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The Shattered Blade

HOUSE FONTEIN

– *Febbraio* 315

Lucien entered the testing chamber, a circular room fifty feet across. Thick candles sprouted at intervals, waxy fungus grown on ledges in the wall. Daylight spilled in from portholes high above, a chill draught on his skin like a phantom's breath. A dais rose from the floor on the opposite side of the room, bearing the face of the king in profile, like a discarded giant coin. Giancarlo stood on the platform, arms crossed over his barrel-like chest, brow furrowed. Three narrow standards provided a backdrop. The flags were divided diagonally into two colours.

Lucien regarded the material as it swayed gently in the draught. Red like dried blood, black as any tar, the flags bore no crest or symbol. He'd longed to wear those colours, the colours of House Fontein, for so long, a yearning now eroded by contempt. House Fontein: few in number and yet wildly self-important. The double doors Lucien had just passed through boomed closed behind him, snapping his attention back to the task at hand, away from the bitterness in his heart.

On his left-hand side, a dozen feet above the smooth granite tiles, was a recess in the wall. D'arzenta and Ruggeri looked down from the balcony above, two stern presences barely lit. Lucien allowed himself a moment of eye contact with D'arzenta. The *maestro* shook his head almost imperceptibly, signalling his unhappiness. Lucien felt cold sweat break out under his arms and across his back. Ruggeri stood statue still; if he had any opinion on the format of the testing he did not show it.

Lucien wasn't sure what he was seeing at first. He'd expected Giancarlo to make things difficult, but this beggared belief.

Three common folk stood huddled together in irons next to the dais. The men looked thin and dirty, their eyes hollow. The rags they wore were soiled with their own foulness.

He turned his attention to Giancarlo, the *superiore*. A broad slab of a man, Giancarlo possessed a wide face and heavy-lidded eyes. A fencing scar ran down his right cheek, parting the olive complexion with a dark exclamation. His hair was cropped and unfussy, deep brown and yet to show any grey. As ever, he wore his uniform, tan leather britches and a battered jacket reinforced with studs. His boots were immaculate, a product of novices currying favour. Two sashes in house colours were tied around his left arm displaying his allegiance, the statement redundant. All knew of Giancarlo's unflinching loyalty, the favourite son of House Fontein. Another deep red sash was wrapped twice around his waist, marking him out as the *superiore*.

Lucien struggled to keep his expression neutral. There were few people in all of Demesne he wanted dead, but Giancarlo's name was top of the list and underlined for good measure. Lucien gripped the hilt of his sheathed sword and forced out a calming breath.

It was then that he recognised one of the prisoners. Franco was in his late fifties and owned a large orchard on the Contadino Estate. The cider he produced was very popular across Demesne's many hamlets and farmsteads. His forearms were like great hams from fetching barrels; iron-grey hair fell to his shoulders, now lank and greasy from imprisonment. Lucien liked him very much, even grooming his ponies on occasion in earlier times. Franco had always managed to make Lucien feel like a regular boy, never putting on the airs and graces required to interact with the Orfano. Many were the times Franco had rescued him from misery with a kind word.

'Why are they here?' said Lucien quietly.

'They're criminals,' replied Giancarlo. 'It has been decided that they can go free if they face you in single combat.'

'To first blood?' said Lucien, feeling a chill in his veins.

'To the death.' Giancarlo's face was stony.

Lucien's lips twisted in a sour approximation of a smile. He'd long known Giancarlo would stoop to any depths to unman

him – he'd grown accustomed to it – but this was beyond the pale.

'I'm a student of the sword, not an executioner. This is a farce.' Lucien's eyes locked on Giancarlo. The *superiore* stared back unperturbed. Lucien thrust out his chin and crossed his arms.

'Golia had no such reservations when he tested three years ago. Still, if you'd rather cling to ethics I can fail you right now. And these wretches can return to a slow death in the oubliette.'

A novice appeared from behind Giancarlo in House Fontein livery, one of the Allatamento boys. His tunic was overlong, the cream hose sagging. He couldn't have been more than fourteen summers, already gangly and awkward with the onset of puberty. He fussed at the farmers' irons with a key and unlocked the three prisoners, scurrying back to Giancarlo's elbow, where he waited with anxious eyes. He looked ridiculous in contrast to the threatening bulk of the *superiore*.

The captive farmers rubbed feeling back into their wrists and ankles. They glanced at each other, eyes haunted with unease. Giancarlo pulled his blade from the scabbard, advancing toward one of the men. He looked to be in his mid-twenties and gazed at the *superiore*, incomprehension frozen on his face. Giancarlo muttered something to the man, handed over the weapon and withdrew with an expectant look.

Lucien swore under his breath. Ten tests, beginning at age eight, continuing each year until eighteen. Failure at any point could mean expulsion from House Fontein. Only Lucien's title had prevented his ejection before now.

Refusing this final test would mean a mark against him for all time, as both student and Orfano. He really didn't want *that* particular reputation dragging at his heels. Giancarlo would damn him with a loss of status and a significant dwindling of prospects.

The farmer advanced, the tip of the sword shaking, weaving in the air before him. Not any sword but Giancarlo's own blade. The *superiore*'s slight did not go unnoticed.

‘What did he do?’ said Lucien, ignoring his opponent. Giancarlo frowned.

‘That is not important. Only the fight is important.’

‘What was the crime?’

Giancarlo sneered and said nothing.

With his opponent on his right side Lucien crossed his left foot behind, turning and drawing his sword, striking in one fluid motion. There was no need to look directly at the target. His peripheral vision was more than adequate for such a blow. The man ducked under the sword’s reach, then backed away breathing heavily, visibly shocked with the speed of the attack. Lucien followed up, feinting high. His opponent’s eyes went wide with fear, throwing an awkward parry in front of his face, lurching back from the waist. Lucien winced as his own ceramic blade hit the steel of Giancarlo’s sword, the *superiore* had stacked the odds steeply. The ceramic stayed true and Lucien realised his opponent had forgotten his feet. Lucien’s next strike came low at the exposed front leg, then pulled his blow at the last moment to avoid contact with the kneecap. The farmer attempted a clumsy counter, and Lucien ducked beneath it, then withdrew three steps.

‘I could have immobilised him. The fight is mine. There’s no need for this charade to continue.’ Lucien struck Giancarlo with a wintry look. ‘Release him.’

The *superiore* scowled back but said nothing.

The farmer sneaked forward while Lucien was distracted with Giancarlo. The blade clattered from Lucien’s hastily prepared parry and bounced up, opening a small cut on his shoulder. Lucien snarled and swore. Stepping back he let forth an angry bark and unleashed an overhead blow, a hammer strike, knocking his opponent’s blade downwards. Lucien knew first hand how demoralising this manoeuvre was. Golia was all too fond of exactly that style of combat. He remembered numb fingers and an arm too sluggish to respond. Lucien had not wanted to hurt the man, but was struggling to contain his pique.

Too bad.

Lucien struck again, made contact with the farmer’s right

arm. He spun back on himself, lashing out again to connect with the farmer's left arm. Lucien feinted low, striking high with the bone-coloured blade before the man could mount a defence. There was a wet smacking sound and the farmer crumpled to his knees. A choked sob reverberated through the training room. Lucien stood over his opponent breathing lightly. No blood had spattered the tiles. The farmer checked himself in shock and wonder. Lucien had used the flat of his blade to batter his opponent into submission. He was bruised, certainly, but unbloodied.

'Finish him,' grunted Giancarlo.

Lucien resheathed his sword with a flourish, then folded his arms.

'Finish him yourself,' he replied.

The *superiore* was behind the farmer before he'd regained his feet. Lucien stared at him, unable to believe what was happening. A knife appeared like a conjuration in Giancarlo's hand, a twist, a jerk, and then the farmer was face down on the floor, clutching at his throat. Deep red fluid grew in a pool around him. Lucien stared aghast, barely able to breathe. The farmer made a last pitiful wet cry and expired. Lucien stared up to the balcony, where Ruggeri was carefully inspecting his fingernails. D'arzenta looked away with a creased brow.

'*Figlio di putana*,' whispered Lucien, knowing he could be failed for insulting the *maestro superiore di spada*.

The Allatamento novice ran over and dragged the corpse to the side of the room, struggling with the weight. Lucien scowled at the lack of dignity, then concentrated on making his hands stop shaking. The novice mopped up the blood and none could ignore the taint of voided bowels on the air. The clatter and clang of the mop and bucket was a crude and unpleasant din in the silence following the farmer's death. Finally the chamber was ready for the second test.

'Knife fight,' was all Giancarlo said. The novice scuttled forward, equipping the second man with a short blade, then withdrew. Even across the room Lucien could tell it was a well balanced weapon, the hilt wrapped in deerskin. Lucien laid

his sword on the dais with reverence. He looked up to find Giancarlo gazing down intently. Neither of them spoke.

It was unusual but not unheard of for students to be tested on the knife. It wasn't regarded as a noble weapon but a crude tool for thugs and petty thieves, the domain of desperate women and assassins. If Giancarlo had wished to insinuate something through his choice of trials then he was making his message admirably clear.

The man circled Lucien and regarded him with cool grey eyes. He was weatherbeaten, olive-skinned with a large aquiline nose. His right eye bore the purple-yellow of severe bruising. The knifeman's left hand extended forward, fingers spread wide, the knife held up next to his face in his right hand, ready to be thrust into unprotected flesh. His knees were bent slightly, weight over the balls of his feet. Lucien hadn't conceived there might be dangerous criminals in the lands surrounding Demesne. He quickly revised this opinion.

The punch from the left hand caught him off balance. Clattering into his jaw and knocking him to one side. There was a twinge of panic as he realised how quick his opponent was. Lucien purged the feeling, holding a picture of Virmyre's most admired sharks in his mind. Deadly, implacable, attacking without reserve or hesitation.

Lucien slashed across the man's torso, making him leap back, then directed a backhanded blow with the hilt of the weapon, cracking it across his opponent's nose. Blood spilled in a torrent; the criminal stumbled and swore. Lucien attempted to kick his feet out from under him, instead walking into a wild swipe that opened the right breast of his jacket. The flesh beneath remained whole. The man grinned, his teeth a foul shade of yellow. He launched in with a series of staccato jabs, using the point of the blade to drive Lucien back across the chamber. On and on, his attacker pressed forward, not pausing for a second, each thrust faster and more ferocious than the last. He punctuated the knife thrusts with strikes from his left hand. Lucien batted the blade aside with his knife held in a reverse grip, watching the knifeman's left hand warily. Much more of this and he'd be up against the wall.

A split second, a realisation. The man had overextended himself. Lucien bent his knees, punching with every ounce of force in his body. Using the blunt handle of the knife he mauled the man's ruined nose. The criminal howled in pain, staggering back, blinking away tears. The farmer, if indeed he had ever been a farmer, slipped on the spattering of blood from his own nose. He hit the ground with a muffled yelp, his right hand concealed by the weight of his body. He attempted to stand, then exhaled noisily, an awful shiver running through the length of his body.

The training room pitched into silence.

'Get up!' roared Giancarlo, who cuffed the novice soundly across the back of the head. The novice ran forward, in turn giving the criminal a generous boot to the ribs. The man didn't flinch, a deadweight. The novice looked to the *superiore* with an edge of rising panic on his face. Giancarlo approached and rolled the body over. The man had fallen on his own blade, betrayed underfoot by his own slippery blood.

'This at least you have managed to get right, bastard boy,' said Giancarlo eyeing Lucien. 'Let's see if you've really got the nerve to wear the sashes of House Fontein.'

Lucien stepped forward to the dais to retrieve his cherished blade. Giancarlo calmly laid one boot down on the scabbard and folded his arms. A cruel smile twisted on his lips.

'You'll not need this. The last fight is hand-to-hand.'

'What?' said Lucien, outraged. No testing had ever been conducted in such a way. 'I have to kill a man with my bare hands?'

'If you think you can manage it,' sneered the *superiore*. He knelt down and collected Lucien's blade, drawing it slowly. 'After all, there will be times when you don't have a sword to rely upon.' Lucien stared open-mouthed in horror. Giancarlo hefted the weapon above his head, then brought the bone-coloured blade crashing down onto the granite floor. The blade flew apart, shattered into uncountable pieces.

Lucien felt the fury grow behind his eyes, at the back of his neck, coiling in the muscles of his torso like reptiles. His fingers curled into claws and then he was lunging forward.

D'arzenta shouted something from the balcony, but the sound came from a great distance, drowned out by Lucien's rage. The smirk on Giancarlo's face gave way to uncertainty. Lucien grasped him by the jacket, mashing his forehead into the nose of the *superiore*. Giancarlo collapsed with a muffled thump, blood streaming down his chin.

For a few seconds no one in the chamber moved. D'arzenta and Ruggeri stood leaning over the balcony, faces frozen with shock. The Allatamento boy cowered, keen to be away from the furious Orfano. Franco sidled to the wall, flattening himself against it, perhaps hoping he would be forgotten. Lucien stood at the edge of the dais, the remnants of his blade scattered all around like bone fragments. His hands were shaking but his anger had fled.

Giancarlo dabbed at his face with blunt fingertips, regarding the blood on them. He looked at the bright fluid for a few seconds and laughed.

'Striking the *superiore*. This is . . . unforeseen.' He stood up and Lucien backed away from the dais, hand straying to his knife.

'Not only am I failing you, but I'm petitioning Duke and Duchess Fontein to strip you of your colours.' Giancarlo's eyes glittered coldly. 'You'll be forced to change your house name.'

Lucien tried to swallow, struggled to breathe. He'd delivered to Giancarlo everything the *superiore* could have hoped for short of dying. Everything Lucien had worked for, all he'd dare dream of, swept away in one moment's insanity.

'In fact, I'm taking this further,' growled Giancarlo. 'I'll petition all of the houses for your immediate expulsion.'

Lucien staggered back a step as if he'd been struck. He totalled up the votes. Against him, Duke and Duchess Fontein, Lady Prospero and the *capo de custodia*. Golia most certainly. In his favour, Lady Stephania, if she was allowed to vote. Dino perhaps. Unknown: Lord and Lady Contadino, the Majordomo, the directors of House Erudito. Would Anea stand by him or simply abstain? Worse still no student had ever struck a *maestro* in all of Demesne's history, much less a *superiore*.

'Why don't I save you the bother and just leave,' he whispered.

‘Oh no, I’m going to enjoy this.’ Giancarlo grinned through blood-rimmed teeth. ‘I’ll see to it your name goes down in Demesne’s history books as the most wretched Orfano that ever existed.’

Lucien turned and walked out of the chamber, the sound of his boot heels too loud. He struggled with the door, pushed through into the antechamber, then away into the dank corridor beyond. All that followed him was silence.