

All is Fair in War and Dragon Scales

SAMPLE

Chapter 1

The Eagle and The Falcon Pt. 1

Living in a bubble, to some, is peaceful. To others, it's ignorance. That's the black and white thinking of the villagers of Gillian, a small town choked by poverty and crime. With the streets littered with abandoned kids and drunk adults that are barely managing to get by, they all look upon the same large and imposing castle built to the north to their home every morning, afternoon, and night.

This castle, to some, is a saving grace for the kids of Gillian. But to others, it's filled with hypocrites and powerful magicians who want to remain ignorant of the problems the rest of the world has that they actively avoid. Surrounded by tall black gates and guarded by dragons that are half the size of the snowy mountains behind it, to some folks of Gillian, King's School for Dragon Masters, or more widely known as the KSDM, are recluses who have the answers to all their problems yet do absolutely nothing about them.

Because then they would lose the one reason they're still thriving.

The students of the KSDM blink, struggling to stay awake at their desks in the classroom.

“While time is a construct that is human made, I think you can all see that its creation has helped us tremendously in different ways. Some might say that creating weeks, days, hours, minutes, and seconds was an idea given to us by a god. Interesting, isn't it? Don't you ever sit down and ask yourselves just how something so perfect came to be? Littlemen.”

Cailin flinches, raising his head and pretending not to have been sleeping on his knuckles. The girls in his class that have been watching him giggle.

“Yes ma’am?”

“What do you think? Was time given to us by a god?”

He yawns. “Yeah, sure.”

The teacher nods her head, standing up from her own desk. She grabs a ruler, walking up to the closest student in front of her. She slams her ruler down on a student’s piece of paper. The rest of them are yanked out of their dreams. They sit up properly without a second thought, backs straight, and eyes forward.

“You all came here to learn magic,” says the teacher. “To make something of your lives. To go back into the *real world* one day and have a happy life. A much happier life than you lived outside The KSDM’s walls, yes?”

The students nod, their faces dropping with frowns.

The teacher smiles, clamping her hand around the ruler. Her knuckles turn white. “This is the beginning of the year. So, I have to make you aware of the most important rule at this school before you get your wands: Don’t mess with time. Time is a perfectly created construct that has its complexities. Do not. Touch it. I don’t care if you need to go back just a few seconds to complete your homework. No, no. Spells *that* strong have consequences. Why is that?”

“Because magic is not human made. It’s not perfect,” Cailin responds with a sigh.

“Exactly. Now.” The teacher looks at the empty seat in the back of her classroom.

“Where’s Finley?”

Out the back doors of King's School for Dragon Masters, large fields of crops and pastures of grazing animals are tended to by workers and small children carrying buckets of vegetables and fruits just picked off their bushes and trees. The entire area gleams under the afternoon sun, emitting peace and tranquility.

Finley has decided to enjoy this perfect day kneeling behind a large rock at the edge of a forest, staring at the dead carcass of a raven. It must have fallen from a tree, its head turned at an unnatural angle. Strangely interested, Finley's eyes are wide and round, not blinking for several minutes. He doesn't touch it, knowing his mother wouldn't do such a thing, so he shouldn't either.

But... she wouldn't be staring at it either.

There's a huff, a large gust of wind blowing back his long blonde hair.

Finley finally tears his eyes away from the raven, looking up and staring at the glittering eyes of an alpha dragon. With its spine nearly touching the branches of the trees, its black scales glow with different colors under the refracting light of the sun shining through the leaves. At first, the dragon looks angry. It growls lowly in its throat, its head tilting.

Finley falls back in shock, hitting the ground. Then, he sees the green, painted dot under the dragon's right eye.

"Oh. Leo. You scared me." The dragon huffs again, eyes flicking from the dead raven to Finley, and back again. Finley raises his hands in surrender. "I just found it here, I swear. I didn't hurt it."

Leo pauses, then grins. He moves to position himself in a playful stance, head to the ground. He pushes his nose onto Finley's chest, eyes closing as Finley brushes a finger on the dragon's forehead.

"I'm guessing you're here to tell me to go back to class?"

Leo backs away, sitting down. His large head nearly hits a tree branch. He doesn't respond.

Finley looks away.

"I don't want to go," he says. Leo's head tilts. "Kids are mean," Finley finishes.

Leo's ears fold, whimpering. After a moment, Finley's eyes slowly shift back to the raven.

Leo promptly crushes the carcass under his claw.

Finley's confused by this, but Leo pretends not to notice. His head turns up to the sky with his eyes closed, pretending to sunbathe.

Finley chuckles, falling back to rest against the ground with his hair spreading among the grass. He fiddles with a shining blue butterfly pin in his hair as he stares up at the clouds, the smile slowly leaving his face as the urge to investigate that raven fills his mind again. He closes his eyes, trying to ignore it.

Hold on.

His eyes open, seeing another raven land on a branch above him. It squawks, clicking its tongue as though it's laughing at him.

I've never seen a raven around here before—

“Fin?”

Finley sits up but Leo's gone. And so is the raven carcass.

“Fin!”

Suddenly, who cares about ravens? A smile appears on his face, and he gets up. He runs through the trees until he gets to the crop fields. He stops at the edge of the wheat fields, chuckling as he sees his best friend Cailin standing alone with his hands on his hips, staring at the stalks.

Whatever Finley's about to say gets stuck in his throat. With the sun high in the sky, Cailin's shaggy brown hair looks shiny, the light casting a halo of gold at the crown of his head.

Finley frowns, crossing his arms. If there was one word he'd use to describe Cailin, it would be *heavenly*. It was used so much by the young ladies in his classes that even the nannies of the school have tossed it around teasingly. Cailin's popular, handsome, athletic, and talented. His presence demanded attention—

“There you are,” Cailin says, turning around. “I've been looking for you, where in spells have you been? What? Why are you staring at me like that?”

“You think I hid in there or something?” Finley asks, pointing to the wheat.

“Not gonna answer my question?”

“Which one?”

“Where have you been?” Finley turns his head away, defiant. “You’ve hid in the wheat before,” says Cailin, letting the question go unanswered.

“You would’ve gotten lost, dummy.”

“You missed the first class of the day. Why? Is someone bullying you again?”

“No, that doesn’t happen anymore,” Finley says, walking down the dirt path back towards the gray brick castle they called home. Cailin walks with him. “Just lost track of time.”

“On your first day?” Cailin wraps an arm around his shoulder, pulling him close. “I won’t pester you about it. Lady Penelope will do that for me.”

Finley groans. He can hear the nagging already.

“Hey boys!” The two stop, meeting eyes with an old farmer carrying heads of lettuce a few feet away. “What are you two doing out here? Classes aren’t over yet!”

Finley swallows, stepping behind Cailin who raises his hand to wave.

“Good morning, Mr. Devon! We were just heading back.”

“Right,” Mr. Devon says, scoffing.

“I’m telling the truth! I’ve never lied to you!”

“Quit pushing it. Come over here and take this extra basket of lettuce for your mother.”

Cailin runs over, taking the basket.

“Where’s your grandson? Lolling about?” Cailin asks.

“Wow, you really got me laughing, boy,” says Mr. Devon, who’s not amused. “He’s tending to the parsley.” He glances at Finley who stays all those feet away, his attention now on a ladybug crawling along a blade of grass. “What’s with Finley? He alright?”

“Fine. Just Finley,” Cailin answers. “Having a hard first day.”

Mr. Devon hums, shifting through his pockets.

“You fifteen-year-olds and your *hard days*.” He takes out a persimmon. “Here. Give him this for me. From my best batch.”

“Give it to him yourself. Hey. Fin.” Finley looks up, Cailin beckoning him over with a finger. Finley walks up to them. “Mr. Devon wants to give you a present.”

Finley holds a hand out, Mr. Devon setting the persimmon on his palm.

“From my best batch,” Mr. Devon says.

“Thank you,” says Finley, cheeks turning pink.

The old farmer coughs, uncomfortable.

“Go on now, git. Your next class should be starting soon.”

“We’re getting our wands today,” Cailin says.

“Congratulations. Let me see them later.” Mr. Devon gets down on his knees to get started on another basket of lettuce.

“Yes sir!” Cailin responds, saluting.

The two walk up the steps towards the back door of the school. Two alpha dragons sit on each side as bodyguards, both of their ears lifting at the sight of Finley. The two dragons happily lean their heads down for a pat on the head, Finley happily granting it to them.

Cailin notices a purple dot under one of the dragon's eyes.

"Hey Violet!" Cailin calls, the dragon on the right turning her head to him as if just noticing he's there. "Take these to Mother. We're heading to class." He holds up the basket of lettuce. Violet hums, gently taking the handle into her mouth.

The back doors open on their own. Violet's body sparks with golden magic as she shrinks in size to fit through them and happily runs inside. She flaps her wings, lifting into the air to get to the upper floors.

Cailin and Finley follow her inside, the first floor and common area of the school welcoming them with pops of color sprouting from the wands of older students that run around. Juvenile dragons the students are training either sit on their shoulders, hang on backpacks, or lay on top of their heads.

The air is thick with the smells of old parchment and fresh rain. The floor beneath their feet is smooth black tile that, with every step, shifts. They rearrange themselves like a puzzle, gold outlines creating drawings of dragons or other creatures.

Chandeliers float overhead, some quickly moving out of the way as Violet flies towards them. Their lights shine in hues of deep purples and golds, casting shadows along the stone walls. Tall, polished wooden doors are open and lead to classrooms in varying hallways. A grand staircase in the center of it all splits in opposite directions on the upper floors leading to dorm rooms where the students and their families live.

And next to that staircase is a towering grandfather clock that ticks rhythmically.

The Arcanum Vault. Bathed in a soft glow that pulses with the latent energy of thousands of wands of varying ages, the room is vast and filled to the brim with shelves made of dark wood that have been intricately carved with runes and symbols that protect and preserve all the wands stacked within. Each wand rests in its own alcove. Cradled on velvet cushions, they are all waiting to find their masters. The shelves rise all the way to the high ceilings, where constellations of shimmering stars twinkle.

“Now class, I expect you to choose your wands wisely. The KSDM has deemed you all fit to wield wands after a significant testing period. If you keep up with your good behavior, you’ll be able to get your dragons next year. But before then, you’ll need guidance.” Ms. Green, the head of the magic training department smiles. “Mr. Len and I will be your guides.” Mr. Len, who stands next to her, bows in greeting.

Ms. Green turns her back to the class, gesturing to the vault.

“This vault is yours to explore,” Ms. Green says. She turns back to the students, pushing her square glasses further up her nose. “Take your time when you’re looking around. Do not use them until we tell you it’s okay to do so. Now, off you go.”

All the students race down the halls, scattering around the room. Finley’s overwhelmed, but excited as he looks around the vault, not knowing where he wants to start. This is possibly the biggest choice he will ever have to make in his life.

“Cailin, where are you starting?” He turns to look at his best friend, but the space next to him is vacant.

He finds Cailin already talking and walking around with other friends in the class. Disheartened, but not surprised, Finley lets Cailin leave without a fuss. But as soon as he realizes he’s alone, Finley can feel the stares on him.

The hair on his neck rises, but he ignores it. He moves into the nearest hall to his left, taking his time to really look at each wand.

He hears laughter. Tensing up, Finley looks back where he came. There, three boys have blocked his way. They whisper to each other, all three of them with wands in their hands. The boy in the middle fiddles with it before flicking it towards Finley. A puny spark of lightning from the tip hits the floor. It bounces once, twice, and three times before striking Finley in the shin.

“Ow,” Finley mumbles, stumbling back. He pulls his pant leg up, frowning at the small burn mark that appears. He looks around for the teachers but they’re nowhere nearby.

The boys cackle.

“Hey, Rapunzel, did that hurt?” the one in the middle asks.

The boy on the right twirls his own wand, wind whipping through the air. The spell twists Finley’s blonde hair together, tangling it up, and yanking. He yelps as he’s tugged to the floor.

The boys walk towards him.

“Let me try something out, too.”

“Hold on, first one to make him cry wins—”

Finley gets up and makes a run for it. The boys are quick to follow, the unclaimed wands humming and jumping in their alcoves as Finley moves through the hallways. He turns right, left, and right again, until he loses them.

He stops when he's sure they're no longer following him, out of breath. He coughs, lightly touching his long blonde hair with a frown. As he untangles the knot, there's a loud creak.

Finley stops, letting go of his hair to slowly spin around. *Where...?*

Mistakenly, he's traveled deep into the vault. So deep, he's reached the wands that were built thousands of years ago. The shelves are old and cracked.

Finley's read a lot of books over the years. He loves reading. He loves jumping into fictional worlds in order to leave the one he's living in. But he's taken a liking to history books as well.

He knows the older the wand, the stronger it is.

And he can feel one calling to him. Deeper. Way in the back.

"Fin?" Cailin walks up behind him. "You feel it too?"