

PROLOGUE

On the day that Icarus fell into the volcano, makin' one hell of a racket when he landed (I didn't know then that he always made entrances like that; that was the first I had laid eyes on the kid!), I was out diggin' for flamepetals with Rig. Like usual, Rig was bellyachin' about having to do work, and like usual I was tellin' him to shove it. "How we goin' to make it if we don't have somethin' to sell?" I says, and he gives me those big eyes of his and droops his ears down like always when I yell at him. "Naw, I'm not goin' to hear it, you," I says. "You don't do all *that* much work, you know. What if I treated you like other people treat their solars? Hmm?" And he pretends not to hear me, you know, snuffin' around and scratchin' his ear. "I could, you know," I says. "I could keep you caged up for as long as I want an' no one would give a hoot. There's lots that thinks solars oughta be treated like pests, you know, like flickerbrads or something." And of course he looks up at me and starts howlin', you know, so *sensitive*, that friggin' thing. "Yeah, never mind that," I says. "I'll just think about it, you know? Maybe a nice cage, some magister ice around it or somethin'..." And then Rig just loses it, you know, just starts a cryin' and howlin' and carryin' on, and I starts thinkin' about him wakin' some flame demon or somethin' and then wouldn't we be set. "All right, all right," I finally says. "Quit the funeral, I won't cage you. But you gotta do your work, or I won't be able to afford to even buy a cage...even keep the house. You gotta do the work." And he jumps up and starts runnin' around, you know, trying to jump on me and practically knockin' me into the lava flow. "Yeah, yeah, enough," I says, "let's just get to it." And off he goes like a flickerbrad flyin' away from a cool, boundin' ahead of me and sniffin' like he's got somethin' stuck up his nose.

Rig's a pain sometimes, but I gotta say there ain't no better solar west of the Hole, not when it comes to findin' flamepetals. They grow below the ground where the flow still moves a bit, and it's way too hot for most of us to look. For a solar, well, you could throw 'em in fresh lava and they'd barely feel it. But a lot of 'em can't really smell worth a damn, and a lot of the rest are too wild to use. Rig is wild, but only 'cause he don't wanna listen sometimes—but he's not dangerous, leastways not to me. He's a big baby, to tell you the truth. But he can smell all right; I've seen him sniff out a pellar from half a mile away when most solars woulda been runnin' in circles...even though he tried to eat it when he found it, like usual. I've told him a hundred times not to eat those things—they don't show their spikes until after they're swallowed—but he won't listen, and then I have to hear him howlin' for three sanacycles until he finishes digestin'. Not the biggest brains in the Vol, for sure...but still, he can find those flamepetals when he's got a mind to. On his best solacycle I've seen him find ten, and that'll go a ways down here. But for a while we'd been comin' up pretty light—two, three, maybe four on a good solacycle—and I was startin' to get worried. I got bills to pay, you know?

Rig took us over the West Plains a good way, sniffin' and scratchin' the ground, and a couple of times I thought we had somethin'—he would stop, smell, dig a bit. But each time he only got down a bit into the dirt and then was off again after the next scent. No worries—even in the best digs you can get a coupla false starts. But nearly a full sanacycle went by, and nothin'—not even a broken flamepetal, somethin' I could maybe have tried to plant and get somethin' out of. Finally Rig sat down pantin', and I didn't blame him—I was tired as a magman myself, and I couldn't have gone much further. So I plopped myself down on a rock and waited, takin' a swig from the canteen now and

again as I looked about while Rig rolled around and basically made a fool of himself. We'd come even farther than I had thought before—almost nearin' the Central Plains—and this wasn't territory I knew too well, except to be careful of it. You hear stories, you know, tales of folks vanishin' without a trace, crazy tales for crazy people I always say, but still...you don't live long down here without knowin' how to keep your eyes open and your ears near the ground as much as you can. Mountains rose up to the north, up where some say the firbargs live (if you still think they're alive like some fool people do!), and to the south the lava pools with the Salamander Kings; to the east I could make out the stretch of jagged rock that covers the Central Plains—and far in the distance, farther than I could see, the East Plains (farther than I've ever been, too), and beyond them the Hole, leastways if I remember what my dad told me when I was just old enough to be foolish. "Don't go that far, son," he used to say; "don't go any farther than you need to go to get by. Stay in the places you know and you'll never be caught nappin'." And I never did—leastways not until I met Iccy. Nope, I stayed in the West, where folks are—well, they ain't *decent* exactly, but at least you know the kind of fools they are anyways.

Maybe I was too tired, or maybe I was too busy livin' in some fool memory, but either way I must not have been payin' attention for a while, 'cause all of a sudden Rig sets to growlin' and yelpin' and nearly scares me into fallin' off my rock. Might have been better to fall anyway, cause when I looks up, what should I see but the last thing I woulda expected—seven feet tall, red horns and tail, spiky fur, teeth that don't fit proper inside the mouth—yep, a sure enough flame demon, and there he was right in front of us, gnashin' his teeth and eyes so wide they coulda dropped out of his head.

Maybe he was tryin' to decide which one of us to eat first, or maybe he was just havin' fun, but anyways he didn't move at first—just looked at us with that crooked smile of his. Frankly I just about gave it up there, and spent most of my last cycles alive cursin' myself for bein' so stupid. First off you almost never see flame demons this far west, but like I said I didn't know this territory too well, and things had been kinda strange lately...and if we hadn't been so desperate for a couple of lousy flamepetals we wouldn't have been out so far from home anyways. And I shoulda been payin' closer attention. But now we were in it for sure, and I just felt bad for Rig mostly. Me, I'm just a washed up prospector, you know, but he don't know any better, and if it wasn't for me maybe he'd be runnin' around free somewhere instead of gettin' eaten alive. And wouldn't you know it, the damn fool solar stepped in front of me growlin', as if it could do anythin' against a flame demon! Solars aren't small, you know—I mean they can defend themselves—but against a flame demon, well, really. “Come on, now,” I says in a low voice, holdin' my search stick like a fool while the demon steps forward. “Come on, you don't want none of Rig, here. You let him go and deal with me; I got what you want anyways.” And I held up my stick and got ready to do some damn foolish thing like yell and charge, or somethin' like that.

But just then I thought I heard a sound above us, kinda a whistlin', and I took a step back. The demon raised his claw and got ready to swipe...but he never did. All of a sudden somethin' hit him head on from above, some flurry of white and feathers, and down he goes in a heap while Rig and I jumped back. First I couldn't tell what happened, but then I saw the demon get to his feet, shakin' his head and screamin' bloody murder—and I saw the other thing get up as well. Even now I can't explain what it was like to see

that thing stand—tall, thin, two arms, two legs, curly brown hair, white skin...and young. But this expression on its face—kinda serene, like it knew what was going to happen—that’s what amazed me the most...that and the things on its back, of course. ‘Cause that demon comes up swingin’ and screamin’, you know, and in it comes, and the other thing just smiles and all of a sudden I saw it unfold these *wings*, by Sol, wings I tell you, white feathered wings almost as wide as the body was tall, and out it stretches them. The demon stopped for a millicycle, and then roared again and came in, and the other thing—well, it just lifted its arms, you know, and all of a sudden those wings glowed and blue light shot out all over the place, and I fell backwards near blinded. I heard this screech, and then a wail, and then a sigh and then nothin’ at all; and when I looked up and I could see, there it all was: Rig on the ground whimperin’ like a baby, some pile of ash that I think used to be a flame demon, and that other thing lyin’ on the ground with his eyes closed, those huge wings folded beneath him.

Entrances, I tell you! That kid knew how to make an entrance!