

## Knights of Fortune

Galan did not expect a camp this large. It was impressive, organized, and bustling with mercenaries—outfitted in all types of armor. He walked and ignored the curious looks casted his way, eyeing his ornate falchion and well-loved armor. He looked around for his old friend, turning away when his eyes would lock with an unwanted, trying his best to appear aloof and not overwrought with misery. Over the years, Alaric had gained the trust and respect of the disenfranchised, the wayward, the lonesome, and even as busy as he was hunting fiends, crushing creatures, and winning wars—Alaric still managed to write often, and Galan was desperate for him, his warmth, and his enduring friendship. But written words would not suffice, not now.

“Well, I haven’t seen you in quite some time.”

Galan paused at the accent. Tatan. Familiar— He turned and spotted Daire armed with his bow, clearly engaging in some target practice. His curly hair was slightly longer now, and he’d grown a tidy mustache, which somehow made his face even more boyish than before. It suited him though, and Galan couldn’t help but smile, though it felt half-hearted and made Daire’s grin slacken some.

“I take it you’re looking for Alaric?” Daire said, readying his aim. He always looked so confident in that stance. “He should be around. He hates staying in his tent, even when he should be resting. He’ll be tickled to see you, I’m sure.” He loosed his arrow and it struck the middle of the target with a satisfying *THWACK*. “Have you come to join our band of merry men?”

“Something like that.”

Daire lowered his bow, surprised.

“It’s a long story.”

The Spellweaver regarded him with a small empathetic smile. “I know heartbreak when I see it, love.”

Galan hated how obvious it was, but he had always been one to wear his emotions openly. He shrugged, adjusting his rucksack. “This is a remarkable op—”

“You don’t have to humor me with idle chat, Galan. Go find Alaric, he can mend your heartache better than I ever could. Though... if you need bodily comfort, my bed is always open,” he offered with a wink.

Galan laughed. “I might take you up on that,” he said as he walked onwards, oblivious to the flush of crimson that colored Daire’s face.

The sun was setting, casting lovely shades of pink and orange across the sea of white tents. Bonfires were being prepared as the air had cooled. The scent of savory curry mingled with the smell of metallic sweat and heavy musk, all wafting through the makeshift aisles of the campground. Men communed, settling in for the night, but still no Alaric. Discouraged, Galan thought of heading back to Daire, but then spotted the tip of something shining in the distance. He walked, weaving through mercenaries of every shape and size. Alaric didn’t need to turn, Galan *knew* that back, his hair was the same—slick, silvery, and fastened into a slim ponytail at the nape of his neck. The weapon though... Alaric turned once the person he was talking noticed Galan staring.

“Fuck my ass!” he exclaimed, face brightening. “What have they been feeding you? Galan, you beast, c’mere!”

Galan grinned and walked over, catching Alaric in a firm embrace. He pulled away to look his friend over. Tall as ever, looking like a proper leader in fine leather armor with hard golden accents.

“The Lance of Ambrose,” Galan said, fawning over the shimmering splendor of the weapon.

“Yes! Not a legend—turns out,” Alaric said, looking at his weapon as if it were the love of his life. “Had you written of your return, I’d have prepared the camp for your arrival.” He clapped Galan’s shoulder. “But a welcomed surprise nonetheless. What brings you here?”

“I wish to cross the sea, to Gord Oder, and I’d like you to come with me.”

Alaric laughed, disbelieving. “A wag you’ve become!” But then his grin fell way to a look of concern as Galan’s eye brimmed with tears. “Shit, are you okay?”

“No,” Galan admitted, swallowing a hot lump of sorrow. “My heart has been broken. I always thought that was a figure of speech, but it’s truly broken. It aches. The pain refuses to subside.”

“*Tch*, that Ulrian—I *told* you not to involve yourself!” Alaric sighed and gripped his spear. “Shall I kill them?”

“No! Alaric, fuck, no—don’t—” He laughed. The fury on his friend’s face warmed his heart, and he knew it would be mended yet.

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Two rounds of ale finally loosened Galan’s lips. “I thought I’d make my father proud—being the shield of a noble family, but I’ve wasted my time falling for someone who never understood me, vainly loving someone I could never have. My stubbornness clouded my judgement. I couldn’t see how deeply delusional I was. There was no beauty to be found within those walls—no gratitude.” He swallowed a generous swig of ale. “And here I am, utterly heartbroken.”

Daire frowned. “I believe everything happens for a reason.”

“*Ugh* Daire, *please*.” Alaric rolled his eyes. “Ignore him, all that magic is rotting his brain. What you need is a stiffer drink and a good fuck.” He eyed his downtrodden friend. “I’m sure I can supply you with both.”

“I’m in no mood for fucking Alaric,” Galan said rather menacingly. “That’s what landed me here in the first place. And no... Daire is right. Perhaps this was *exactly* how events were to unfold. Though miserable, I’d like to move forward, and leave Ulrian and their wretched family in the past.”

Alaric and Daire glanced at one another, and the knight leaned back in his chair.

“You said something about crossing the sea,” Alaric offered, hoping to allay the mood. “To Gord Oder?”

“Oh!” Daire perked up. “A cursed land with timeworn towers and hidden halls. There’s an old magic conservatoire... They say time and space function differently in Gord Oder. Count me in.”

Alaric grimaced. “It’s a realm of decay. Why there of all places?”

Galan sat slumped. “Why did we attend the academy if not to pursue a future rife with adventure, glory, and magnanimity?” he said sourly. “I admit, I’ve passed my time as a shield reading tales and verses about the land and its people. I want to see it for myself, test my mettle. See if my blade has lost its edge.”

“Why can’t you just change your hair like a normal person does when they’ve been dumped?” Alaric asked, rubbing the back of his neck.

Daire laughed and Galan scowled. “Never mind, I don’t want you to go. Daire alone will make a capable partner.”

“Daire is a dropout who only wants to tag along so he can to jerk it to some dusty magic scrolls,” Alaric scoffed. “You’ll need someone adept in your corner, someone who can call the shots, handle challenges—” He snapped his fingers. “With unwavering precision and—”

“Would you like to *lead* this expedition,” Galan interrupted. He sat forward, elbows propped on the table, hands clasped, smirking. “I would fall in line accordingly.”

Alaric laughed. “I can see why that tart Ulrian fell for you. You’ve developed some charm, Gal. But you’re rather full of yourself. You think that you can show up unannounced at my camp and expect me to put my dreams aside for a sail across the sea only to possibly suffer a miserable death after being ripped to shreds by a grotesque brute in some rotting, accursed ruins?”

Galan smiled.

“You know me too well,” Alaric said, raising his drink to the prospect. “I’ll have my second-in-command watch over my band. She could use the experience. You have my spear *and* my great company. Lucky you.”

“And I would very much enjoy *jerking it to some dusty magic scrolls*,” Daire said with a wry smile, making Galan laugh.

“I suppose we need to find us a Captain,” Alaric said, considering the air for options. “I have someone in mind. They’re in a port town not far from here. I’ll send a bird, see if they’re available.”

“I knew I could count on you to take action. You have my thanks, old friend. You too Daire,” Galan said, polishing off his ale. “But now, I need to sleep, it’s been a rough ride.”

“You can have my bed for tonight,” Daire said, standing. “I’ll show you to it.” The two men exited the tent, leaving behind Alaric who sat with a look of concern. After a moment he fished out a map from his breast pocket and unfolded it onto the table. Gord Oder was merely a name at the far right of the sea. A land not worth charting.

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Galan was back at the estate. He knew he was dreaming. Everything felt hazy, too soft and nonspecific, but he was in his old room with the window open, and the sunlight felt warm upon his back. There was a gentle rapping on the door and before Galan could say *enter*, admittance was already granted, and he felt Ulrian fold into his arms.

“I missed you,” Ulrian said into his chest. “Don’t ever leave me again.”

Galan didn’t move, didn’t speak. He watched as Ulrian undressed, skin flushed, eyes downcast. He didn’t stop them as they unlaced his trousers. He missed Ulrian too. He missed their shared intimacy—he missed the covertness of it, the risk. His lover dipped their head between his bare thighs and brought their tongue flat upon his

clit. The pressure made him gasp. The two had painstakingly discovered one another over the years, and they knew of each other's pleasure as if it were their own—it had blossomed into their own. Galan had grown fond of teasing, gentle sucking, debauched words... He had adored Ulrian inside of him too. And Ulrian... Well, they enjoyed being in control. Their pleasure was the one thing they had control over it seemed. The thought made Galan ache.

But that ache subsided as Ulrian loved him. It felt amazing. It always did. But Ulrian's words—so harsh and cruel—felt like a knife in Galan's heart. The words had become an echo of pain, a constant reminder of their classes, of their roles, of what was expected of them. That night had undone all that they'd secretly built. Years of sweet words and intimacy gone with a heated exchange.

Galan woke and was greeted with darkness. He sat up, eyes scanning the tent, but he was alone. A lovelorn fool he was—to have dreamt of Ulrian in such a way. He was disappointed with himself and embarrassed by the wetness between his legs... He imagined that unloving someone took time, so he forgave himself.

He slipped out of bed and pulled on his boots and stepped out into the night. The camp sat shrouded in fog, alive with the hushed conversations of sleepless men by dying fires, the muted sounds of sex, and snoring. Galan stood, appreciating the company, refreshed by the dew. But a sudden yelp made him start and he watched as a man rolled out of a tent, tugging on his trousers all the while as a woman followed him out, furious and topless.

Galan squinted.

Daire held his hand out to stop her. "*Darling* please!"

"D-darling? You're a miscreant! A dog!" she shrieked, wringing his tunic. "Why do I bother with you? You disgusting, vile—"

"Aw c'mon, no need for name calling. Weren't we having a good t—"

She flung his tunic at his head. "Shut up! I can't believe you're fucking him too! Who else? No! No, don't answer that! You're so—so... UGH!" She turned on her heel and marched back into her tent.

Daire exhaled and slowly pulled the remainder of his clothing on while a few unseen mercenaries chuckled at his misfortune. He spotted Galan and walked over.

"Everyone expects monogamy," he said with a sigh. "Ah. Are you okay? Your lips look pale."

Galan smiled. "I'm alright. Would you like your cot back?"

"No, I'll shack up with Alaric. He's probably awake anyhow."

"Alaric?" Galan folded his arms against the cold. "You two a thing again?" he asked, smirking.

Daire ran a hand through his wild hair and smoothed down his mustache. "I wish. No. He's too involved with the band. Scarcely casts me a glance anymore. Though I hope one day he realizes."

"Realizes?"

"How much I love him."

"Oh." The serious look Daire offered him filled him with embarrassment, as if he were now privy to information that he had no business knowing. "Uh..."

Daire waved the awkwardness away. “It’s fine. Plenty know. I’ve messed up with him before. I’m paying for it now. Maybe one day...” He shrugged and smiled feebly.

Galan studied him. He appeared dejected... but he also had a nasty hickey on his neck too...

“I wish nothing but the best for you, Daire. Truly.”

He brightened. “Same for you. We are merely acquaintances, but I know there’s a lot to love about you, and I’m sure you have plenty of love to give.”

Galan was bashful. “That’s very kind o—”

“But if I lose Alaric because of you,” Daire said suddenly. “I swear you’ll regret involving him with Gord Oder.” He smiled, nodded his goodbye, and disappeared into the fog.

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The flap to Alaric’s tent lifted and Daire stepped inside, shoulders hunched with defeat. “Mind if I sleep here tonight?”

Alaric looked up from his reading. “Are your indiscretions finally catching up to you?” he asked, folding the top corner of a page and closing his book.

Daire huffed and leaned his hip into the table. He crossed his arms, stared down at Alaric, and said, “The hickey you gave me got me in trouble.”

“Good.”

“I don’t think we should go to Gord Oder.”

Alaric sat back. “That’s a surprise. You were keen to go earlier.”

“When I thought it’d only be Galan and me, yes, but...”

“But?” He raised an eyebrow though his smile betrayed him.

“It’s dangerous.”

“I’m a big boy Daire I can handle myself, so can Galan.”

“He’s not alright. He’s too... depressed.”

“Mm well, you’re too late. I sent word to the Captain.”

Daire sighed and pushed off the table. He made his way over to Alaric’s cot and flopped onto it.

“Don’t be so morose. This will be good for us. We can score some loot, gain some stories. Think of it as an investment into the band.”

“We’ve invested enough,” Daire said, pouting up at the tent’s apex. “And I *know* you think this is foolish.”

“I do.”

Daire sat up. “Then?”

Alaric inhaled sharply. “He’s my friend, Daire. He’s done a lot for me. The least I can do is this. He’ll go with or without me, and I rather be there.”

“Why can’t you be more selfish?”

“Like you?”

The two men stared each other down until Daire looked away. “Would you rather I not spend the night?”

“My tent is always welcome to you—”

“Then would you rather I not go? To Gord Oder.”

“I want you there. You’re my right-hand.”

Daire scoffed. “Briar won’t like that.”

He laughed. “Yeah, well...”

“I told Galan that if something happens to you—”

“Nothing’s going to happen to me.” Alaric drummed his fingers on the table. “I’m familiar with Gord Oder’s history. I’m expecting the worst.”

“As am I.”

“Then we’ll be ready for the worst.”

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“A carriage,” Galan said, crossing his arms and giving Alaric a teasing side-eye.

“Yes, a *carriage*,” Alaric said mordantly. “You’re a madman if you think I’m going to ride all the way to the Port of Biscay.”

“You used to like riding,” Daire said, walking up and shoving himself between them. He was in the middle of devouring a peach. “Your ass gone soft?” he asked while chewing.

Alaric smacked his lips and slapped the peach out of Daire’s hands. “The only thing that’s gone soft is your head. Now c’mon, we’ve a long passage.”

Galan stifled a laugh with his hand as Daire’s face twisted with a brief expression of rage, but he kept his calm and directed his attention to realigning his waist pouch.

“Thank you,” Galan said.

Daire looked up at him, cheeks flushed. “For what?”

“For coming along—” He held his palm up. “I know you’re here for Alaric, but I’m appreciative nonetheless.”

The two men watched as Alaric argued with the coachman. “I’m not sure what you’re hoping to find,” Daire said. “And I admit I’m not exactly pleased that you’ve dragged him into this.”

Galan frowned.

“But,” Daire continued, petting his mustache. “I know he’s excited... Been a while since we’ve done something like this, something dangerous.”

“Is mercenary work not dangerous?”

“Not when there are no wars, no conflicts.”

Galan hummed and watched Alaric’s animated movements as he argued in the distance. “I suppose he’s been rather restless then?”

The coachman gasped at something Alaric had said and slapped him.

Daire sighed. “That’s putting it lightly.”

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The Port of Biscay sat at the base of a dormant volcano. The land was rocky and adorned with winding stone stairs, aquamarine buildings, and vibrantly clad merchants; the port was the heart of the east. The Captain was of slim build, well-dressed, and armed with a narrow smallsword. Their thick hair was tied up into a high ponytail, and their face was stern. They pulled on their ruffled cuffs as the three men approached.

“You’ve arrived sooner than I anticipated,” the Captain said. “This must be important.”

“I know you’re in demand, didn’t want to keep you waiting,” Alaric said. He wore his finest and offered the Captain the Hovian gesture of greeting.

But the Captain was not finessed. “To Gord Oder?” They crossed their arms in consideration. “What’s in it for me?”

Alaric laughed. “You had us come all this way. I suspect you already know what you want.”

The Captain looked at their ship. “There’s a shield... Bring it back for me.”

“What shield?”

“A lustrous black shield with a golden serpent on the front. Belonged to a knight named Ozias.”

“Alright, but what if we can’t find it? What if it’s not there?”

The Captain returned their attention to Alaric. “Then you better hope I never see you again.”

He sighed. “Won’t money do?”

“I want that as well, up front. Costs a lot to run a crew and maintain a ship. Five thousand. A steal for three bodies.”

“*FIVE*—!” Alaric wheezed. He looked at Galan with desperation. “I’m doing well but not *that* well, my friend.”

“Hmn. How about my falchion and three thousand and the *possibility* of delivering that shield to you?” Galan proposed, drawing his weapon.

“My... You three are desperate. Sorry, but I’m not fond of lowering my prices. Lovely blade, but I know not of its worth.”

Daire cleared his throat. “Captain, I believe you have a debt with the Sunfell Inn over in Thuringia. I can wave that for you if you help us.”

They frowned, and with no hesitation said, “Fine, but I still want that shield.”

Daire nodded. “Ozias’ Shield of the Aegis, yes. Alright. You’ve *my* word. Do we have yours?”

The Captain sucked on their teeth. “Yes. We set sail in two days. Have your shit in order by then,” they said and walked away.

“Goddess, I have such a crush on them,” Daire said, sighing.

Galan leaned in. “Do you really know—”

“No.” He laughed. “But we’ll be long landed till the lovely Captain finds out.”

“Suppose we’ll need to find a new way back then,” Galan said.

“*If* we survive,” Alaric mumbled.

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The trio made their way through the rubble, once fine stones now toppled and weathered with time. Galan trailed the talons of his gauntlet over the varying surfaces, trying to envision the place as it was. The sound of metal scraping over rock made Alaric grimace and glare.

“An amphitheatre,” Galan said, studying the vast space, the endless vomitoria, and the concentric rows of stands. He imagined the heraldry, colorful banners fluttering against a bright blue sky. He could hear the cheers, feel the anticipation. “Remarkable.”

“A house of blood games,” Alaric spat. “I’ve a weird feeling...” He equipped his spear. “Something’s amiss.”

Galan laughed. “So easily unsettled! ‘Tis only inbound rain you’re sensing.”

“Oh, *shut up*.” Though Alaric considered the moody sky.

The three picked their way across the arena floor, stopping in front of a towering statue. More creature than man—a wide-legged stance, holding a massive twohanded axe.

“Odd place to erect this,” Daire said, cocking his head to the side and squinting up at it. “What it is? I can’t tell.”

“It’s ugly, whatever it is,” Alaric said, clearly perturbed. “Let’s leave, there’s nothing here.”

“What, you don’t find this fascinating? Never seen anything like this back home,” Galan said, taking in the structure, all mean curves and vicious angles.

“Cause it’s too ostentatious, and in the middle of an arena?” Alaric scoffed. “Strange as the barbaric entertainment,” he added as he caught Galan’s eye. “No offense.”

Galan smirked. “Fine, we’ll leave, once we’ve trekked underground.”

Alaric sighed and Daire spotted something in the stands.

“I think someone’s here,” he whispered, pulling the other two to him.

“Where?” Galan said, eyes focused where Daire was staring. “Hiding?”

“Bet you could scare them out,” Alaric said.



“Way ahead of you,” Daire said, readying his bow. “A little heat ought to do it.” The tip of his arrow went ablaze and Daire released. The fire was more warning than assault, but an immediate yelp echoed out.

“FUCK! Please—*don’t*—don’t shoot again!”

Galan frowned at the voice. A crack of thunder roared in the distance, and a shower of rain fell upon them, quickly extinguishing the tiny flame from Daire’s embedded arrow.

“I’ll come out, please don’t hurt me,” said the stranger.

The three walked a few paces closer, armed.

Someone stood, slowly, hands gripping the low wall in front of them.

Galan lowered his shield and falchion. “...Ulrian...”

Alaric looked at Galan. “Ulrian,” he repeated, looking at the young lord in the stands once more.

Ulrian leaned forward, lips parting. “Galan? GALAN!”

Ulrian’s cry rang out and silence followed. Then, the ground trembled and a great groan assailed their ears. The once-still statue roused, eyes igniting with a rich green flame, face and limbs animating before them.

“*Godsdamnit!* Galan, I *told* you!” Alaric said, backing up. “What the fuck!”

“I don’t know...” Galan was awestruck. “I—” He saw Ulrian in the stands and fear gipped his chest, and the words left him before he could stop them, “Hide! Go below and I’ll find you!”

Ulrian, clearly in shock, peeled their eyes from the giant. Their face pallid, hair plastered to their forehead. Galan repeated himself, yelling over the rain, and Ulrian finally nodded and ducked away.

“Why’re *they* here?” Alaric hissed.

“I don’t know,” Galan repeated, defensive. His back went tight, heart pounding—butterflies.

The giant swung his axe down, aiming right for Galan and Alaric, but the two men dodged before impact, hastily rolling away from one another. The collision of metal to earth shook them off stance and sent them tumbling.

An arrowed struck the side of the giant’s head, causing it to falter and step back, swatting at some unseen pest.

“Will you two focus!” Daire said, crouched and aiming. “It’s massive but slow, we’ve a chance.”

“Right,” Alaric said, standing, spear poised. “Or...” His shoulders sank. “We could run...”

“Coward.” Galan laughed. “Mercenary work made you soft?” He struck his shield with the butt of his blade, rallying himself and readying his stance.

“Tch.” Alaric drew into his stance as well. “Neither cowardly nor soft to know when you’re in over your head,” he mumbled.