

The Contract Breaker

Tobias S. Buckell

From set *Streets of New Capenna*

Most people take one look at someone like Perrie and think “head basher,” but Perrie’s rise through the Brokers has given him more interesting assignments, and more complex fights, than just basic bashing heads. It’s their poor imagination that stops them from seeing the mind in that enormous head on those cable-thick neck muscles.



Art by: Joshua Raphael

Perrie pulls up the tall, armored tips of his collar and ignores the whispers swirling in the dark light of the velvet-walled lounge around him. “Broker enforcer watch out Junash: you better get out of here.”

Perrie has just ducked under the door frame to enter, careful not to catch his horn on the frame’s varnished mahogany top. The padded door shuts behind him as he scans the lounge. He’s not looking for Junash—apparently a harried aven with wings that droop sadly behind him as he runs out the back—Perrie’s here for a maniacal little street brawler by the name of Krent.

There’s security in the corner. Two leonin. Their brass-engraved eyeglasses reflect the purple light, enchanted into the form of liquid rope that’s draped corner to corner across the lounge. Security’s fuzzy ears flick toward Perrie. They look relaxed, but wary.

Perrie gives them the nod. Muscle to muscle. He isn’t here to be a problem, just looking. But the one on the left recognizes Perrie. His ears flatten, and he bares his fangs.

“Oh, buddy,” Perrie rumbles. “That’s a *baaad* idea.”

Here in the Mezzio, the lounges are neutral territory. All the families need to cut loose and relax somewhere, right? The Cabaretti own most of the lounges, though.

That makes this place *neutral-ish*, Perrie supposes.

Perrie wonders if these Cabaretti bouncers are truly ready to come at a Broker enforcer on an errand?

Apparently so: the two leonin split up and cut through the flashy dancers lost in the warm flush of each other's company as they rhythmically tap their feet against their partners' and smile too widely at each other.

The leonin to Perrie's left pulls out a loaded violin. Red light shimmers up and down its strings as the light catches it.

For a moment, it's just the three of them. Two leonin, cat-like and towering over the dancers shrinking away from them all as they realize something's wrong, and Perrie. Perrie the enforcer; a rhox, gray and hulking, his tiny eyes examining the situation, his great single horn tilting as he smiles slightly.

Perrie raises his hands. "You gonna point that my way? All I've done is walk in, haven't even had time for refreshment—"

"We know who you are." The bouncer on the right licks his lips. Nerves. Perrie can see the faintest ridge of fur standing up on the bouncer's neck.

A small weaselly man darts around the varnished bar top and shoves his way through the padded double doors behind all the drinks.

"There we are," Perrie mutters. He takes a step forward, and the two bouncers close rank in front of him.

"You can't come in here after the customers," they say.

"If you weren't hassling me, there'd be nothing to disturb your customers about," Perrie says slowly and calmly. "I'm just passing through."

"Got a reputation to keep here."

Perrie knows all about reputations. He's been focused on the exit, following his target. But now he's paying all his attention on these two jumped-up cats. Some people just couldn't leave well enough alone. These two have something to prove. And Perrie, several steps ahead of them, knows that if he doesn't answer the challenge, word'll get out that Perrie's gone soft. Then things will get harder for him.

From the gaudy, clouded Park Heights balanced on their girders overlooking the city, to the Mezzio where the lights danced up and down the swept lines of building facades, to the Caldaia's Halo smoke-spewing stacks, people were all just trying to get on with it. Hustle hard during the day, dance the night away. Perrie's no different. He has a job to do. And these cats are getting in the way.

A bead of light splits the wood paneling on the nearby wall to reveal a door concealed by magic. A craggy-faced elf in a dapper metal-edged suit steps out, looks over at Perrie, and then weaves through the crowd as if playing the smoothest game of hopscotch Perrie's ever seen.

"Ari, Leonard, it's okay. Let him through." The elf brushes the cuffs of his pinstriped suit and smiles at everyone.

"But Mister—"

The elf's eyes flash. "I hired the two of you because in a pinch you might—I repeat might—be able to stand against an enforcer. But I'm not paying to find out tonight."

The leonin grumble a bit, but visibly back down.

Perrie nods at the elf and shoulders his way past the two bouncers.

“The buzzies say you’re on the outs with the Brokers,” the bouncer on the right snarls. “Rumors say you’ve been judged a contract-breaker. Something to do with a kid. You’re soft. How long before an enforcer shows up to render a verdict on *you*, Perrie?”

“Other families have wiggle room, but a Broker breaking contract?” the other bouncer laughs. “There is no room for interpreting *those*. You’re washed up, Perrie.”

Perrie pauses right by the door. This is one of those moments, isn’t it? Since Perrie’s fallen into a strange limbo with the Brokers, he’s been careful. No unnecessary mix-ups, no fights. But after all that laying low, Perrie’s feeling taut, like something’s been growing deep inside of him for the last few days and is ready to burst out.

The leonin have fixed him with all-black eyes, pupils fully dilated. The ears are back, their bodies almost vibrating.

Okay. Time to pop this blister, Perrie thinks.

“Good kitty,” he says softly to the bouncer on his right with a wink.

Perrie leans against a smooth limestone wall in the alley across from the lounge. He pats the inner pockets of his coat to check if an old, shattered pocket watch he’s carried since his boxing days is okay. It’s still in one piece.

A flash of light makes him wince, and a young leonin in a pinstripe vest walks out of the glare to stand by Perrie’s elbow as sparks fall to the ground and dance in the garbage.

“Rigo,” Perrie grunts.

Rigo pats down his vest. He flicks a few errant sparks off with professional satisfaction, pushes a short swoop of hair off to his right, and flicks his ears.

“Heard there was commotion. I knew it would be you. The two bouncers asleep on the pavement over there. That you?”

“Yeah.” Perrie spits blood into the gutter. The cold stone feels good against his head. He knows he’s gonna have some serious bruises in the morning. Worse—one of the leonin got a claw up under his suit and into his thick skin. He’ll need to get that looked at. But word will get out that Perrie’s still a brawler and not someone to be tangled with.

Rigo, his face pinched, fuzzy and broad, scratches his chin and chuckles. Canines flash. “Feel better with that out of your system?”

“I’ll still catch up to Krent,” Perrie sighs. He turns around to look at the solicitor. Rigo’s street-smart, has an ear to the ground with a network of street urchins. He knows how it goes in the alleys and shadows. “It had to be taken care of.”

Rigo laughs. “Can’t help yourself, can you?”

“Word’ll get out that I’m still more trouble to bother than it’s worth.” Perrie changes the subject. “You know where I stand with leadership?”

“Tired of the grunt-work assignments?” Rigo chuckles and ignores Perrie’s request to share anything he might know. “You shouldn’t take it out on the bouncers. They’re just the help, Perrie.”

“Hrmh,” Perrie grunts. He once saw Falco toss a man out a Park Heights window. For months after that, Perrie had been nervous about going up to the top of Nido Sanctuary to report to the boss.

“You can forget Krent,” Rigo says. “They sent some new kid to sniff him out.”

“Krent’s a heavy hitter.” Perrie took a deep breath, winced as his ribs stabbed at him.

“Kid’ll be fine.” Rigo taps an ear. “Reports say he’s doing his bit.”

Perrie reaches up to feel his left ear. The Amplifier is still snug against his ear canal, whispering to him. But it’s all static and muffled. He fiddles about with it, cursing his thick fingers.

The words become distinguishable again. Updates. Orders. Calls for action. Once he’d been assigned Krent, Perrie stopped paying much attention. The fight must have knocked it the wrong way around.

Perrie: wait for Rigo and further orders, the Amplifier whispers, along with other orders for Brokers in the streets. *Stand down, Perrie. Stand down.*

“I’ve never been called off a mission before,” Perrie notes. Feels like a noose closing on him, if he’s honest.

Rigo shrugs. “First time for everything.”

“Not how it works with Brokers.” Letter of the law. Order. Everything in its place. From Falco on down, one could count on the Brokers’ obsession with procedures.

“You’re choosing *now* to worry about the letter of the law?” One of Rigo’s thick eyebrows arches with amusement. “Didn’t worry you when you balked about that kid.”

Rigo pulls out a small vial of Halo and swirls it around in front of his face. Time to go. Perrie feels a lump in his stomach, and it’s not just from the bruises the leonin left him with; Rigo is taking him back to Nido Sanctuary. Back to face judgment. Falco’s let him twist in the wind long enough, apparently.

He could run right now. The Brokers could send solicitors after him, but Perrie’s the meanest skull-cracking enforcer they have. They probably couldn’t stop his escape.

Probably.

Perrie steps forward. The glow of Halo casts dappled swirls of light around the alley, and spotlights dance in the sky overhead, signs that the upper crust of Park Heights are out having a good time.

“You haven’t eaten anything recently, have you?” Rigo checks.

“Just get this over with,” Perrie says, and a flash of white light envelops them as Rigo teleports them off to their headquarters.



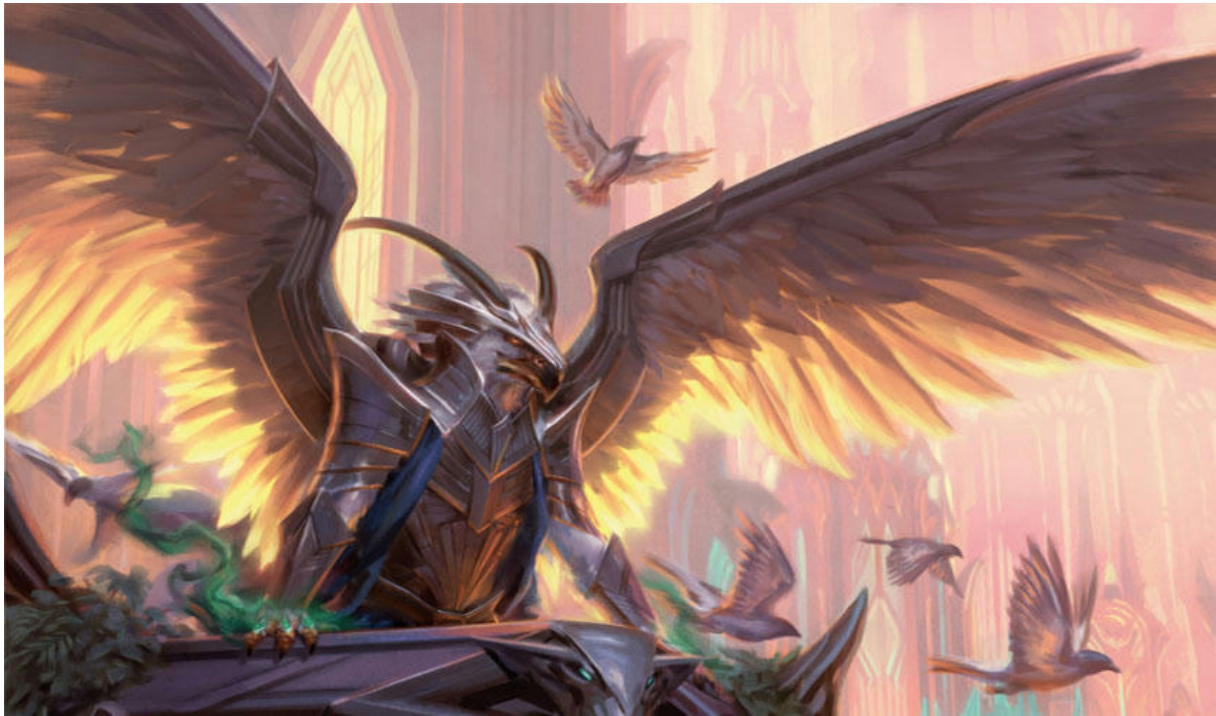
Art by: Robin Olausson

Time to face the boss.

Falco stands by the doors to the balcony where the wind tussles his feathers slightly. His wings loom over him, like supplicants that arch to hold a crown over a king's head. For an aven, Falco dominates the room. Perrie gets a glimpse of how contract breakers must feel when he arrives, making a dent in the chatter and atmosphere as he takes up space with his muscle and bulky coat.

"I have a job for you, Perrie," Falco says, no pleasantries, no greeting. No need for him to say it's an important one. The fact that he sent Rigo to deliver Perrie here personally, that says everything.

Falco steps heavily past winged metal patterns on the room's wall that glint with the light from the many upwardly aimed sconces.



Art by: Kieran Yanner

“What about the boy?” Perrie asks after a long moment.

Falco slams a fist into a nearby table. Contracts flutter to the floor. “I’m giving you a job, and you want to ask about your failure?”

“He’s a child.” Perrie stands firm on the other side of the room, though his eyes can’t help but drift to the big windows behind Falco’s desk. Perrie’s seen people thrown out of them. This conversation could be a death sentence.

But while a contract’s a contract, fair is also fair.

“Have you ever seen what happens to a plane where order falls apart, Perrie?” Falco clasps his hand behind his back and walks forward.

Perrie swallows. “He didn’t know what he was signing. He was a child.”

“That *child* sells newspapers across from a major Obscura meeting point.”

Perrie doesn’t flinch at Falco’s fury. “You know what they do to someone spying on them. Child or not.”

“When contracts fail, the stitches that bind the plane together loosen and the fabric of society frays. Then it all comes down around us.” Falco steps in front of Perrie. “You know the prophecy demands we hold this city together against what’s coming. Are you turning your back to it?”

Perrie looks down at his boots. “I know we’re going to need all those contracts and pacts cashed in.” Every signed promise, every binding contract, all the whispers and pledges given in the dark, they are all for a reason.

He doesn’t understand all the ins and outs. He can’t read, he can’t make out the tiny letters with his eyes, so he’s always been grateful for the Amplifier in his ear and the gossip around the fountains. Over the years, Perrie’s learned that something big is coming. That the Brokers have been getting ready for years, building an army of obligations and promises that most of the pledgers are magically bound to respect, even if those same spells hide that memory from them.

Legions of people, waiting to be activated, and most don't even know it.

"I haven't made a judgement on the case, yet," Falco says softly. "But I may have a way for you to prove yourself useful to the cause."

"I serve the law." Perrie slaps his chest in a salute, then winces.

"We've banked so much Halo even Ziatora noticed that the street supply is affected. She's worked hard to sniff out where it's going. Got a Riveteer in her pocket that stole plans to the newest Halo honeycomb storage before we could fully wipe their memory. I'm sending Kros after them, but I want someone to go with, provide muscle."

"Kros?" Perrie sighs. He doesn't work with partners. And he certainly doesn't want Kros breathing down his neck, reporting every little mistake back to Falco.

"Kros informs me the Riveteer's under a gag order," Falco says. "But she has actual parchment plans. She might not be able to speak to anyone about them, she probably doesn't remember why she's on the run until he looks down at the plans. Then she understands what she has and starts running again. Go. Find this contract breaker. Get the plans back. Leave the Riveteer alive. But make them wish they're dead. Dump the contract breaker in front of the Treza so that Ziatora gets the message. Even that dragon needs to know that you can't break a contract with us."

A faint rustle in the air behind Perrie tells him Kros has slipped into the room. Every Broker is a solicitor, all equal before the law. But Falco rules the family, and there are various other roles that need filled. Perrie enforces contracts, and Kros styles himself as a ranger straight out of Old Capenna, exploring the city's nooks and crannies. He finds the remains of forgotten places the family can use to set up aviaries that solicitors use as hideouts when needed. He started out as a middleman, though. A defense contractor who liked well-tailored clothes and receptions on balcony's high above the city where big deals could be made on a handshake and a smile. Kros's probably standing in a shadowy part of the room, hoping to step out at the right moment in a faint haze of blue to startle Perrie. He loves the flash and drama of it all.



Art by: Katerina Ladon

That works on new recruits, green under the collar. Not Perrie. He's clocked Kros out of the corner of an eye. All trench coat and shiny, well-polished shoulder armor, high-end leonin haircut carefully styled to rakishly fall back toward his shoulders. More flash than substance, Perrie feels. A real Broker should have tarnish streaks from being outside, working contracts in the streets.

There's a decision here Perrie needs to make. Stay and wait for a ruling and find out just how doomed he is, or hustle and prevent the Riveteers from figuring out what his family is up to. Maybe when he gets back, he'll find Falco inclined to rule favorably. Or at least not murderously.

Perrie nods to where Kros hides in the shadow as he makes a decision. "Let's go find us a Riveteer, Kros. Sounds like time isn't waiting on us."

When he turns, the sour look on Kros's face wipes away the exhaustion making Perrie's bones creak at the moment.

"I'm not happy about this mission, either," Kros snaps as they take a car across the Mezzio, just another chitinous, scarab-like vehicle dodging its way down the lanes of street between the swooping scaffolding of city skyscrapers that led to the girders of Park Heights. The driver is a Broker who keeps an ear on passenger conversations for the organization.

Perrie looks out at a well-heeled crowd in line for a theatrical production standing on the corner of King's Street and Butchers.

"Drink this." Kros hands Perrie an elixir as they cross a bridge that seems to float in the air. Perrie's stomach flutters, he isn't one for heights, even if that's all New Capenna is. A city perched on girders, hovering over the land the people in it once walked.

So many uses for Halo. Perrie wonders about that a lot. How dependent has the city become on it in such a short time. "I don't need—"

"If you aren't tip-top, you aren't useful to me. This isn't any Riveteer we're after. Jolene, she's a demolitionist."

They call them bulldozers on Perrie's street. Jolene could, no doubt, pull a whole building down on them if they aren't careful.

"You may have heard her called the 'Plunder Queen.' We showed up to give her some legal assistance when she got herself caught breaking into a jewelry shop's vault. Thought an iron-clad construction contract would cover us, but she's wilier than we realized. Perrie, drink up already."

Perrie tosses back the elixir in a single swallow. He doubles over as the healing effects painfully reknit broken bone.

At least his headache eases.

He watches people in fedoras slouch down the street and wonders about their lives. That one going home with bread tucked under his arm, was that to a family waiting for their dad to finish a late shift at a factory in the Caldaia? His coat glitters with Halo effusion from the stacks.

The driver takes them down a ramp, deeper into the bowels of New Capenna, where Broker power fades further into the shadows. No gleaming corner offices down here. It's the industrial heart of the city, the foundry on which New Capenna sits that breathes for the city. The streets and lights above them now are where respectable families scheme and shake their hands on pacts made in their Park Height aeries. But down here, the city's bellows labor day and night, groaning under the weight of the structures above.



Art by: Julian Kok Joon Wen

Down here, work gets done, Perrie thinks.

Men in flat caps and threadbare shift clothes glare at the shiny insect panels of the vehicle. Perrie and Kros stand out with their clean pinstripes, carefully tailored armor inserts that evoke class and martial leanings, and the clear wealth of the personal transport.

“What are the chances we get jumped just for being down here in this rolling beetle of a machine?” Perrie grunts.

“I’m not wasting Halo on travel. I need to hold onto every little bit we can carry. We’ll need it,” Kros says. He taps the driver. “The factory, there.”

Several minutes later, they stand inside the slumped girders of a rotting building. The stained-glass windows feature cubist portraits of angels that stand on guard before a stylized impression of New Capenna’s skyline, but a third of the colored glass has been shattered, likely by looters, or vagrants tossing rocks at them.

Kros pulls a crowbar out of his jacket and levers a manhole cover open.

“In there?” Perrie looks dubiously down into the dark. Something smells bad down there. Like it died, crawled down several blocks of city gutters, then slipped through a drain and died again once down there. And it’s still dying. “Kros, where are we going?”

“Outside,” Kros says. “Ever been?”

Perrie stares at Kros. The man has held the headline back from him.

“My mom’s people,” Perrie says. “They got in during the second exodus. The Riveteers tightened it all up after that. Just heard stories.”

Mom still lives in the same dingy apartment down in the Verts, not far away from the basement rings Perrie got his start boxing in. The Pulverizer, they called him. Printed it up on broadsheets plastered all up and down the lower parts of town.

Simpler days. Before death and misfortune, before Falco took him in. Perrie misses it, sometimes. But never misses being hungry all the time.

“The Riveteer, she’s down there?” Perrie eyes the manhole dubiously. They don’t get along. Like a pair of annoying siblings, Kros and Perrie came up in the Brokers together, running errands for the older, grizzled solicitors. This could be a prank. Kros messing with him.

The darkness on the other side of the manhole is emptiness, and maybe a faint shimmer of some left-over spell. And maybe, beyond that, one could squint and see the old ruins of something that used to exist down on the ground before New Capenna.

Kros buttons up his jacket and pulls on a pair of heavy gloves. “Took me years to find this, but the Riveteers know more of them. They find weak spots during demolition or construction.”

“Weak spots?”

“Hidden tunnels. Ladders. Gaps in the structure.” Kros swings down through the hole in the floor into the dark. If it’s a prank, he’s committed to it fully.

Perrie stares at the shadows below. “And Jolene’s really out *there*?”

“Too many solicitors sniffing around every nook and cranny in New Capenna looking for her. Falco made it the number-one priority.”

“I never heard anything over the Amplifier.” Perrie drops slowly down, barely able to fit through the round hole, and kicks his feet around to find the ledge. He doesn’t want to let go and drop forever.

Kros grabs the back of Perrie’s coat and pulls him over. “Solicitors Falco trusts, and that he told in person, face to face.”

They crouch on a ledge near the bulk of a city girder. A rusted set of ladder steps leads down and away into the dark void below.

“Down we go!”

Kros starts climbing down, and Perrie eyes the steps warily, not sure if they’ll hold the weight of a full-grown rhox enforcer.



Art by: Adam Paquette

Perrie doesn't want to climb a ladder down to the ground his ancestors fled from, the hammer slung over his shoulder clanking and banging against every other rung. He's had an hour to grumble about it all as they slowly made their way down, and Kros hasn't responded once. Too focused on making sure he didn't get rust on his coat, Perrie thinks.

But if he wants to get back into Falco's good graces, and get his life back to normal, Perrie is going to have to push on here. Kros is one of Falco's most trusted advisors. There's a good chance, Perrie thinks, that he can fix everything that went wrong. Because right now, there's not a single solicitor in New Capenna that will look at Perrie without disgust on their face.

He's broken a contract. It is simple as that.

What had he been thinking, crossing Falco like that? The aven family boss is so unbendingly strict, only the stupid and suicidal break contracts. Even other family bosses make sure to follow the letter of Falco's law.

Kros is the only hope for Perrie's restoration. If he gives a good report to Falco, maybe Perrie won't find out what it was like for an enforcer to be on the other side of an enforcement action.

Perrie shudders.

He can't ever put himself in a position like this again. He should be knocking heads to collect debts, warning transgressors, and finding new contacts to bind to their legal needs.

That is the way it's supposed to work. You're in a bad situation, things looking grim, and there's a flash of white light near the commotion. A dapper-suited citizen sidles out of the shadows, asks if you need help, and offers to make it all go away.

For a small favor, one you didn't even have to remember.

"Here we go," Kros mutters.

Perrie looks down to see the dark outlines of an ancient castle. The walls have long since fallen, slumped into a pile of rubble. The girder they're climbing down splits the castle in two, like a metal spear thrown into the structure's heart.

When they let go of the last few rungs and hit the ground on their feet, Kros lightly, and Perrie with a solid thud, Kros smiles. "Welcome to the old country."

He seems at ease with all this, but Perrie squints as he looks around. Slumped rubble and old walls loom out of a passing mist that's sandwiched between the underbelly of New Capenna above and the ground below. Light from over a distant hill is just a thin sliver of horizon.

"Can you track?" Kros asks.

Perrie pulls a monocle from his breast pocket and settles it onto his right eye. Gauzy skeins of color waft about the ruins and cobblestones of the old plane.

"Faint sign, that way," Perrie nods. "It's a fresh trace, could be Jolene."

The moment Jolene broke contract and ran, it sent up a magic flare brighter than a spotlight outside the Grand Opera House. Broker solicitors would have been able to trace it easily with the right tools, like Perrie's monocle. Down here, outside New Capenna, far from Nido Sanctuary, Perrie has only the faintest smudge of color to follow.

Kros has what looks like a pair of opera glasses in his hands. "I see it, too."

A short, furry form dressed in a leather jacket steps out onto the pocked, weed-infested cobblestones. Raccoonfolk. Perrie glances around at the flashes of eyes in the shadows of the ruined walls all about them.

"Kros "

The man already has his hands up, and his gloves shimmer with blue light. There's a faint, arrogant smile on the edges of his lips.

"Not from the city," Perrie mutters. The knee-stabbers won't hold back, he guesses. There aren't unspoken rules about inter-family dust-ups down here. These raccoonfolk are feral, not like the chatty street urchins and day laborers in the city above.

And maybe that's why Kros has that ghastly grin on his face. Maybe that's what it takes to become one of Falco's inner circle.

"Hey there, buddy," Kros says in an even but somewhat curious tone. "We're looking for a friend."

He has a small portrait on paper. Kros holds the uncannily lifelike representation up in the air for the raccoonfolk to see.

"Our friend—"

Twenty furred, snarling, and clearly starving raccoonfolk attack.

Perrie's been breaking kneecaps and bruising faces a long time. Sometimes cracking limbs here and there. Regular city-folk always worried about families tossing citizens out the window. *Kite rides*, they called it.

Truth is, it almost never happens to common folk.

And there isn't *that* much brawling. Perrie spends most of his time tracking, sniffing around for potential new contracts, and walking the streets so that people see a Broker enforcer out keeping order.

As raccoonfolk pour over them, Perrie kisses the rings on his fingers for the first time in weeks. He hasn't even broken them out for the bouncers. Light plays across his hands into the shape of brass knuckles. More light flows over his right fist to form a gauntlet, with tendrils of light running back up Perrie's massive arms

"Ya gotta embrace who the plane wants you to be, I guess," Perrie grumbles, and starts swinging.

It's satisfying, in a deep, animalistic way. Every punch connects, and he can feel bone give. With every meaty thwack, every crushing punch, raccoonfolk scatter. They may have seen a rhox fight before, but they've never seen one radiant with the glow of a magic like this.

Perrie isn't just a bruiser, he thinks of himself as a master tactician. He knows when to avoid the knockout so that he can drag a body in front of him as a shield. He can see the way the fight shapes up on old cobblestones, as if watching from above.

The raccoonfolk regroup and swarm for another attack, looking only for the blood they can draw with knives and claws, and Perrie is thinking four or five moves ahead.

There's a leader here.

There's always a leader. And if you watch the rhythm of the fight, spot where the gaps are and who they're protecting, you can feel the locus of power. Like a spider sitting in the center of a web.

It's a dance. And when the scrappy, scarred leader of their attackers suddenly realizes Perrie isn't faltering or overwhelmed but has been using open spaces and moments in the fighting to get closer to him, he panics and runs rather than ending up on the receiving end of Perrie's fists.

For the first time in days, Perrie smiles widely.

That had been a small war, and the lesser general had run for the hills.

"Quit gloating, we have work to do," Kros says from the shadows of a slumped wall. He cleans blood off a long dagger and tucks it away under his coat again.

Perrie's smile fades, and he looks at Kros with enough raw malice that Kros fiddles with the edge of his vest. "When you're ready."

Perrie sweeps his hand out, like a butler indicating the way into a waiting room.

Kros starts to take a step forward, and the entire wall he's been using as cover slumps down onto him with a horrifying groan. Rocks tumble out, mortar dust fills the air, and there's nothing more than a hill of debris where the solicitor had once stood just a split second ago.

"Kros?" Perrie's somewhat stunned. Kros might annoy him, they might have years of almost sibling-like rivalry, but for a moment he can't move. Kros's fast, quick to spot any attacks, and is usually gone before his attacker understands what happened.

"Kros!"

Falco's not going to let Perrie back up the Broker command structure if he got Kros killed. Perrie's now thinking about the more horrible things Falco might do to him, which is a mistake. The cobblestones under Perrie's feet vibrate.

Demolition magic.

The road cracks open underneath Perrie.

No one ever expects the big brawlers to move too quickly, but Perrie can sprint. And he moves now like his life depends on it.

Because it does.

Rubble strikes his thick skin, knocking the breath out of him. Old boulders roll down the road. There's nothing but chaos and dust in the air as Perrie forgets tactics or next steps, he's just whipping about in random directions to avoid getting crushed.

Their prey knew they'd be coming. Set up a trap.

Probably told the raccoonfolk where to find some soft strangers, ripe for mugging.

Perrie has his eyepiece out as he tries to get out of defense and grab some of the initiative in the fight. Where is this damn Riveteer?

Too much chaos. It's hard to get a read.

But his ears twitch. Footsteps?

Perrie arrows off the street into the ruins of an old stable and inn. There's still a faint smell of horse in the air, even though it's been centuries since the old city was fully populated.

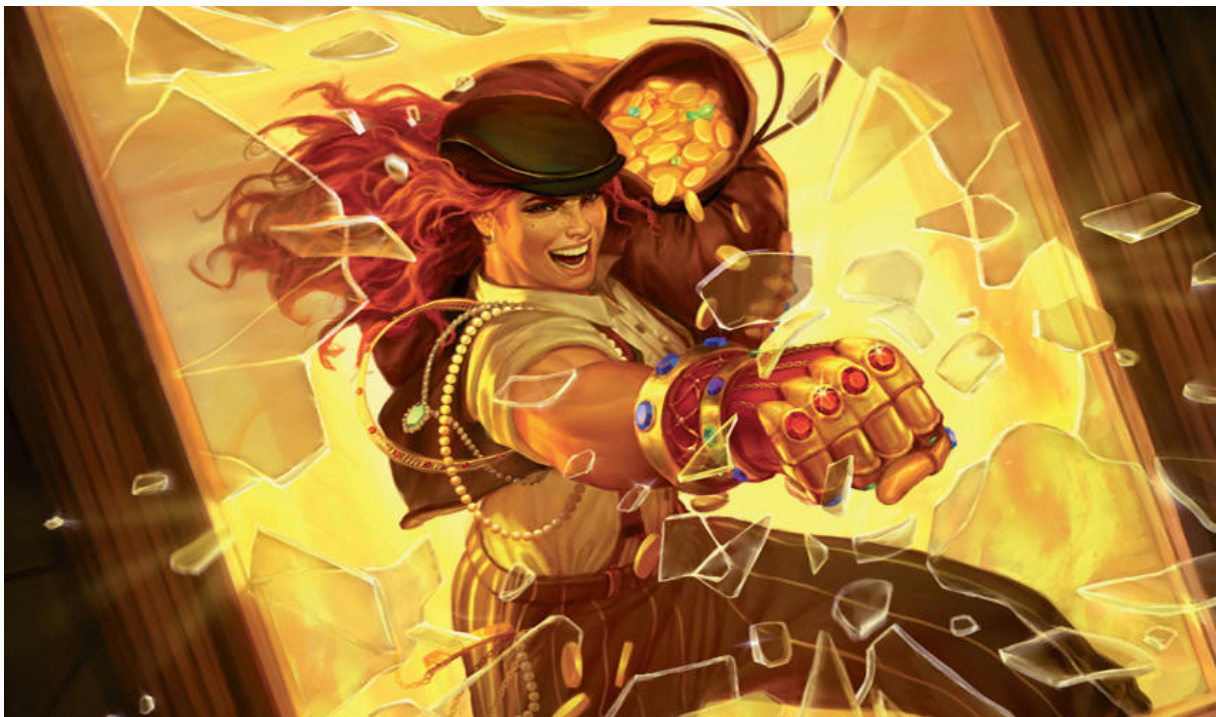
There . A cough. The flying dust has irritated someone's throat.

Even in a battle, little things like this are often the difference between victory and defeat. Perrie pulls his hammer out from where its awkwardly slung under his coat. He'll need it to face someone this powerful.

The hammer hums with anticipation.

Perrie tightens his grip, his eyes narrow as he turns, his ears flicking with each tiny sound. His pin-stripe suit is tattered and ripped. It flaps as he slams his hammer through the nearest wall. It might not be demolition magic, but the result is the same: Perrie destroys the wall.

The Riveteer in the debris and dust has gauntleted, jeweled metal fists that glow. Perrie catches the first punch, feels it shatter bones in his hand, and swings the hammer up. Jolene dodges, tries to grab at the hammer, and hits him in the forearm with a magically charged punch that chatters his teeth.



Art by: Caroline Gariba

Perrie headbutts her.

She flies back and hits the wall, gauntlets up, ready for him.

Perrie raises the hammer. "We both swing at the same time, we can bring it all down on us. I know I can walk away, can you?"

Jolene looks around at the walls and ancient, rotted beams. For a split second, she almost takes the step forward and starts the fight. Something blinks behind her eyes, a faint whisp of a spell.

"You've got something that belongs to us."

She says nothing. Just waits. Way too calmly.

"Yes, she certainly does," Kros says from behind Perrie. Of course, he's not dead. Perrie should be relieved. Falco won't call for an execution. Perrie's chances of living through all this just shot way up.

But he's still annoyed he's done the hard work as Kros—

Perrie glances at his old rival and sees the blood dripping from a gash on Kros's head. The man isn't gliding gracefully out of the shadows, he's limping up to them. Every breath Kros takes is a rattle.

Looks like Kros barely got out of that alive.

"But that's not all she's got," Kros says.

The air crackles with energy and forms as Kros throws coherent energy out into the air. Perrie's expecting explosions or pain, but instead a veil of heaviness he hasn't noticed falls away and Jolene gasps.

She looks utterly disoriented.

"Obscura spell," Kros wheezes. He grabs Perrie's shoulder to steady himself.

"It's not the Riveteers?" The Obscura would have sunk a ton of costly magic into forcing a Riveteer under their thumb like that. Perrie shudders with sympathy, even though he'd been about to crack her skull just a split second ago.

"I don't have the plans anymore," Jolene says. "Even under Obscura compulsion, I'm not that stupid."

"Then, I have questions to ask you," Kros whispers. He lets go of Perrie's shoulder and wobbles forward. He barely acknowledges Perrie, just drags a leg awkwardly past. His fingers glow with magic.

A magical deposition. Perrie shudders.

"We have a problem," Kros says later as he lets go of Jolene's forehead. Wisps of his blue magic dance around her eyes. Kros can wipe memories, a useful solicitor skill for setting up contracts that the person who signed doesn't even remember.

Even more useful to them right now is that he can use the same skills to go digging for memories in depositions.

Kros stumbles when he steps back toward Perrie. He's been doing battle in Jolene's mind, no doubt. And Kros, injured, has had to fight to get something.

"Plans?" Perrie asks.

Kros sits down on a chunk of rubble after pushing aside an old, termite-filled wooden beam. He takes a deep breath.

Perrie glances at Jolene. She's tied up, and after Kros's magic, in no mood to talk. Her eyes are glazed and distant. He's a little impressed. She's a short, heavily muscled Riveteer, and she has almost killed them both.

"They abducted her from her own apartment," Kros says. "Forced her into being an Obscura agent, working for the Riveteers."

"So " Perrie's confused. "We can still get the plans, wipe her memory, and go back to Falco. Right?"

Even as he says it, he knows it won't be that simple. He's just trying to get Kros to reassure him that everything's going to be all right.

"Obscura make a point of knowing everything that's happening. They've been trying to figure where Halo is going missing, and it led them to Riveteers working on construction for us. They've been feeding Riveteers false information, saying that Brokers have been hurting their workers. We dump what seems like yet another beaten-up Riveteer on the streets, with her memory wiped, we start a war." Kros leans back against a leaning pillar and closes his eyes. "This is all a trap, she's the bait."

"The Obscura know that Falco's hoarding Halo?" The stuff is almost currency at this point. Some of the other families had to start sniffing around about shortages in the city. But Falco wasn't expecting it to happen this soon.

"They've figured out that we're doing it, but they don't know why. They're trying to knock us back into our place," Kros says. "Obscura think that they're the heirs to the city just because they know everything. They're always trying to make sure everything remains the same. Arrogant idiots."

"What do we do?" Perrie looks at Jolene. "Falco said—"

"I know what Falco said," Kros covers his face with his hands. "But we do that, we launch a war between the Riveteers and us."

"Isn't that what Falco wants?"

"No! He wants to show that a contract is a contract. He's not ready for a war. Not yet. It's still too early."

There's a larger plan in the air. Something Perrie's not privy to. He's never been told why Falco's fanatically hoarding as much Halo as the Brokers can get their hands on. But he can feel the pieces moving about, and he sees the empty spaces. It's something big, whatever it is.

Maybe even historic. They've hidden a lot of Halo.

"A war with the Riveteers will destroy everything we've been working toward," Kros says. "It's the Obscura we need to be worried about."

"We go and tell Falco," Perrie nods.

"Falco ordered us to do a job," Kros responds.

Perrie stares a moment. "Even if—"

"You of all people," Kros shouts, "should know how absolute your instructions are with Falco."

And Kros wouldn't risk his spot at the top of the organization.

Perrie's still shocked. "People will die if we start a war. A lot of people."

He imagines whole buildings falling. Explosions. Fights in subterranean caverns. Teams of Riveteers bursting out of walls or ducts to kill them. Because it won't be brawling for territory, the bosses would play for keeps.

Falco would need a general, then. A master tactician. It could be a way back into Falco's good graces. But a lot of innocent lives would get caught in the crossfire.

Perrie sighs and stands up. "You're too hurt to travel. Stay here with the Riveteer, I'll send someone back to help."

"Perrie, you can't go back to Falco empty-handed. He'll—"

Perrie laughs. "How many lives will I save if I do?"

Kros looks at the ground. "You're risking your life. You understand that, right?"

"I know," Perrie says. "I know."

Perrie still has a wobble in his step and the afterimage of Rigo's transportation magic in his eyes when he's shoved into Falco's office. The corridors here brim with Brokers getting ready for a war. Everyone's packing magical heat, and they're all jumpy.



Art by: Keiran Yanner

If the streets are as wound up as this, all it'll take is a single wrong glance, an ill word, and the Riveteers and Brokers would slash each other's throats.

"I see no plans, I see no Kros," Falco growls. The hand-carved doors to the balcony are wide open. The swooping buttresses of other buildings loom in the night outside, and alabaster gargoyles glare across at Perrie.

He swallows.

"Is Kros alive?" Falco turns his back and looks out at the heights.

"He's making his way back. With the Riveteer, Jolene." Perrie's faced off against some of the most dangerous people in New Capenna. Right now, he's afraid that if he breathes too deeply, it'll disturb Falco, so he's holding his breath.

Falco's voice drops several octaves. "But no plans."

"It was a trap." Perrie lets out the deep breath. Slowly, strategically. "We can get the plans back, but they aren't as important as who really stole them."

Falco still has his back to him. He flutters his wings, and the snapping crack startles Perrie.

"Obscura?" Falco asks.

"How did you—" Perrie should know by now that Falco has his ways.

Falco steps out onto the balcony, out into the garish light of Park Heights. The city glitters out below him from there. "Take a step outside into the fresh air with me."

Perrie's been relieved of his hammer and knuckles, but he still has brawn. And that isn't much against a boss like Falco, he thinks, as his shoulders slump.

Perrie tentatively crosses the threshold and stands on Falco's balcony for the first time in his life. Falco spreads his wings slightly to let the air ruffle his feathers. He closes his eyes.

"Do you know some people who join me out here are so overcome with emotion," Falco says, "that they sometimes slip and just fall right off the edge?"

Perrie's not sure what to say to that. Is he being threatened? Is he about to join them? He'd do his best to take the boss with him, he knew that for sure. But Falco isn't acting like someone about to move against him.

"Don't worry, Perrie. Your mind isn't that weak. People don't realize you're a tactician. But I've seen you in action." Falco smiles over his shoulder. "You're no one's fool."

Falco leans against the railing and waves his hand at all New Capenna. He looks, Perrie thinks for the first time, tired. Ancient.



Art by: Adam Paquette

“There’s a war coming, Perrie. All this, every solicitor, every pact we bound someone to, all that Halo we have hidden away across the city, it’s just preparation. I’m going to need you in the days ahead. But, we have a loose end dangling between us.”

Perrie lets out another deep breath. “The boy?”

“No one can break a contract.” Falco folds his arm behind his back. “No one. There are smaller sacrifices we must make if we’re to save the city. You know how this works. You left those two leonin bouncers looking at the sky earlier because you saw the bigger picture. Take your step up into leadership, or—”

The “or” dangles in the air above the balcony, much like Perrie assumes he will, shortly.

Perrie looks Falco in the eye and shoves his hands into his pockets. Falco stands on the edge by the railing, arms behind his back, vulnerable, almost taunting Perrie. Try it, the Broker boss seems to be saying with his body language.

All Perrie’s ever wanted is right here. He can agree that the boy broke a contract and deserves the same punishment as any other citizen of New Capenna that crosses the Brokers. He does that, Falco’s dangling a promotion in front of him. Join the inner circle to help the boss fight a war he’s been planning for many long years.

Or defy Falco and go flying with no wings.

“I stand by what I said last week,” Perrie says slowly. “There’s words on a paper that you sign and agree to, and then there’s what’s right. The boy broke his contract, but he was just a scared kid, trying not to get stepped on by either organization.”

“If the child had done what I’d asked, you wouldn’t have been down under the city getting made a fool of by the Obscura,” Falco hisses. “If he’d done his job, we’d likely be a step ahead, instead of stuck with a mess and possible bloodshed.”

“Likely,” Perrie repeats.

“Likely.” Falco carefully folds his wings back and takes a step forward.

“Is it worth winning anything if we have to harm children to do it?” Perrie steps forward as well, hands still in his coat pockets. He looks up at Falco with defiance. “Because it isn’t to me.”

“I have brawlers,” Falco says. “I don’t need more.”

Perrie waits, as stony and still a statue as the gargoyles staring at them from the other building’s facade.

“I have tacticians smarter than you, many of them,” Falco continues.

“Then use them,” Perrie snaps.

Falco laughs. He turns abruptly to stalk back inside his offices. “I need something different from you, Perrie. I still need you to go see that boy for me. I still need you to protect Broker reputations, or everything we built falls apart.”

Perrie opens a car door, and the orphan in the raggedy clothes stares at the ornate building they’ve pulled up in front of.

“Will I be locked in a room again?” he asks mournfully.

Perrie puts a hand on his shoulder. “No.”

A small door in the brick facade opens. A woman in the all-black uniform of a warden waves at Perrie, and he hustles the child in front of him. They both look around the street to see if anyone has noticed.

"All clear," the woman says.

"I'm scared," the boy whispers to Perrie. "Before you came for me, Yomu said you were going to hurt me. Badly. For crossing the Brokers."

Tears slide down the kid's grubby cheeks. He's terrified, shaking in his scrap boots. Perrie notices pieces of newspaper stick out near his ankles. The kid has no socks.

"Just go with this nice lady, you'll be safe. This is a place for orphans like you. It's a school. I'll visit. I'll be by tomorrow." The lie hurts Perrie.

The boy takes off the oversized flat cap from his curly hair and gives it to Perrie. "You should have this. For helping. I won't need it, now, I guess. They'll never let me near papers again."

The woman in all black puts a soft, friendly arm around the boy, and he lets himself get moved into another room past the vestibule. Several older women in black gowns swoop into the doorway after them.

A flash of radiance lights the room, and Perrie sees a circle of black-dressed figures surrounding the child like a flock of ravens. The light fades, and the first warden returns to Perrie. "It's done."

He passes her a parcel tied off in brown twine. "Thank you, warden."

"He won't remember a thing before today," the warden says. "We'll take good care of him."

They had to. They had a contract with the Brokers, now. A boarding school for the Park Height elite might not know too much about the shadowy streets, but even up here, they would know better than to break a contract.

Perrie slides into the back seat of the car.

"What I need right now, Perrie," Falco had said, back as Perrie re-entered the room from the balcony, "is neither a brawler, nor a planner."

Perrie pulls his hammer out from under his coat. He looks at the unsuspecting, dapper people out and about their day as the driver takes him toward a street fight with Obscura. The first of what Falco suspected were many scuffles over territory in New Capenna in the next month. At least the Riveteers are staying out of it, thanks to Perrie's work.

"What I need," Falco had said, intensely, "is a *conscience*."

The car, beetle-black skin absorbing New Capenna's lights, slides past the hustle and bustle of the city with Perrie inside. Outside, those in the know whisper, "There goes a Broker enforcer. One of the most dangerous ones."

Perrie looks down at the cap in his hand thoughtfully. Then he slides it into one of his inner coat pockets, right next to a shattered old watch he never leaves without.