

(Note: This is simply a quick scene recapping major events of previous books and is not required reading for this book's plot. Feel free to skip.)

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"Here are the reports you requested, sir," said Zalenon, the head wing leader of Whitaker's personal Rare retinue.

Whitaker stared at the stack of papers and scrolls and bravely resisted the urge to fling them back in the man's face. Yes, he had asked for all of this to be compiled and delivered, but... why did there have to be so much of it?

For the sake of his first card, it was nearly half the size of his overdue administration paperwork stack, and that had taken weeks to build up!

"Sir?" Zalenon asked. He was practically wringing his hands. "Is all well?"

"Get me an ale," Whitaker told the Rare-ranked rider. He took a second and looked hard at the stack waiting for him. "Make that two ales."

"Yes, sir!"

With a look of disgust, Whitaker reached for the first page of the massive pile. He hated paperwork and foisted the chore off to his juniors whenever possible. He would have been free of dealing with hive admin had that brat, Arthur, not become a power-hungry traitor and stuck around.

Unfortunately, Arthur was the subject of the new stack in front of him. After his defection, Whitaker used hive funds to pay everyone with a Seer or Mind card to search out his past and present. Unfortunately, unveiling the future was more nebulous. But at least he had somewhat of a report outlining what he was dealing with. A profile of his enemy.

As Whitaker read, he found that the late, unlamented Valentina had also done her own research on the boy's past. Irritatingly enough, her notes were the most succinct and factual. The rest... Well, the rest comprised rumors, guesses, and some outright conflicting facts. Arthur Rowantree's—or was it Arthur Kane's?—history was veiled in mystery.

From what Valentina had discovered, Arthur had spent his early years in one of those border villages where criminals were kept. Instead of suffering and dying as was the usual there, he had managed to get himself a Legendary card at the tender age of twelve.

From all that had been observed, the card was Master of Skills, which was a powerful utility-based card. He was able to escape from his circumstances and travel with a trader's caravan for some time, learning new skills and becoming more powerful.

The caravan eventually blundered into a scourge-eruption, but Arthur was saved by one of the purple riders and taken to Wolf Moon Hive.

“More’s the pity he wasn’t killed then and there,” Whitaker muttered, drinking deep.

Arthur grew into a young man in the shadow of the hive he would later betray. The seers stated his skills focused on cooking and gambling, both of which he used to further himself. He managed to combine his pay of card shards into a dimensional storage card, which he later abused to great effect.

During that time, he befriended Horatio who was the son of some Rare rider of Buck Moon Hive. Apparently, Horatio’s father had been highly placed, but as he had never been part of Whitaker’s retinue, he didn’t care.

If later rumors were to be believed, Arthur later scraped together his skills—from a utility card, of all things!—to break in and steal from a high-security carriage that was transporting a portion of a noble’s card library. The carriage happened to belong to the Rowantree family, though Whitaker was unsure if this was planned or coincidence. He read theories of both.

What followed was a few aggravating pages of one of his spies waxing poetic if Arthur had indeed stolen the cards or collected a rightful inheritance as an heir of house Rowantree.

After all, Arthur’s father, Calvin, had been stripped of his rank for crimes against the kingdom, but by then he had already made his first-born son his legal heir. Normally once the head of the house was removed, the heir arose in his place.

Whitaker resolved to burn those pages after he was done reading them. The last thing he needed was for Arthur to use his damnable luck, find, and believe this nonsense.

Speaking of damnable luck, by all accounts Arthur came away from the theft with a secondary Legendary utility-type card. One that belonged to the same set as his own.

It seemed this had given Arthur a taste of power because he soon befriended a minor noble girl and helped her link to a Rare dragon. Though not before poking at the hornet’s nest that was the scholar’s guild and releasing scourglings into the city proper.

That was not enough chaos for Arthur because he immediately put himself forward for a once-in-a-generation Legendary egg that had been laid at Wolf Moon hive. (A disturbingly dark thing that anyone with sense should have known to stay away from.)

But a Legendary dragon was a Legendary dragon, and there were plenty who would throw their lives away vying for one.

During the trials of the Legendary recruits, Arthur happened to befriend a young prince of the blood, Marion... even though the two were in direct competition for the egg. All recruits were put

through a series of tests. Unfortunately, Arthur excelled at them and was granted permission to be one of the first to approach the egg at hatching.

The egg hatched out an undersized purple dragon, so dark that it looked black, with the horrific ability to steal cards from the hearts of other people.

It was postulated that by linking with Arthur's two Legendary utility cards, they were able to create a new type that could copy card powers for a short period of time. This was an ability that Arthur and his blasted dragon would openly display multiple times.

As every good kingdom citizen knew, owning multiple cards in the same set was not allowed. Their king was expected to take appropriate actions, and so Whitaker thought he had washed his hands of the boy. After all, the king was not known to be forgiving.

Arthur managed to scrape out of that ordeal and take the necessary oaths that would bind loyalty to the king.

Here, Whitaker saw a footnote written in Valentina's hand postulating that Arthur's dragon, Brixaby, could simply remove the oath from his heart as easily as any card. How irritating.

Arthur returned to Wolf Moon Hive and went through standard training. Unfortunately, Brixaby was not growing, and several people — including those in Whitaker's retinue — supposed he would stay the size of a pigeon forever. It had become quite the joke in his circle.

Nevertheless, Arthur was a leader now and was put in charge of his own training class, while in training himself.

Then the idiot boy disappeared during a standard scourge-eruption along with his noble friend Cressida and some low-ranked blue rider.

The information came out later, through spies, that he had not died but instead was taken to one of the so-called Free Hives. One of those pathetic communities that lived on islands of life outside the kingdom.

This was where Whitaker's information grew vaguer. It was reported that Arthur and Brixaby grew stronger with new skills and exotic physical resistances. Arthur added several combat abilities, including a card which allowed him to shoot out metal fragments at high speeds. Also, when Brixaby consumed cards, he grew. Somehow, Arthur fed him enough to get him to the size to carry a single rider.

It was rumored that the dragon took up crafting, of all things, becoming not only a decent blacksmith but also a rudimentary enchanter.

However, one of the scourglings Arthur had set free had not died out in the wilderness. It was preying on other Free Hives.

Whitaker should have left well enough alone. It was a good thing when vermin got rid of vermin.

But Arthur would hear nothing less than flying to the rescue. Not before returning to Wolf Moon and baiting Whitaker into a battle he could not win, and then using him as a distraction to swoop into the doomed hive and get his hands on a secondary Legendary card for his dragon. One that was said to have a monstrously powerful seeking ability.

They returned to Wolf Moon Hive long enough to speak to Valentina, who let them slip through her fingers. Damn woman. If she had not already had one foot out the door of life... Well, Whitaker was rid of her now.

That was where the scant information ended. The rest of the pile was full of reports from anyone Whitaker could hire who had a Seer, Prophet, or Mind card.

Unfortunately, even with a card, the mind could be difficult to probe and the future even harder.

Whitaker read a few pages and those amounted to: *He is looking for something to kill all scourglings.*

“Good luck,” he snorted and drained his second glass. Yes, eruptions were coming more and more frequently. But that was part of the cycle. It would surely calm down before long.

With nothing left to drink, his attention wandered. He still had half his current stack of paperwork on Arthur to comb through—more predictions of people who were paid to guess his whereabouts and motivations.

Beside it sat the truly intimidating pile of administrative work.

Down a few levels below, Whitaker heard the first notes of someone tuning a lute. It was late, but his retinue was well used to toasting the night away even later.

Whitaker was not going to miss out.

“Zalenon,” he called, and when the man appeared he gestured to the half-read through stack in front of him. “Read through this and give me a summary in the morning, would you?”

The man gave a long-suffering sigh, which Whitaker ignored. Rank had its privileges, and he was the highest ranked man in all the Hive.

Ignoring the administration paperwork entirely, he brushed past the other man and went out to enjoy his night.