

THREADS OF FATE

ALTERNATE REALMS
BOOK

TRILOGY
ONE



TIMOTHY J.
RAVENSCROFT

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

THREADS OF FATE

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Written by Timothy J. Ravenscroft.

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Chapter 1

Yearning for Yesteryears

A cascade of translucent blue water rolled off the mountainside, wafting a cool mist into the air as it collided with the surface of the lake. Bright white foam bubbled in the water like a boiling stew, dissipating as it rippled out into the vast openness. The lake was something more than a lake; it was a small piece of treasurable existence that nature held dear.

Zedek leaned back and let himself weightlessly drift atop of the water. It was cool to the touch but also very warm in comparison to the air—not only the water itself, the beauty, the serenity. There was a soothing vibe that elated the senses he never thought he possessed; he felt so sure he could fall into a comatose state and the water could keep him safe from what he could not thwart himself

Becoming one with something so peaceful was almost enough to make him forget the pains of being the son of a ruler. In the lake springs, he wasn't the prince of Fallendor. He was a free spirit, his own individual being. There was no training or anxiety. There was only the land and water, offering itself up as his own personal escape.

“It's great, isn't it?” his father asked him.

Twirling around in the water, Zedek caught his father's soft brown gaze but the tenderness of his eyes only masked his spirit. His father's true self was as dark as his half graying hair and the man's large muscular build was but a hint of his true capabilities as a ruler of Fallendor.

“Yes, Father,” Zedek dove beneath the water's surface, returning with his hand full of jade stones.

“What's that you got there?”

One by one, he dropped the stones back into the water but not before examining each one closely. They were all a mixed darkish green and as slick as polished mirror glass. Each of them had its own unique ripple as they vanished into the lake.

When he got to the last stone, he clasped his fingers around it, making a fist. “Father, how was all of this created?” He opened his hand finger by

finger to examine the stone once more. “I mean, all of these stones, this lake. It’s all so very extraordinary and peaceful. Where does it all come from?”

“Son, there is no simple way to explain such complex things,” his father ran a flat hand just over the water’s surface. “Take this lake for example. Water comes from the sky, does it not?”

Zedek released the final stone, allowing it to splash into the water and into its home with the others. “But who sends us this beauty from the sky? Why can’t it be sent to the mucky Moors of Fallendor or to the inner Kingdom of Fallendor to share with everybody?”

“Ah, such a curious boy.” His father let out a deep somber sigh and shrugged. “But I must stress to you, who sent it is of no concern to us. What is of concern to us is who it was sent to and what we must do to ensure that it is protected. The Erastus bloodline was entrusted to cherish it and wholeheartedly defend the wonders in which you see here.”

“Protect? Defend?” Zedek exclaimed, feeling a sudden wave of doubt come over him. “What would we need to protect it from? Don’t the bounds of nature defend itself?”

“Neither is that so simple.”

“What is so complex about it; hasn’t this survived on its own for many a years?”

His father waded slowly closer to him and rested a tender hand on his shoulder. As their eyes locked, the soft brown began to fade to something much darker, there was sullenness to his face that was a stark betrayal of his normally stolid figure, addled by the sudden change that came over his father and Zedek looked away. He didn’t want anger and sorrow to somehow befall him in such an unsuspecting manner.

“Son, there may come a day when this is all yours, your responsibility; and you may be made to defend the lands in which you have been bestowed.”

“Why can’t there just be peace?”

“Because peace isn’t given. Peace is taken.”

“Taken?”

“Exactly. You must take your peace by force.”

“Um, I don’t exactly understand.” Zedek tried to pull away from his father’s tightening grip but he was held painfully firm. “But I will take the

peace if that is your honors wish,” he said—hoping his father would release him if he agreed.

“Take your peace. Defend what is yours.” His father shoved him back to the open water.

Startled by the suddenness of the force, he lost his footing on the jade stone lake bed. He began falling deeper than he thought the water stretched. As he tried to swim to the surface, he felt a hand grasp his foot; it was pulling him toward the bottom of an abyss. Holding his breath against his resisting lungs, he fought the force trying to drown him to no avail.

Then it released him.

When he returned to the surface, everything was dark and his father had vanished.

Ten years, countless tears and an Empire torn asunder.

The Reveille rang out loud three times, snapping Zedek back into an awakening in Caria; telling him that it was time to arise for work.

Just another bad dream, more-so a nightmare. One that had been coming to him far more often since the passing of the last year. The dream was almost the exact same every time. He tried and wished he could find a dream that didn't sully one of his only memories of better times in his life; but, as with everything else, he had no control. Awake and asleep, he was afforded no free will of his own.

Zedek laid utterly still for a moment before running a soft hand over his chest; it was an attempt to steady his racing heart and set his heavy breathing back to normal. *As though normal is even possible for me anymore.*

Feeling the moisture on his soiled old over-shirt brought on a flagrantly unsettling fit of chills over his entire body. The reoccurring night sweats that had forever plagued his sleep, yet again remained loyal; making certain he would feel the bite of the frigid waking breeze on his skin. It was unexplainable he could sweat so much when he never had the comfort of warmth.

Because it was one of his two daily guarantees; a miserable awakening and many toiling hours of work—something he came to expect without fail.

Zedek rolled his eyes as he sat upright and caught the whiffing sear of odorous urine in his nostrils from the chamber pot. *Not surprising.*

It was the nearly forgotten third guarantee. Ten years, a deplorable decade, he had lived in the stable house stall with his brother and still he

could never grow accustomed to it. People in and out of their neighboring stall; creating the foulest of stench in the lavatory. Then, when the creepy fellow who was charged with emptying the chamber pot passed out drunk before the day's end; a less than pleasant surprise would seep under the makeshift partition wall. The occurrence was something that often came forth while they slept; at a time they weren't aware enough to thwart it.

Even with all the travesties they had to endure in the stable house, some would even call them quite fortunate. They were well within the Kingdom walls. And they weren't living in the hovels that lacked full enclosure; Zedek and Tubias lived just slightly west of what was considered a dreadful plot of land to inhabit.

Fortune aside, Zedek found his every waking and sleeping moment to be consumed with his pining for his old home in Fallendor. All of the unanswered questions he held often left him feeling on the brink of insanity. What would his life really have been like had he not been taken as a slave? Would he have made it into the White Guard Academy in Cencarro, with the other noble blooded young men of the Empire? Would he have graduated if he did? What had come of all he once knew?

Life in Fallendor wasn't and wouldn't have been a wholly painless one, of that he knew but it would have been a life worth living and worth his pride. Many possibilities were ahead of him at one point in time, now things were different.

What should have been, Zedek cursed what his life had come to, leaning over to snatch up his boots.

It was his more than seldom curse. Each time he went through his thoroughly practiced morning ritual of inwardly expressed griping and self-loathing, his father's words were forced upon him as though they were freshly spoken.

Son, today is the day that it all gets better for us.

The statement always made him wonder if his father ever knew how extremely wrong he was about his conclusion. About all of the bragging to his pair of bondsmen, the claims of the expansion and other gains he would be receiving after the palaver with Cyrus Arias. Zedek vaguely remembered the word foolish following the name Cyrus; furthering his notion that his father hadn't fully thought out what they about to do in that road shack.

The answer always came to 'no'. As every other ruler, his father was overly prideful. Not even beyond his grave would he admit to his

wrongdoings or errors in judgment. Suddenly there was another wake up call. *Not again*, he complained in his mind.

Before he could arise after pulling over his feet, the Reveille rang three more times. It was a sharp breaking of his brooding thoughts. With three simple clangs on the large brass bell piece, a promise had been made to the slaves of West Caria; an already long day of toiling just got a little bit longer; because a call to the pavilion was never a pleasant manner to begin a day.

“Tubias, wake up. It’s the Reveille.” He shook his brother’s arm. “We have to go early today.”

“So, that’s your problem.” Tubias groaned, slapping his hand away and rolling over on his straw mat. “My master is drunk right now; I don’t have to be at the hog sty until afore morning.”

“No, not the Reveille, The Reveille. You have to get up already or we won’t make it to the pavilion by sunrise.” He shook Tubias’ arm again, receiving the same result.

Tubias tucked himself tighter into his wools. “I’m sure it will go on just fine without me. If they miss my presence, you could tell them the wine was too good last night and it’s the brewer’s fault I have to sleep it off.”

Zedek gritted his teeth and yanked his brother’s wools. “Ah, you’re not a child anymore, Tubias. You know the rules.” He released the crinkled wools, clambering to his feet and leaping away. “You shouldn’t need me to keep coddling you all the time,”

“Damn the rules.” Tubias leapt to his feet, kicking the prickled straw from his bare feet. “Why do you always have to be such a damn prude?”

I’m not a prude, Zedek wanted to say but held his tongue so as to not be the one on defense.

You’re just too damn dogged to understand real life.

Fuming inside, he held his ground nearly against the slate of partition wall as Tubias glared at him with the glowing golden rings in his eyes. He returned the flare of gold in counter rage, showing his brother that he wasn’t about to back down by any means. It was their silent spar of a sort. Both of them had their *animus* rings to use on one another and would put to the test whose would glower the brightest in fury, yet it wasn’t a game, it was just a threat but in unsubtly doing so, a battle would brew just below the point of bursting.

It was something to be expected. In all of the years trapped in their small confines, the dormant violence was yet to be unleashed. Zedek knew his own roiling sentiments were subdued by his countless hours of forced practice. Though Tubias' temper was always quelled before it was lost completely, Zedek suspected Tubias only held his tongue for lack of realization of his true potential, something that could only be seen on his surface.

At well past eighteen years in age, Tubias had gained massive size, yet kept his childlike immaturity. Adding to his more than intimidating build was the unnaturally pallid complexion he shared with Zedek, a trait often attributed to the myths of immortal beings. An unexpressed fear Zedek held was, at some point, Tubias' gadding impulses would have a reckoning with his other traits, making it only a matter of time before his brother did something really foolish because stubborn audacity and aggression was a mixture that didn't get one very far in the Kingdom of Caria; except straight to the knouting post or on the pavilion stage.

"Quiet yourself," he growled, "before one of the neighbors pose another complaint against us. Do you really want to get us thrown out of the stable house? What do you think would come of us then?" He puffed his chest out, calling for Tubias to back down.

As expected, his brother adhered to his common threatening projection, surrendering control of the spat. It wasn't what Zedek would consider a new scenario; Tubias seemed to, at times, enjoy the bickering, shouting and endless arguing but, for a stronger reason than any other, he was yet to step very far past the line.

The submission wasn't exactly for fear of a brotherly tussle, Tubias had graver fears. Contrary to his outward dismissal of the rules, he was reluctant to become an example, yet again. Being that they weren't owned by a noble, they were at the mercy of Caria's Taskmasters when it came to their homes and places of work. If they were to be found to be nuisances, they could be shipped off to work in Cyrus' coal mines, after a stiff knouting in the pavilion. One simple fight and it could be Tubias' worse nightmares come true; a lifetime as a collier trapped in the confines of a dark abyss.

Groaning, Tubias snatched up his boots and pulled them over his bare feet without even bothering to find socks. "I care not for the petty complaints of these people, it doesn't bother me at all how much they whine."

“You should,” Zedek told Tubias, with a calm tone, not wanting to further bait his brother by calling him out as a liar. “Because someday you’ll be held accountable for your actions and when that day comes, you’ll...”

“Do you know what your problem is?” His brother pointed a finger in his face. “Someway, somehow, you got it in that arrogant little mind of yours, that if you worked hard enough for these people and followed their every iota of a rule, you could earn your way out of this slosh pit but you’re wrong, so very wrong.”

Is he really going to curse me this way? Zedek shuddered, in irritation.

As much as he hated to admit it, the harsh words barked at him by his brother were slightly more than true. All he ever fantasized about was making it back to Fallendor, becoming the man he was born to be or, at the very least, getting out of the stable house of West Caria; into one of the more lavish noble homes in the East. The latter not being so farfetched, because it wasn’t uncommon for Kingdom owned slaves to be sold off to nobles at some point in their lives.

“I do what I have too, so we could survive. While you’re off stealing your hog masters wine, getting drunk and smoking whatever he has lying around, I make sure we keep our...”

“No.” Tubias shoved his finger closer to Zedek’s face. “You’re just an obedient, self- righteous, pushover. Because you truly believe somebody will recognize you for it and you’re right, they do. Not these Watchmen or Taskmasters...Our people do, yes whether or not you want to admit it, these are our people now and they all hate you for what you are. Did you ever stop to ask yourself if all of those posed complaints were merely to unnerve you because of all your nose lifting?” He paused his berating to catch his breath. “And most people tend to enjoy my drunken rant.”

Again, though his brother’s tirade was angering to name the least, nothing he said was even an exaggeration. Not many people outside of the forge even spoke to Zedek unless they were for some reason forced to do so and he rarely ever tried to speak to anybody unless he was forced to speak. Behind his back, some people even secretly accused him of being a spy for the Watchmen.

Veracity aside, Tubias never lashed out at Zedek like that; the entire occurrence made him wonder how his brother had felt that way.

“Boy, get that finger out of my face before I break it off and shove it somewhere you wouldn’t want to find it,” he spat, his hands beginning to shake violently.

“Boy?” Tubias scoffed. “You even sound like them now,” he lowered his hand slowly. “Go figure, the mighty prince of Fallendor would take after the Watchmen of Caria.”

A brief silence followed before they both peered over the partition wall. *Not good*, Zedek thought to himself.

All movement ceased around them. The neighbors were no longer going about their hurried waking routines, nor were they gossiping with bits of speculation about why they were being called to the pavilion again after their visit just one week prior. Nobody had even opened the stable house door to be off for their shared destination. Instead, several sets of eyes were peering back at them; eavesdropping on an argument that could undoubtedly be heard clear from the dirt roads.

“Look,” he mumbled through clinched teeth. “If you want to run off into the beautiful sunset with that gad-a-bout red head, you are free to do so. Mark my words though, it will be your hide up on that stage when all is said and done.”

“I think I might do just that.” Tubias declared, sounding as though he was attempting to be sarcastic. “But brother know this, there will come a time when your loyalties will be called into question.” He lifted his palm before Zedek could cut him off. “When that day comes, you will be made to choose. And you mark my words... You will die alone if your loyalties fall to the wayside,” he moved closer and whispered. “I’ve made my choice, now it’s your turn.”

Oh, no, Zedek thought, with an unnerving chill shuttering down his erecting spine. *He can’t do this now*.

He opened his mouth to speak but he was cut off before he could go on. The stable house door burst open, letting a strong gust of wind kick up an eddy of dust and straw. Two large Watchmen followed the miniature storm. The neighbors who were caught gawking fled to their own stalls as the Watchmen tromped down the center aisle wielding their infamous ferule rods. Hollering curses and for the occupants to clear out the Watchmen pounded their rods on the rickety partition walls. One of the Watchmen came to a screeching halt in front of the stall in which Zedek and Tubias were hosting the spat that slowed the departure of their neighbors.

They all eyed one another but nobody spoke. “Dammit,” he muttered under his breath.

“I said get a move on,” the Watchman bellowed, his angry face barely visible in the waning light of the open doors.

“My apologies, sir,” Zedek responded, with a submissive bow of his head.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” the Watchman mumbled, before moving on to harass the occupants of another stall.

“My apologies, sir,” Tubias mimicked.

Zedek ignored the comment and went on with lacing his boots.

Then he stormed off, nearly snapping the hinge off their makeshift doors on his way out.

The sun was well into the clear sky by the time they made it to the crowded pavilion gates but, at that point, Zedek was no longer concerned with being on time for mandatory address. The mass of latecomers was enough for him to blend in and he had a far more pressing burden weighing him.

It was something heavy and burdensome on his soul. All he could think about was his argument with Tubias. Not that the morning banter was uncommon, those were normal and didn’t truly break down his peace of mind. The weight was dripped on him as soon as Tubias came out with his last words. Loyalties...Choosing...They were words just not spoken in the slave city of Caria or the Empire, for any reason. Their loyalties were only supposed to lay with one man, the man who would soon come up on the stage in front of the pavilion to address them. Choosing wasn’t a luxury afforded to them or anybody else.

Tubias’ very mention of the words meant something important because merely using the term meant he had obviously made a choice, which didn’t include the ruler of Caria.

Admittedly, Zedek didn’t know what irked him the most. His unknowing place in what Tubias was referring to or the very reference itself. They had lived and slept within arm’s reach of one another for the better part of a decade and following a single set of words, Zedek felt as though he no longer knew his brother at all. Being Tubias had always been a bit mischievous, he knew his steady tinges of uneasiness were well warranted; but, after their spat, he realized that fear of future was more than a valid sentiment.

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