days, he had never felt such dread. These ghastly forms, stricken by physical afflictions that defied logic, were begging for him.

They latched onto Wing’s ankles with breaking fingers that seemed to reject the mere existence of his threads. Fully exposed to the beasts’ unrelenting grasps, McCallister shuddered.

He did not possess the time to face this nightmare. His wounds drained precious life that the occupants of this realm devoured without hesitation. "Finish us, Your Presence," they hissed in unison before licking the blood of their lord.

The acid tongues of these unkempt devils probed the injuries with savage strikes that aimed to plunder the boy's sanity. He fought as their jagged teeth pierced his flesh, and the fire coiling within his petrified gaze burned the terrifying images of their forms. Scarred and disfigured, these boil-covered, gluttonous creatures appeared incomplete, as if they had been left behind by a temperamental artist who had abandoned his scraps.

Adrenaline shredded the paralysis and pain before the paladin's frozen digits curled into a fist worth throwing. Violet sparks, peppered by onyx blades, burst through the animals' oily flesh with searing explosions that catapulted chunks of the forsaken in every direction. The survivors, pushing back against the masses that still yearned to approach, encircled the pile of still corpses through which Wing concluded his angelic drop.

Mangled faces, further marred by bits of the fallen, squared to the knight's rising posture. Their screams intensified as the teen's inferno consumed the nameless. Its cackling mocked the dead while the sweeping crescents of light cleansed the crystal grounds, and its sermon ushered in a wave of forbidden recollections as the unholy cried for salvation. "Riddled and violent, they will all destroy the world..."

Wing clasped Daizer's core as the memories surged across the purified plane. With that first sentence uttered, the cadet had unlocked the hidden path to a place where truth and legend had never been separated. *But most people call me Wing. Today, we're going to talk about angular momentum. "What the hell is this?" How exactly has it affected our lives? Think about rifling for a moment. By imparting spin to a bullet, we improve its stability and make firearms more accurate. A simple invention of the 15th century completely changed the course of history...*

"Why are all of these things here? Where is Daizer, and why am I being bombarded by these images?" *Hey, Sis... I know I don't come here very often. "Why are my hands dirty?" I brought you a little present this time though. I hope you won't mind me leaving it here. "Why am I talking to her at a grave?" I'm going to do what I set out to do. I'm going to unite them...* "Answer me, you fucking bastards! What the hell is this? Where the hell is my sword!?"

Swallowed by the ever-expanding peripheral darkness, Wing watched as his outstretched hand seemed to grow more and more distant. The mysterious runes had vacated, yielding the spot on the back of his mitt to five familiar characters. "Kiddo, leave this one to me. This place is screwing with your head, and the effects are making it all the way to that fortress of yours. Consider it an opportunity to fulfill Christopher's request. Besides, Rachael has been clamoring about something ever since we got here, and it's getting on my nerves. I need to relieve some aggression."

Commotion quickly spread through the ranks of the unfinished. "Our master has left us! Our master has left us!" The cacophony swelled to unparalleled magnitudes, for the harsh truth had made its rounds.

"Shut up!" Trigger commanded, his borrowed amber cores deriding the population of vermin. "I'm looking for someone, and there really aren't a lot of options here. You'll either stand aside so I can find him, or I'll incinerate your filthy lot. Of course, if I discover that you've done something to him, then I'll incinerate you all anyway."

The repetitive roar pushed the Battle Flame towards the brink. He shoved the jewel into his vest pocket, furrowed his brow, pressed his thumb against his middle finger, and kindled his midnight wings. *Moron, what does he expect me to do with this torn body?* "I take it you guys

aren't going to be getting the hell out of my way. Maybe you all think that I'm running out of time because this idiot doesn't take care of himself. I really enjoy killing underachievers like that. It makes me feel like I'm bettering humanity."

Trigger's snap garnered the attention of the buzzing swarm. Silence corralled their renegade wholes as the conductor's baton guided their empty stares towards the sphere of black fire swirling above the wielder's palm. The monsters, compelled to consume the intruder, bared their fangs in unison and stalked the prey. Like wolves, they slowly swallowed the bastion of purity Wing had created. "That's right. Get a little bit closer, you stupid fucks."

With a flip of the wrist, the Battle Flame catapulted obsidian arcs into the masses. The inferno's unfurling clefs hacked the rests to oblivion and tore screams from the fabric of creation. Ashes fell to the mirrored plateau, but Trigger did not have the time to enjoy his handiwork. He had already spun around to face those who had attacked his rear.

Joints cracked as he drove Wing's fingers into the decomposing skull of one of the damned. Its bone shattered without much effort, and the resulting shockwave threw globs of pus and blood upon McCallister's arm. The syrup-like interior generated shivers that even Trigger could not control. Disgusted, he quickly lifted the body and growled, "I told you to get the hell out of my way!"

The creature wailed and squirmed as searing jets blew out the back of its head. Its limbs flailed before ignition as a final, agonizing cry escaped dissolving lungs. Trigger chucked the carcass into the mob and gripped the throat of the nearest bastard he could reach. He leapt into the air, still clutching the beast, and drove his knee through its neck. Beaten, the demon collapsed – a dark stain against the mysterious and vibrant celestial canvas that was the bedrock of this twisted world.

"I think it's time for you runts to stop wasting my life. As much as I like the exercise, I do have a sword to find. Don't worry though. Whatever your shitty version of death is, I'll make sure you don't get there in vain." The Battle Flame's natural cockiness crept onto the contours of Wing's broadening smile. "Boys, or whatever the hell you are, I haven't done this one since the brat was born. I sincerely hope that you all enjoy the ride."

Rapidly, the wild snarls of Trigger's flame abandoned their reckless ambitions. Like menacing talons clutching weak prey, the threads curled to form five flawless orbs that danced around the warrior's chest. A sharp click rang off the roof of his mouth as Trigger brought his boot down upon the glass altar.

Clawed by the resulting sequence of supernovae, the tattered anatomies of the unfinished succumbed to the awful power of the Black Star Flare. The string of coherent pulses severed strained flesh, and the jarred bits of empty dreams, lost promises and fading pleas found themselves burning amidst the stellar core. From that furnace, only two living things emerged: the legendary paladin and a drifter dressed in a trench coat.

"That was quite a demonstration," the wanderer called. Time had weathered his well-kept, noble appearance, but Dai was unmistakable. The open halves of the leather top lagged behind the soul-forge as he bolted towards his rescuer. The aphotic flaps joined the long, unrestrained silver strands that yearned to be as steady as the blade's unwavering lavender eyes.

In a flash, he entrenched his unforgiving tips into Wing's wounds and turned them into canyons. Even Trigger – the one who had fought through it all – could not couple the betrayal to the realm of possibility. He grunted and moved his lips, but the wind to ask why did not surface. It did not need to. With one sentence, Dai confirmed the Battle Flame's worry. This place did

something to people. It placed them at a mental threshold where reality and imagination dangerously collided. "I already know that you are one of them!"

Trigger pounded Daizer's jaw with his knuckles and dropped back from the deranged weapon. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" he shouted, taking a moment to check the brutalized injuries. "Dipshit, Wing doesn't have much time as it is!"

"I've been here long enough to know how you things operate. This is another one of your pathetic ploys to get me to lower my guard. You're not Wing or any other friend of mine. I bet you can't even tell me what name belongs on my dog tags..."

"Dumbass, your name is Daizer. If I'm not your friend, then why do I have the key to your soul?"

"Not that name! I want the name he would see. And you couldn't possibly have my keystone. Whatever story you're trying to sew, I see right through it. Keep your fake garbage to yourself and stay away from me."

"I'm afraid I can't do that. Wing will die if he doesn't renew his contract with you." Pushing through the cresting pain, Trigger cradled a newborn spark. Innocently, the small pilot swayed between the user's digits as unsullied conviction continuously fueled the will to overcome. "Thanks to you, I have even less time now. It's pretty clear that this shithole has screwed with your head, so I guess I'll just have to torch the sense back into you."

"More damn lies!" Dai thundered forward to devour the abomination with another fierce barrage, but his battle cry was cut short. Wick's quick draw planted a single shot upon the katana's throat and brought an abrupt end to the advance. Daizer coughed and clutched the blackened skin. The fire was not strong enough to pierce his toughened hide, but it still felt as though his Adam's apple had been whipped with a band of chain.

"Am I real enough yet?" Trigger asked, the tones of agitation grappling for control of his voice. He refused to let another second go by without firing another salvo. This round struck the forehead of the soul-forge and delivered enough force to knock Dai to the baked and polished sands. "You were born to Kouenza and Caliburn. I was there to see you come into the world, so don't you dare call me a liar."

The Battle Flame watched Wing's partner writhe and groan. Sympathy had fled his veteran countenance, and another bullet was already at the ready. "If you're going to just sit there and whine, then you might as well sign the damn contract so we can get this the fuck over with.

"Unless, of course, you still don't believe I am who I say I am. In that case, I highly recommend that you get off your ass and put some credit behind the worthless words you spewed."

"Shut up!" Dai screamed before he jumped to his feet. The angered teen pressed his alloyed nails into his worn palms and charged once more. At one meter, a pair of running shadows ripped into the razor's slacks and scorched his knees. With repressed, intense breaths escaping through his grinding bite, Daizer dropped to all fours at the feet of the Flame.

"I don't have to see it to know the expression you bear. You shouldn't be pissed with me though. You should be pissed with yourself. Your partner is losing his life right before your eyes, and you can't even see it. It's pathetic really. I'm not going to be able to fight this battle forever, so I'll cut to the chase. If you don't believe me by now, then you may as well strike him down..."

The cathedral trembled as McCallister's existence began to slip away. Even within the pearly confines of that fortress, red ran and pooled at the base of the altar. He was hunched over

the megalithic structure and waited impatiently for Rachael's return. It came sooner than he expected.

As if to add insult to injury, Wolfe grabbed his long violet mane and pulled the teen's head from the marble. "You're lucky I need you alive," she said while placing a candle at Wing's side. It had been lit by Luka's cobalt blaze, and its aura had an immediate effect on the knight's lacerations. "Now that you are feeling a bit better, let's have that talk.

"Ever since you went through that portal, the layout of this place has changed. Beneath this aisle, the doors to a library have appeared. I tried to walk around, but the jerk wouldn't let me. He babbled on and on about how I should get your permission first. I don't think he even understood what I was talking about. What an obnoxious prick..."

"He's right," Wing answered somewhat coldly. "Need I remind you that not too long ago you were plotting my slow and agonizingly painful death? Why the hell would I let you wander around down there?"

The woman balled her fists and snapped her head to the side. "Trigger isn't exactly a reader, and you're never here to do it yourself. Seriously, the guy isn't much for decent conversation. I'm bored out of my fucking mind! I just need something to do."

"Well, payback's a bitch." Absorbing the humor radiating from her less-than-pleased reaction, the cadet found the energy needed to push his torso from the sacred space. "Even Lukainy isn't this demanding, and she is a fucking princess. Honestly..." He paused to observe the disgruntled grimace that plagued her lips. "If I say yes, will you stop complaining?"

"Why is it that the chivalrous ones are always so moronic? Part of me wishes I had just killed you when I had the chance."

"Yeah, but you didn't. I would ask what the other part says, but your particular blend of crazy just isn't my style. Now, allow me to be blunt. There is absolutely no reason why I should trust you with anything, but as I recall, you promised to show me the danger. That being said, I'll allow you to poke around down there on the condition that you report your findings to me."

"Fair enough," Wolfe replied. Stopping her stride mere moments after it had begun, Rachael pivoted to face the boy. Her cheeks shifted as a mischievous grin replaced the feigned scowl. "You're proving to be far more interesting than I thought you would be. Especially at this second, there is something a bit different about you..."

"Just get out of here before I change my mind," Wing quipped, "and don't think for a second that Trigger won't be watching." He turned his back to the girl and peered at the holy text waiting on the tablet. "I have other business that needs my attention."

He waited until Rachael had left before placing his hands upon The Cross. *What am I going to do without you here?* The thought wandered freely throughout his consciousness until it evolved into a fear. Without his quill, how could he possibly communicate with the book of legend? The rough pages flirted with his shy fingertips as they painted faint streaks upon the parchment.

The toll is enough. Within the fortress, revelation rang as Wing drew his arms from the altar and gaped at the cost of his sacrifice. He bathed his digits in the still-warm brew and collected the sap that would become his ink. Swiftly, he found the first unused sheet and thrust his index to the canvas. *Where are you?*

Kneeling to the increasingly intense tremors, McCallister steadied his stare. The words seemed to leap from the tome while the stone foundation rattled. Above, the chandeliers swayed to the quake, ticking off the tense seconds that separated the hero from the jaw-dropping response. *I am here.*

“Fucking smartass,” Wing shouted. “Of course that’s what it would say.” He sighed, stretched his limbs across the smooth surface, and continued. “What exactly am I supposed to do now? I can’t just sit here and wait for Trigger to do the job for me.” The paladin mulled over his meager position before voids of freshly fallen lead refocused his efforts.

Hurriedly, Wing heeded the wisdom of The Cross and thumbed his way to 115. *Adrift amongst the boundless numbers of unfulfilled fantasies, a razor, masterless, fought to maintain the delusions of his own reality. He imagined the day that his knight would be reborn amongst the stars, and he dreamed of the moment that his author would come to reclaim the pen to forge a new world. Praying solely to the gods of solidarity, this blade even adopted the name of the one his wielder had sworn to protect. She was the everlasting link between them – the one for whom he had been summoned. Only that man would have a chance. Only that man would see the truth.*

Amethyst arcs devoured the midnight glow of Trigger’s flame. The stern demeanor ensnared by McCallister’s irides faded as violet hues grew evermore apparent. Wing caught his sword’s last-ditch strike with the little strength his body contained. He was no longer afraid of this strange domain. It was his to control. It had always been his to control. It did not matter anymore anyway. He had his partner there. He had his best friend. He could reclaim him now, and then they could go home.

“Your name is Daisuke Rekk de Marrok,” Wing answered. He latched onto the soul-forge’s wrist and pulled the awestruck blade to his bloodied chest. “Do you believe me now?”

Tears dispelled anger when Dai felt his master’s embrace. Without thinking, he had already returned the gesture, and it did not take long for McCallister to use the sturdy sword to steady his crumbling frame. The burn of the cadet’s burden was tangible. Its heat transferred pangs of guilt that stabbed the newly minted Marrok with daggers that no armor could thwart. “Only you would do something this stupid.”

“You should take your core,” the soldier replied with a weakened voice. “Once our contract is reformed, my wounds should be healed. I trust that you can take care of the rest.” He closed his eyes and laid his chin upon his companion’s shoulder. “Let’s go home Daisuke. Let’s go home.”