

## Hawkswood

Resting his hands on a rusted parapet, Mr Firbank gazed at the highest rooftops of Ceraphoon and sighed with increasing discontent. A light rain had been falling all morning while a thick layer of mist had been ever present for most of the week. Firbank had been reluctant to step outside and face the tears falling from the firmament, but his lungs yearned for fresh air and his mind sought the haven of an open space away from the narrowing jaws of the clustered office.

Firbank turned to a cigarette to placate his inner turmoil. He took in the view he'd seen hundreds of times before but never tired of – pristine Ceraphoon. The vast city and capital of Raincronia was steeped in history, yet great stories were now an almost alien concept. As Firbank continued to smoke and ignore the persistent rainfall, he yearned for the next great spark of inspiration that would rock the foundations of the literary world.

Returning to his office, Firbank grimaced at the sight of his desk. On either side were piles of manuscripts; the dreams of countless aspiring authors, carefully pieced together in the hope of giving the next masterpiece to the world. Firbank knew different. His employer – Essenas Publishing House – hadn't produced a best seller in years and now the long winter of obsolescence had manifested itself in increasing redundancies, falling book sales and the very real threat of liquidation. Firbank didn't know how long he had left. All he could do was search hopelessly through the unrewarding pile of manuscripts and believe salvation was within the pages of one of these books.

It was close to the end of the working day when Firbank heard a gentle knock at the door. Without invitation, the usually jovial Wilkins stepped into the office. He held a large book under one arm and looked around the room suspiciously.

‘Do you have a minute, Firbank?’ he asked, closing the door before he had even received a reply.

‘Make it quick, Wilkins,’ Firbank replied, ‘I have to get through the rest of this pile before I can go home.’

‘More romance novels?’

‘How did you guess?’ Firbank tossed the latest manuscript to one side and leaned back in his hole-ridden leather chair. He beckoned Wilkins to take a seat before sharing out the last of his cigarettes and ignoring the company’s policy on smoking indoors. ‘All these writers seem to think love stories are the way forward but it’s been done so many times that everyone is bored. Don’t get me wrong, love is an enduring institution but these amateurs are not doing anything new with it. How much longer before we’re as redundant as these novels?’

‘I’m thinking more a well-earned retirement than redundancy,’ Wilkins said, a sly grin bringing life to his face.

‘Retirement?’ Firbank replied, as he finished the last of his cigarette. ‘We’re not due to retire for another thirty years, Wilkins? What are you talking about?’

‘Have a look at this.’ Wilkins released the large book from beneath his arm and handed it to Firbank.

‘What is this?’ Firbank asked, as he began flicking through the pages. Wilkins smiled as he watched Firbank’s inquisitive eyes suddenly widen with wonder and possibility.

‘Interesting reading, wouldn’t you say?’ Wilkins asked, popping a small sweet into his mouth to stave off the suspicious scent of cigarette smoke.

‘Is this real?’ Firbank replied. He flicked through the book again taking in not just the words and revelations but the painstaking images and sketches that accompanied them. ‘Wilkins, this book answers many of the questions that have baffled historians for centuries. Eglacius and the fall of Arlvayamond, the final resting place of Leansja the Great, the truth behind the passing of the dragons and the mystery behind Mufessius the Doppelganger.’ Firbank paused for a moment; his eyes were fixed on the edge of the desk as his mind sifted through a forest of repressed memories. When Firbank’s eyes finally blinked and shifted from their statuesque position, he faced Wilkins. ‘Where did you get this?’

‘The author brought it to me personally. Can you believe that? He must be eager to see this in print and who could blame him? This will put our rivals to shame. No more romance novels for us. We can live off this for years.’

‘What was his name?’

‘It was something with a hawk in it. Hawksmoor? Hawkweed? No. Hawkswood! That’s it. Hawkswood.’

Firbank froze as Wilkins continued to convince himself of the mysterious author’s name. As soon as he heard mention of ‘hawk,’ Firbank felt as if a tight fist had snared his throat and began to crush his windpipe. He could barely force a breath let alone words as the magnitude of this revelation grew ever more significant.

‘What did he look like?’ Firbank asked. He immediately covered his mouth with one hand, afraid to say any more, and almost cursed himself for the question.

Wilkins scratched the stubble on his chin while his eyes glanced up at the ceiling as if the answers were written there. ‘He was one of those types from Emeraldon, you know

the ones with animal heads – the valkayans. Saying that, he could have been a Caul or a Sargonian. I always get them mixed up. Which are the bird-headed ones?’

‘They’re the Sargonians,’ Firbank said, in almost a distant whisper. His eyes had fallen from Wilkins’ face; his lips formed inaudible words while his heart began to beat faster. ‘Did this Sargonian have a head reminiscent of an owl?’

‘That’s right,’ Wilkins replied, nodding.

‘Listen to me, Wilkins, this is important. Did Hawkswood have a large scar running from his forehead and down one side of his face?’

Wilkins lost his mirth and frowned as Firbank’s once surreptitious insight continued to dissipate. ‘He did. Firbank, how do you know all this?’

‘How long ago since you saw him?’ Firbank asked, now resting both hands on his desk and leaning forward. ‘Was it today? Please, Wilkins, I need to know now.’

‘It was only a short while ago,’ Wilkins replied. ‘Maybe half an hour. Why? What is this all about?’

Firbank made no response. He raced around his desk, out of his office and into the metropolis of Ceraphoon.

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As soon as Firbank was outside Essenias Publishing House he noticed them. Transparent along the sodden streets were footprints emitting a purple glow that remained undiminished beneath the heavy raindrops. Firbank approached the first prints cautiously and rested one hand on the surface of the path. He felt the moisture of rainwater on either side of his hand but where the imprint rested was warm and dry. Firbank raised his hand

and watched purple fragments of glittering dust run down the lines of his palm before falling into the unrelenting puddles that surrounded his feet.

‘Magic,’ Firbank said aloud, ‘just as he told me.’

Firbank continued along the streets with haste, the sparkling footprints leading him closer to Hawkswood. Beneath the mist and increasing rainfall Ceraphoon’s streets were largely deserted. Those out in the rain were too absorbed in finding the sanctuary of the nearest shelter to be concerned by a man in a sodden suit racing through the streets with his eyes fixed mostly on the ground.

An hour after leaving Essenias Publishing House, Firbank discerned a small figure in the distance with long black robes and small wings protruding from his back. His every step parted the water on the road to be replaced by a magical footprint that the rain retreated from rather than subdued.

‘Hawkswood!’ Firbank shouted. He saw the figure turn his head before immediately breaking into a frantic run.

Firbank continued the pursuit of Hawkswood but his lungs were soon gasping for greater intakes of air while his legs and feet slowly screamed their submission. Up ahead, Hawkswood turned left and brought a grateful smile to Firbank’s face; he was heading into a dead end. Firbank took the same left turn and immediately halted. Hunching over, he took a few minutes to steady his breathing before walking the short distance to the end of the street.

Hawkswood’s footprints continued along the path, their increased distance betraying the urgency and speed of his progress. As Firbank reached the towering wall at the end of the path there was no sign of Hawkswood. His footprints continued on towards the wall

but then all trace was lost. It wasn't possible. Firbank had blocked the only escape route from the street yet Hawkswood had still managed to get away.

Firbank searched the area frantically in the hope that Hawkswood had simply found a secluded hiding place but there was nothing. Just as he was about to concede defeat and leave, Firbank was distracted by a faint purple glow at the base of the wall. Kneeling close by, he perceived the last trace of Hawkswood, which was nothing more than a fraction of the once prominent footprints.

Firbank shuddered amidst a swirling wind and hugged himself. 'He can walk through walls,' he said.

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By the time Firbank returned to Essenas Publishing House he found the bulk of the offices were empty and the corridors were mostly in darkness. The sense of unease from his close encounter with Hawkswood had not subsided and the desolation of the workplace only served to increase his uncertainty and fear.

Firbank was relieved to find Wilkins still waiting in his office. His colleague stood close to the balcony, oblivious to the unrelenting rainfall that continued to drown the streets and rooftops of Ceraphoon. Wilkins was smoking with trembling hands that Firbank deduced was more down to the cold than his earlier meeting with Hawkswood. Wilkins didn't know the truth.

'There you are, Firbank,' Wilkins said, tossing the remnants of his cigarette outside onto the balcony. He watched the cigarette strike the parapet, flip briefly into the air before falling to the streets below. 'Where have you been? What is all this strange business with Hawkswood?'

‘Sit down, Wilkins,’ Firbank replied, shaking off his sodden jacket and remaining oblivious to the scattered droplets that struck the pile of manuscripts on his desk. ‘Now, listen to me. What I’m about to tell you cannot leave this office, Wilkins. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, of course, Firbank. Now, tell me what is going on?’

Firbank opened one of his desk drawers and produced a bottle of whisky and two glasses. Wilkins shook his head as he watched Firbank’s trembling hands slowly fill each glass before restoring the bottle to the seclusion of the drawer.

‘My grandfather first spoke of Hawkswood,’ Firbank said between eager sips of whisky. ‘When Essenas Publishing House first opened Hawkswood brought a book to his office that answered questions from Elenchera’s past that have left historians either baffled or in a permanent state of dispute. Little was thought of this first book. My grandfather ensured its publication but contemporary historians dismissed many of its answers as delusion and folly. However, all this changed when my father met Hawkswood.’

‘Wait a second,’ Wilkins replied, ‘so you’re telling me that Hawkswood has visited the same publishing house when three generations of your family have been working here? Just how long do these Sargonians live?’

‘Sargonians can live for centuries, their longevity far outweighs the life span of humans.’

‘In that case, what’s the problem, Firbank?’ Wilkins asked, folding his arms and leaning back in his chair. ‘Surely it’s just a coincidence that Hawkswood has paid us three visits and a member of your family has happened to work here at the same time.’

‘When my father first met Hawkswood he felt the rapture of an almost forgotten memory of his school days. The name ‘Hawkswood’ seemed important somehow. My father travelled north to Kaluminia to use the great library – Prescience. After weeks of research he found something.’ Firbank drank the rest of his whisky then reached into another desk drawer. He produced a crumpled piece of paper and handed it carefully to Wilkins. ‘Read this and promise you will speak nothing of it to anyone.’

Wilkins unravelled the sheet of paper and found it to be an extract from a diary that Firbank’s father had clearly torn and stolen from under the unsuspecting noses of the librarians in Prescience. At first, Wilkins squinted at the handwriting before producing a pair of glasses from his jacket and reading Hawkswood’s secret.

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“...The Beruvian soldiers are fearless and their resolve would shatter the courage of most armies. Though the tide is now against them it has taken my army many months to claim the south of this malevolent republic. I began the submission of central and southern Beruvia a year ago and now we stand on the threshold of victory.

The next step is to return north to Anderida and bring about the downfall and ruin of the Beruvian tyrant, Sjanasari. A brilliant politician he may be but he is no soldier. However, I must allow my men the grace of a week’s rest before we return to lay siege to Anderida. Their hearts still beat with mine and their loyalty is without question but we are all counting the cost of this terrible war.

Only yesterday I was devastated to hear that Hawkswood, a former Sargonian soldier now full-time war correspondent, was killed in the midst of heavy fighting at Lightcliffe. The long and prominent scar across his face, a testament to long experience of war, left



us in no doubt that it was Hawkswood that had fallen. He's been with us since the start of this war, chronicling the celebrations of every victory and capturing the sadness and lamentations of those that we have seen fall before their time.

How Hawkswood was slain is something of a mystery. I fear the Beruvians may have succeeded in their plans to harness magic and are now using it against us. A line of glowing purple footprints led away from Hawkswood's body but came to a sudden and inexplicable end on the banks of a nearby river. I can only conclude that Hawkswood's murderer, a practitioner of powerful magic, met his end in the river.

It is my intention to submit Hawkswood's notes along with this diary for future generations to understand the magnitude of the sacrifices we have made in the name of freedom."

[Account of the First Elencheran War by Emperor Helianta of Emeraldon – 42188]

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Wilkins removed his glasses and handed the paper back to Firbank without words or even attempting eye contact. Firbank poured two more glasses of whisky and waited for Wilkins to absorb this overwhelming revelation.

'Is there any way it could be a different Sargonian?' Wilkins finally asked.

'It's too much of a coincidence,' Firbank replied. 'The same name, the love of writing, the long scar across his face, the transparent footprints and the purple magic dust they left behind. It was all the same for my father and grandfather. We can't hide from the truth, Wilkins. The same Hawkswood that came here today has been dead for more than three thousand years.'

‘Now I can see why you were so eager to catch up with him. What happened out there, Firbank?’

‘I followed him through the city until he disappeared just as mysteriously as he has emerged these last three generations. A wall blocked his path yet he found means to scale it or, I’m almost afraid to say, pass through it. I lost him, Wilkins. I missed my chance. We both lost a great opportunity here.’

Wilkins drank the rest of his whisky in one enormous gulp before breaking the silence that was threatening to envelop the room.

‘So, what happens now?’ he asked.

‘We publish the book,’ Firbank replied. ‘Historians will dismiss it as lies but it will augment Hawkswood’s growing legacy and keep Essenias Publishing House afloat through this latest adversity. We should go home, Wilkins. There’s nothing more we can do now. It’s a burden our children or whoever sits in these offices will come to face when we’re retired.’

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Hawkswood wandered through the receding rain until he was on the edge of Ceraphoon. He stopped to look back at the city and felt a hint of sadness tinged with regret. It was time to move on, as difficult as that was. Elenchera was a seemingly bottomless well of history and the purpose of Hawkswood’s early death was to continue to draw the truth and answers from the murky depths.

A thin beam of sunlight broke through the tiniest gap in the dark clouds surmounting the rooftops and highest towers of Ceraphoon. As the rays fell on his now fading form,

Hawkswood longed to just once feel the warmth of the sun, to have air in his lungs and to shed one more tear as he reflected on the poignancy of all life.

When the clouds merged once again and cut off the sun's interloping rays

Hawkswood was nowhere to be seen.

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