

LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear reader,

Thank you for taking the time to read this book. It is something I have refined for over six years of my life. And as my first official release, I hope that you enjoy the beginning of a new series.

Sincerely,

Malachi Maverick

HB / Son of Tamerran

Half-Breed

SON OF TAMERRAN

BOOK: 1

HB / Son of Tamerran

Malachi Maverick

ISBN ***_*_*****_***_* (digital)

ISBN ***_*_*****_***_* (paperback)

ISBN ***_*_*****_***_* (hardcover)

ISBN ***_*_*****_***_* (deluxe)

ISBN ***_*_*****_***_* (audio)

Copyright © 2025 by Malachi Maverick

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods without the prior written permission of the publisher. For permission requests, solicit the publisher via the address below.

This book is a work of fiction. Any names, characters, companies, organizations, places, events, locales, and incidents are either used in a fictitious manner or are fictional. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, actual companies or organizations, or actual events is purely coincidental.

First edition published on Feb 5th, 2025.

Revised edition © November 1st, 2025. (Manuscript Only)

Half-Breed Studios LLC

PO BOX ADDRESS:

11160 Veirs Mill Rd STE LLH-18, Wheaton, Maryland, 20902-1094, #300.

www.halfbreedseries.com

MalachiMaverick@halfbreedseries.com

Printed in the United States of America

TO MY FATHER AND THE CHOCO MAN!

I dedicate this book to my father who supported me by paying for the initial cost of the contract for this book, as well as my grandfather who was the first to read the first draft of the manuscript.

Thank you for believing in my ambitions and supporting me through the many, many months of editing. It means the world to me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue - A Warm Ending	pg. viii
Chapter 1 - The Rebel.....	pg. 1
Chapter 2 - The Wager.....	pg. 9
Chapter 3 - The House of Tamerran.....	pg. 23
Chapter 4 - An Unexpected Surprise.....	pg. 39
Chapter 5 - The Agatte Estate.....	pg. 47
Chapter 6 - Childhood Friends.....	pg. 63
Chapter 7 - Hometown.....	pg. 87
Chapter 8 - The Invitation.....	pg. 101
Chapter 9 - The Beginning of Academia.....	pg. 113
Chapter 10 - An Unpleasant Surprise	pg. 129
Chapter 11 - The Proposal.....	pg. 141
Chapter 12 - Strange Encounters.....	pg. 155
Chapter 13 - The Cultural Exchange Student.....	pg. 177
Chapter 14 - The Turning Point.....	pg. 197
Chapter 15 - A Crimson Shadow.....	pg. 221
Chapter 16 – Broken.....	pg. 251
Chapter 17 - Strange Changes.....	pg. 261
Chapter 18 - The Return to Academia.....	pg. 283
Chapter 19 - A Good Deed.....	pg. 303

HB / Son of Tamerran

Chapter 20 - Aftermath.....	pg. 319
Chapter 21 – Son of Creed.....	pg. 329
Chapter 22 - A Meeting in the Meadow.....	pg. 339
Chapter 23 - Dreams of a Forgotten Past.....	pg. 363
Chapter 24 - Demons and Nightmares.....	pg. 371
Chapter 25 - A Silent Warning.....	pg. 399
Chapter 26 - At the Heart of Hell’s Mountain.....	pg. 417
Chapter 27 - Racing on the Edge.....	pg. 439
Chapter 28 - Confinement.....	pg. 461
Chapter 29 - Duel of Fate.....	pg. 471
Chapter 30 - A Meeting Between Families.....	pg. 497
Chapter 31 - Dangerous Visitors.....	pg. 513
Chapter 32 - The Winter Festival.....	pg. 533
Chapter 33 - Adagio for Warrington.....	pg. 555
Chapter 34 - Night of the Blood Moon.....	pg. 567
Chapter 35 - The Huntress Returns.....	pg. 591
Half-Breed: Rogue Hunter // Book 2.....	pg. 613
About the Author.....	pg. 615
???	pg.???

PROLOGUE

A WARM ENDING

It was a calm winter morning in the northern province of Tavrobel, Eldorann, the sun rising as it hid its face behind the mountain crests, painting the clouds with streaks of orange, blue, and purple. The mountains, standing stoic and wide, formed a natural gate to the tundras of the North-East—a frozen expanse of ice and snow separating Eldorann from the Ork Lands and their brutal marauders.

Settled at the base of the range stretched a thick forest of pine and birch, its canopy giving way to a valley that ran toward the South-West. At the valley's center, perched atop a hill, stood a solitary house overlooking the land. Its foundations were rough and ridged, weathered by years of wind and frost, yet its presence remained welcoming.

At the edge of the cliffs, a man stood against the wind in dark winter clothing, his gaze fixed on the rising sun. His rugged face, glacier-blue eyes, and short beard matched a strong, imposing build. What set him apart were his pointed canine ears and gray husky tail trailing behind him. His name was Paul, Son of the Tamerrans. A Demi-Human of the North—a living link between Man and Beast.

Though he appeared no older than thirty, he was nearly a century in age. Eighty-six, to be exact. His most striking feature was his right leg from the knee down—a black, polished prosthetic that shimmered in the morning light.

The call of a great bird split the sky.

Looking up, he saw a silver owl using the wind to stay aloft before diving toward him. Just before reaching the edge, her wings flared with light, the glow enveloping her body as she shifted into her true form.

An Arctic Elf landed before him.

She was a Huntress—deadly and precise. Dark tactical armor clung beneath her leather jacket, with auto-adapting boots digging into the snow. A long metallic bow with a glowing string rested on her back, a quiver of various arrows at her side. Twin daggers hung at her hips, a pistol secured to her thigh, and a black kevlar satchel across her back. A white scarf shadowed her face, concealing all but her gray eyes—cold and sharp as stone.

“Took you long enough,” Paul grumbled, his voice tired. “I’ve been waiting three hours. It’s not like you to be late.”

“Apologies,” the Huntress replied, her voice muffled by the scarf. “The crosswind was heavy.”

He answered with a grunt and stepped toward her, pulling her into a brief embrace. When they parted, she spoke again.

“So, how is he?” she asked.

“Better,” Paul answered. “He’s getting used to leaving the valley and seeing the town. He’s even met the daughter of my good friend. From what I’ve heard, they get along well.”

“That’s good,” she said. “Does he still have nightmares?”

“Occasionally. He still sleeps with us from time to time, but he’s getting better on his own.”

The Huntress nodded, then turned her gaze down the mountain toward the house below. With her sharp eyes, she focused on a second-floor window, spotting a boy asleep in his bed. His face was turned away, but a small elf-like ear poked through his dark, curly hair.

“You made it shorter,” she murmured.

“Hmm?”

“His hair,” she clarified. “Did you cut it?”

“You can see that from here? I forgot how sharp your eyes are.” Paul asked, half impressed. “It was getting in his eyes, so we trimmed it a few months ago.”

She said nothing, taking the time to observe the child’s condition. From what she could see, he was well cared for. Clean clothes, tidy hair, new toys scattered around the room. As Paul watched her, he knew what was on her mind.

“You can go see him if you want to,” he said, easing himself onto the cliff’s edge.

She turned to him, surprised.

“Look,” he continued with a sigh. “I know it’s been three years. But I’m sure he’ll remember you, given some time. You’re going to take him with you eventually. It would be best for him to know you before that day comes.”

She looked back toward the house, paralyzed by hesitation. And as her thoughts spiraled into a frenzy, the boy stirred in his sleep and rolled onto his back.

Her heart skipped.

After three long years, she finally saw his face.

The boy's appearance was one of youth and innocence, something that she had always remembered him by. He was an early adolescent, and his skin was a warm, mocha tan.

"Has it really been three years?" she wondered.

Her gaze lingered, tracing his features until she noticed a thin white scar along his left cheek, shimmering in the morning sun like a string of spider's silk. The sight drained the joy from her chest, replacing it with quiet sorrow—and resounding resolve.

"No," she said softly. "He's not ready for the world he has to face. He needs to be protected."

"I understand," the man said, rising to his feet. "Anne and I will make sure of that."

"This will be the last time we meet." Reaching into her jacket, she produced a strange black device. It felt heavy when she placed it in his hand.

"I'll contact you with this when it's time," she said. "Until then, keep him safe and raise him well."

Paul stared at the device. It was smooth, polished, and oval-shaped—his reflection appeared in its obsidian surface. The runes circling its equator were foreign to him, ancient in design.

“Last time?” he asked. “What do you mean, last time? We agreed to meet every year.”

“If I continue this pattern, the Apostles may find this place,” she said, stepping toward the sunrise. “There’s still too much I don’t know—where he comes from, why he’s being hunted...”

She paused with a pained expression. “Until I understand the full extent of the Apostles’ motives and capabilities, I can’t prepare him. Distance is the only way to keep you safe.”

Paul listened in silence, knowing what she was implying. Toward the end, his concern hardened into anger.

“If you disappear, we won’t even know if you’re alive,” he said, his voice rising. “You said it yourself—you don’t know what you’re facing. If they kill you and find anything linked to us, they’ll come here and take him away. And there *will* be a slaughter. I only agreed to take him in if there would be peace. The last time those bastards came here, they took my leg and threatened my wife! I won’t risk her life again. If you do this, you must promise our home will never be put in harm’s way again.”

A long silence fell between them as they revisited that terrible moment. She was not surprised by what he had to say, as she was there when it happened. But instead of giving false optimism, she did what she knew was best.

“You know I can’t promise that, Paul,” she said quietly. “There will always be risk. But I swear, I will do everything in my power to keep you and your home safe.”

She extended her hand.

“Do you trust me?”

Paul stared at the device, memories flooding back—his screams of rage, his blood staining the snow, his wife’s cries as she was held at gunpoint. That fear had only come twice in his life, and he never wanted to feel it again.

At last, he met her eyes and grasped her forearm.

“I trust you.”

Their grip sealed the promise.

Paul slipped the device into his pocket as the Huntress walked toward the far edge of the mountain. She removed her satchel and drew out a fractured yet mended mask with a scratched-out symbol on its forehead.

“We gave him a name,” Paul said.

She paused and turned to him.

“We named him Cole,” he continued. “Son of the Tamerrans. I thought you should know.”

Cold wind wrapped around them as she considered the name.

“Cole,” she repeated softly.

She secured the mask over her face. Light flared along its cracks as her body dissolved into white mist, carried away by the wind until nothing remained.

Alone on the mountain, Paul stared out across the frozen wilderness, anxiety pressing down on his shoulders.

With a breath, he channeled his inner strength, transforming into a massive gray and black wolf, standing five and a half feet tall. Even his prosthetic shifted, forming into a reinforced mechanical paw.

He soon made his way down the mountain, leaping and sliding across rock and ice before entering the valley below. Keeping a steady pace, he made light work of the heavy-laden snow.

Arriving at the front door of his home, he reverted to his original form, kicking the snow from his boots before entering quietly. Closing the door with care, he sat at the base of the stairway and unlaced his boots, setting them aside to dry.

He lingered there for a moment, considering his new reality.

Taking a breath to steady himself, he rose and moved up the stairs, light on his feet despite his frame.

He cracked open the door to his room. Anne was still asleep, breathing softly beneath the sheets. He could see part of her face and one of her rabbit ears, the other buried in the pillow. After everything that had transpired, it was best to let her rest.

He closed the door without a sound and walked to the other end of the hall, stopping before a door plastered with crayon drawings and rough sketches.

One caught his eye.

It showed him and his wife holding hands with the boy between them.

His chest tightened as he stepped inside.

The boy was still asleep, still lying on his back. Paul sat beside him on the edge of the bed, watching quietly.

He remembered the day he had first found him—his body blue from the cold, unconscious in the arms of a wounded Huntress, both at the edge of death.

Scars still marked the boy's frame, quiet echoes of what he had survived.

"What happened to you?" Paul had asked himself that question more times than he could count.

Then the boy stirred, his eyes opening slowly.

"Uncle?" He croaked, his voice small and heavy with sleep.

"Hey, buddy," Paul said gently. "Did you sleep well?"

Cole thought for a moment as his mind cleared.

"I dreamt of a lady," he said quietly.

Paul paused.

"A lady?"

Cole nodded.

"Do you remember her?"

"No," Cole said, looking toward the window. "But I like it when I see her."

Paul smiled, taking the boy's hand. "You'll see her again one day. Just try not to forget her."

"Okay..." Cole yawned, resting his head against Paul's palm.

Paul froze, unsure of what to do. Moments later, Cole was asleep again.

Paul remained there, wondering when it would be right to pull his hand away. Then his own words echoed back to him.

I only agreed to take him in if there would be peace.

Shame gripped his chest as he looked down at the boy.

He was a warrior. A soldier who defended the innocent without hesitation. And yet he had placed conditions on a child who had done nothing wrong.

“What’s wrong with you...” he murmured.

Almost instinctively, Paul lifted Cole into his arms and wrapped him in the extra blanket from the foot of the bed.

Cole stirred briefly, confused, but the familiar scent and warmth of his uncle’s chest soothed him. Within moments, he was asleep again.

As Paul made sure he was secure, he reached into his pocket and withdrew the device. His gaze drifted to the window, toward the distant cliff where he and the Huntress had spoken.

With a slow breath, he closed his eyes, gripping the device in his hand, and murmured a quiet prayer.

“Almighty be with you.”

HB / Son of Tamerran

CHAPTER 1

THE REBEL

Seven and a half years later.

Elsewhere, in a vast tundra of stone and brush, a lone road twisted at the base of the mountains. It was late afternoon, the sun casting long shadows across the valley, where deer and small game nibbled on shrubs and weeds.

Across the horizon, a dark gray object approached from the west, accompanied by a distant drone.

Serenity shattered as the drone swelled into rolling thunder.

The object came into view—a car, dust swirling behind it, moving at tremendous speed.

As it tore past, it startled a hare feeding quietly along the roadside, sending it scrambling into its burrow nearby.

The machine rode low on sway-bar suspension, cutting through the air with aggressive aerodynamics. Its heart was a precision-bored aluminum block with steel sleeves and a twin-screw supercharger—built with obsessive detail. Etched into the center of the steering wheel was a single name:

Creed.

A sentiment of the builder's appreciation.

At the helm of this beast sat a young man in black, hand firm on the wheel. He wore a leather jacket, fingerless gloves, and a racing helmet that hid his face. A digital display glowed within the visor, showing his location, the time [17:13], and surrounding weather (15.6 ^).

The road was rough and uneven, steel reverberating through his bones. He turned right, but the car veered left. By instinct alone, he feathered the throttle and guided the wheel, clawing the car back onto the road.

He downshifted, yanked the handbrake, and snapped the car sideways into a controlled drift. Dust billowed. Fire spat from the exhaust. He straightened out and buried the throttle, pushing past 120 mph.

Asphalt gave way to dirt as he entered the jaws of a canyon. Stone walls towered over him, their shadows blocking out the sun. Far ahead, a sign loomed over the canyon, its presence stark and unmistakable:

**NATIONAL PROPERTY — VANGUARD INDUSTRIES —
STRATEGIC ASSET**

He started a timer on his watch—adrenaline coursing through his veins. Past the sign, a gate appeared around the bend. Time slowed as everything sharpened. He floored the accelerator and braced for impact.

BASH!

Steel chains exploded as the car plowed through.

Sirens wailed, their screams echoing off the canyon walls.

There was no going back now.

He shifted to first and floored it. The machine lunged forward with a deafening roar. Smoke and dust rising behind him.

She was a stallion—

and he was her rider.

Now clear of the canyon, the Driver burst into a massive surface mining operation. It was so vast and deep his stomach lurched—like peering into an open maw. Along the outskirts, he threaded between automated mining drones and colossal ore-laden haulers, narrowly escaping their rumbling tires.

High above, managers within a glass-walled outpost pressed against the windows, shouting and pointing at the intruder in black.

“Two minutes, thirty seconds,” intoned the watch on his wrist.

With a sharp snap of the wheel, he shot between two ore haulers, forcing them to slam on the brakes—metal shrieking to a halt.

It was a race against the clock.

Every action mattered.

Every correction cost time.

Stones ricocheted off the undercarriage, rattling the cabin.

Then came another sound.

Whirling turbines.

In the rearview mirror, two hovercycles cut through the dust like predators, armor glinting silver and green.

Enforcers.

They flanked him—one on either side. The leader slammed his gauntlet against the Driver’s window, his voice booming through a megaphone.

“Rogue operator! You are in violation of national security! Pull over and surrender immediately!”

The Driver ignored him, drifting along the cliff's edge as loose stone sprayed into the abyss.

"Pull over now or be engaged!"

The Driver's eyes stayed forward.

A sign flashed overhead:

MINING VEIN #34 — 200 YARDS.

His fingers hovered over the emergency brake.

"You have three seconds to comply!" the Enforcer warned, weapons flashing.

"Three! ... Two!! ... One!!! ..."

The tunnel appeared and he slammed the brakes.

SCREECH!

The hovercycles overshot him in a cloud of dust. In the same instant, he wrenched the hand brake, spun the wheel, and snapped the car into a perfect skid.

It slid into alignment before the tunnel.

With a burst of power, the car roared into the earth, plunging deep into the facility.

At first, the caverns were wide, his engine reverberating off the rock.

Then the walls closed in.

Mistakes would be lethal here.

The Enforcers reappeared in the mirror, carving through the tunnel with ease. Being smaller and lighter, their cycles hugged jagged walls, turbines screaming as they closed in.

The lead Enforcer keyed his comms.

“Dispatch, do you read?”

“Loud and clear, Commander Thornwood,” said a woman, her voice crackling through the interference. “Have you apprehended the suspect?”

“Negative,” Thornwood replied. “This one is bolder than the others. Requesting permission to engage.”

A pause.

“That’s a negative, Commander. Those veins are laced with pure Terrarium. One stray shot and you’ll be blown into the stratosphere.”

Thornwood gritted his teeth. “Understood. Maintaining pursuit.”

His lieutenant broke in, breath ragged.

“What’s the play, Commander?”

“Stay on him, Hildar. These tunnels lead to a dead end. Once there, he’s ours.”

“Roger that.”

The chase intensified. The Driver tore through razor-thin passages, skimming drones and jagged stone. Despite their size advantage, the Enforcers struggled to keep up.

“How is he doing this?” Hildar shouted, nearly clipping a drone. “It’s like he knows this place!”

“Just stay on him,” Thornwood growled. “We’re almost out.”

The tunnel narrowed to its tightest choke point, then burst into a straight chute of carved stone. At its far end, a pinprick of daylight burned.

The Driver floored it.

“He’s getting faster!” Hildar shouted, visor pelted with dust and stone.

Thornwood’s eyes locked on the crimson taillights ahead.

“Let him run. He’ll stop when he sees the cliff.”

Daylight burst across the windshield.

The Driver squinted as his vision adjusted. He had burst onto a massive cliffside platform stacked with containers, landing pads, and idle hovercraft.

Ground crews scattered.

Pilots froze.

Workers dove behind heavy equipment as the pursuit tore across the platform.

By some miracle, no one collided.

The far edge of the platform was nothing—a sheer drop.

Still, the Driver pressed harder.

“What is he doing?” Thornwood muttered, a chill climbing his spine.

“Commander?” Hildar’s voice cracked.

Thornwood didn’t answer. His hands trembled on the controls.

Five hundred meters.

Four hundred meters.

“Commander?!”

Three hundred.

Two hundred.

“COMMANDER!”

“Disengage! Disengage!” Thornwood barked, redirecting thrust as drag panels flared.

The Enforcers whirled to a halt just short of the precipice.

The car did not.

It flew off the edge.

For a heartbeat, gravity vanished. Inside the cabin, the Driver floated against his harness as loose items drifted around him.

His hand shot upward and yanked a red handle.

A roof panel blew free, releasing a massive parachute that opened with a violent crack, wrenching the car mid-descent.

From the ridge above, the Enforcers watched as the black machine glided toward the canyon floor.

Inside, the Driver gripped a joystick duct-taped to the console, guiding the descent. At a hundred feet, he flicked a switch. Suspension pistons snapped down, preparing for landing.

The car slammed into the earth with a bone-rattling **THUD**, bounced twice, then skidded to a stop. Dust swallowed it whole.

He jettisoned the chute and tore off across the canyon floor, disappearing into the wilderness.

Above, Hildar whispered, "He's insane."

Thornwood keyed his comms, still staring at the fading trail.

"Dispatch. Do we continue the pursuit?"

"That's a negative, Commander. The suspect has left your jurisdiction and entered No Man's Land. Border Patrol has been notified. Return to post."

"Roger that."

Thornwood turned away from the edge, blood hot with frustration. Behind him, Hildar lingered, staring into the canyon as if trying to understand what he had just witnessed.

“So that’s it? We’re just giving up—after all that?”

“Unless you’re keen on a thousand-foot drop, be my guest,” Thornwood snapped. “Otherwise, turn around and get back to post.”

As Thornwood sped away, workers swarmed the platform, shouting questions, demanding answers. He ignored them, sirens blaring to clear a path. Hildar gave one last look at the fading dust trail, shook his head, and followed his commander.

CHAPTER 2

THE WAGER

The climb out of the canyon was steep and treacherous, the path carved by seasons of ice and rain. His engine snarled as he forced the machine upward, gravel skittering over the edge with each surge of power. After a final twist, he crested the rim—the ruins of a colossal bridge stood before him. Worn and ancient in appearance, yet precise and advanced in design.

Granite blocks, each weighing dozens of tons, had been cut and placed with flawless precision. Its partially exposed infrastructure revealed a steel skeleton seemingly immune to rust and decay. Not a single rivet or weld had been used, but held together by perfect geometry alone. In ages past, it had been a seamless wonder spanning the canyon. Now, it stood as a monument to a long-lost era—when projects such as these were once considered ordinary.

Beneath its shadow gathered a crowd of racers. Their exposed engines gleamed, polished to a mirror sheen, headlights casting sharp beams across the surrounding arches. Some cheered at his arrival; others greeted him with hostile glares.

The Driver eased to a stop and stepped out of the vehicle. Removing his helmet, he revealed his identity.

Cole Tamerran, now nineteen years of age, stood quietly before the restless crowd. Apart from his tanned skin, disheveled hair, facial scar, and hybrid ears, his most striking feature was his eyes.

They were a rich imperial blue, threaded with faint traces of indigo. At first glance, they appeared no different from any Human's. But as the evening sun caught the iris, they narrowed into vertical slits—reptilian and unnerving, like those of a viper.

At the center of these racers stood a group of three Nobles, surrounded by expensive cars and equally expensive attire. They were twenty to twenty-two years of age, groomed and confident, effortlessly entertaining the provocative girls who lavished them with attention.

The first was Justix Honor, who carried himself with effortless arrogance. His hair was white as snow, his skin carved ivory, his eyes a brilliant silver. A descendant of a long line of lords, his family possessed assets across the continent of Agarath. With corrosive charm and sharply angled features, he wore a white-and-steel racing suit that matched the exotic hypercar he leaned against.

To his right stood Beleg Fodreth, born of high-ranking military leaders and government officials within the Eldorannian Empire. Built like a wall, with short-cut hair, he wore a jacket of digital arctic camo, heavy boots planted firmly in the dirt. The knife at his side appeared ceremonial—more a symbol of authority than a tool of survival. Aviator glasses concealed his eyes, leaving only the scar on his brow exposed.

To the left stood Haleth Malacar, future inheritor of one of the largest merchant companies in the Northern Nations. Taller, thinner, and wrapped in glowing fabrics, his presence was bombastic by design. Black and neon-yellow patterns adorned his clothing, crystal earrings caught the light, and painted lips curved into a smile that relished a spectacle.

Due to the scope of his family's empire, Haleth commanded access to rare resources and advanced technologies, backed by a seemingly endless flow of income. It made him a powerful ally to both the Honors and the Fodreths—and to much of the Imperial Government.

Cole spotted them, walked to the trunk of his car, and retrieved a package. He slammed the trunk shut and moved toward the trio. They met him halfway as the crowd fell silent.

Justix spoke.

"I have to hand it to you, Snake Eyes. I'm surprised you followed through. But then again, you never walked away from a wager."

Cole said nothing. He tossed the package at Justix's feet. The Nobles flinched at the sudden gesture, murmurs rippling through the crowd.

Justix bent down and picked up the parcel with a faint chuckle. The smile faltered when he broke the seal. Inside lay a roll of parachute wire, marked with neon paint where a deliberate cut had been made—undeniable proof of sabotage.

"You inspected the entire parachute?" he asked with a smug grin.

Cole did not respond. He stood in silence, eyes cold and sharp, never leaving Justix.

“Fair enough,” Justix concluded, tossing the package aside.

With a snap of his fingers, he summoned one of the girls behind him. She stepped forward, pulling a golden card from her cleavage. Holding it just out of reach, she let it fall at Cole’s feet.

Laughter rippled outward.

The young woman looked Cole over, taking note of his worn clothing, and sneered in disgust before returning to Justix’s side. The rest of the women were already moving through the crowd, distributing similar cards to select individuals.

Cole knelt, unbothered, and picked up the card. The laughter rose again, mocking his inconvenience.

“A deal’s a deal, Snake Eyes,” Justix said as the girls returned behind him. “You won the wager—and with it, fifty percent of the pot.”

“With the rest going to the fools who bet on you,” Beleg added dryly as a woman took his arm.

Cole ignored them.

He removed a small device from his pocket, scanned the card, and studied the data streaming across its display. His eyes sharpened as the analysis ended with a soft chime.

Footsteps approached.

Cole turned to see Justix closing the distance.

“So, do we have an accord?” Justix asked, extending his hand.

Standing before Cole, he made his height advantage clear—at least four inches taller. Cole barely looked up, his attention still on the card.

“What did they receive from this wager?” Cole asked, breaking his silence.

Justix blinked. His brow furrowed.

“What?”

“What did the recipients receive from this wager?”

Justix scoffed.

“Imperial Credits, as usual.”

Cole met his eyes with a steady glare.

“Then why is there crypto on this card?”

Justix’s smile vanished. Voices flared like sparks in dry grass.

“This card has crypto too!” a man shouted, waving his card overhead.

The crowd erupted, accusations flying as they closed in around Justix.

“What do you mean crypto?”

“We were promised Imperial Credits!”

Golden cards flashed through the air as the space tightened, threats stacking over one another.

Justix’s companions observed in cold silence.

“You think he can turn this around?” Beleg muttered.

Haleth exhaled a colorful cloud from his jeweled vape, smiling faintly. It smelled of cherries.

“Have faith, Fodreth. He’s seen worse. He’ll turn the tide.”

Haleth offered the vape. Beleg waved it away.

“He better. Or he’ll lose a lot of clout being outdone by a half-devil.”

Justix raised his hands, posture steady.

“Relax. Relax! The crypto is backed by silver and carries equal value to Imperial Credits. The Code states wagers may be paid with any tender equal to the amount owed.”

The uproar dulled—but only slightly. All eyes shifted back to Cole.

“As long as it is accepted by the winner,” Cole countered.

Justix’s jaw tightened.

“And why won’t you accept it?”

Cole lifted the card. Light reflected in his reptilian eyes.

“Because this crypto is tied to your family’s bank—under your name. If you sold your shares, it would collapse overnight and trigger a mass sell-off.”

“And why would I do that?” Justix snapped. “The currency is strong. It’s performing well.”

“Because you would gain everything and face no legal repercussions,” Cole replied evenly. “Per the contract your lawyers coughed up, a year of ownership was required. The debut was seventeen months ago.”

“I have my reputation to consider,” Justix argued, voice like ice.

Cole narrowed his eyes.

“Just like you did with Envidia?”

Justix stiffened.

“Wait—he really did that?” said one not too far away.

“Yeah. Quarter of spring. Dumped his shares. Market crashed right after,” answered another, eyeing Justix with contempt.

Justix was losing ground with every second.

“You see, Justix, I’d rather not place my winnings—or my wallet—in the hands of a man I don’t trust,” Cole explained.

His gaze drifted to the silver-and-white hypercar in the background. Then back to Justix—his pupils contracting like razors.

“And if I refuse your tender, the Code grants me the right to take whatever I see fit.”

The crowd followed his stare, eyes widening in realization.

Justix burned red.

“That car is worth more than this wager!”

“I know,” Cole said flatly, dropping the card at his feet. “But I feel it’s necessary.”

Justix swallowed his fury, forcing a smile that looked strained as he pulled out his checkbook. Writing down the necessary information, his eyes lit up for a moment, paused, then finish the check.

Justix no longer appeared cornered, but relaxed. Confident.

Something wasn’t right.

Tearing out the check from his book, Justix held out his hand.

When Cole reached for it, Justix didn’t let go.

“What’s wrong with you?” Cole asked in disgust.

“I finally understand you now,” Justix said quietly.

“What?”

“This isn’t for you, is it?”

Cole ripped the check free, turned—and froze. He read it once. Twice. Then looked back.

“You doubled it?”

“Yes. Just in case your ‘family’ has trouble securing a loan in the future. More so than they already do now.”

Cole’s blood ran cold.

“Seeing as my family owns the largest bank in the provinces,” Justix continued, circling him, “I have access to every financial record. Including that of Captain Paul Samuel, Son of the Tamerrans.”

Something sparked in Cole’s chest.

“Stay calm. Walk away,” he told himself.

Justix stepped in front of him, cutting off his escape.

“From what I read, he joined the ARROW Division fresh out of high school—the tip of the spear of the Eldorannian Military,” Justix said, his voice calm and authoritative. “Here, he served in dozens of deployments to defend our borders, fighting against the onslaughts of the Battle Orks. Here, he became a legend and a deadly marksman, solidifying his name as the Shadow of Death. He brought honor to his departed family, being the last of his lineage.”

Cole stood rigid, heart pounding. The sounds of the crowd dulled, fading into a distant hum as each word struck deeper than the last.

“But then came you,” Justix continued.

The pause was deliberate.

“The half-spawn of a heretic Forest Elf and some wretched Reptilian.”

Laughter rippled through the crowd—sharp, ugly, and eager. Cole’s vision blurred. He blinked hard, but a tear still slipped free, trailing down his cheek before he could stop it.

“In spite of the nature of your blood—and the consequences thereof,” Justix went on, “he and his wife took you in as their own. A decision that removed them from the favor of the very Empire he swore to defend. Quite foolish, honestly.”

Something hot and violent surged through Cole’s chest, spreading outward like wildfire. His hands trembled at his sides. Justix saw it—and smiled.

“Shut up,” Cole growled.

“Honestly,” Justix said, unfazed, “I have no idea why they didn’t submit you to the authorities after finding you half-dead in the mountains. Most likely abandoned by your whore of a mother.”

The crowd roared with laughter.

“I said shut up!” Cole shouted, crushing the check in his fist.

“And the best part?” Justix asked the crowd, spreading his hands theatrically. “He was found with amnesia! Undoubtedly a blessing to that ‘mother’ of his—having no shame left to carry.”

“I’m warning you, Justix!” Cole yelled, tears spilling freely now.

“You know,” Justix said, stepping closer, lowering his voice as he locked eyes with Cole, “others say it was out of pity when they saved you from that mountain. But truthfully, it was to numb the pain of their stillborn child.”

“Justix!” Cole roared, his restraint finally splintering.

“They never wanted you,” Justix said coldly. “You were a substitute. You could never replace their child, Snake Eyes.”

Something in Cole snapped.

He surged forward, fist clenched, rage eclipsing reason.

“I SAID! SHUT! UP!”

Before the blow could land, Justix caught his fist effortlessly, twisted, and yanked him forward. The world spun as Cole was flipped onto his back, the impact driving the air from his lungs in a brutal gasp. He barely managed to rise to his knees before a heavy strike caught him across the skull, sending him crashing back into the dirt.

The crowd roared for violence.

Some jeered. Others cheered. Not one lifted a hand to intervene. They delighted in the suffering of a ‘devil.’

Cole staggered, chest heaving, ribs screaming with every breath. Something warm ran down his face. He wiped at his brow and stared at the blood smeared across his fingers.

Slowly—defiantly—he forced himself back to his feet.

Justix scoffed and lunged.

Cole raised his forearm just in time. The impact felt like a hammer blow, rattling bone and nerve. He answered with two quick jabs and a wild haymaker. Justix slipped past them with ease and drove a right hook into Cole’s jaw.

CRACK!

Stars burst across Cole’s vision. His legs buckled as he stumbled backward, only for the crowd to shove him forward again, trapping him in the fight. He swung once more—desperate, unfocused.

Justix laughed, weaving aside before driving his knee hard into Cole’s ribs. The force folded him in half. Cheers erupted as he hit the ground, his head swimming.

“You really are a half-devil,” Justix taunted, circling him again. “A selfish one at that.”

Cole wheezed, coughing blood into the dirt. He clawed his way upright and threw a jab. Justix parried, twisted his arm, and sent an uppercut crashing into his mouth. Pain exploded as his lip split.

“If you really cared for them, you would have erased your name to restore theirs,” Justix continued as Cole stared down at his hands, blood pooling in his palms. “But you can’t do that, can you?”

He swung and missed—two sharp blows slammed into his ribs before he could recover.

“But it was never about them. Was it?”

A palm struck his nose. White flashed behind his eyes.

“You were just too busy leeching off their legacy.”

Another hook snapped his head sideways.

“You never gave a damn about them!”

Cole reeled, half-blind, vision spotted with stars. He swung again and hit nothing. The counterstrikes came fast and merciless. The girls shrieked in delight, their laughter cutting deeper than any blow.

Justix grabbed him by the hair and collar, yanking his head forward, and slammed his knee into Cole’s face. The crack echoed sharp and hollow. Blood poured freely from his nose and brow.

Cole staggered back, dazed—but Justix surged after him, ramming an uppercut into his diaphragm. Something snapped. Cole lifted off his feet, breath stolen, and collapsed to his knees.

The crowd roared.

Cole's senses faded for a heartbeat—then crashed back all at once.

While he writhed in the dirt, Justix kicked him in the side. Once. Twice. A heel smashed against his cheek. Then his ribs. Dust kicked up with every strike. The air filled with jeers and cruelty.

And then—

Silence.

Cole lay broken, coughing blood, one eye swollen shut. Above him, Justix stood tall, breathing evenly, a checkbook still in hand.

“Here,” he sneered, scribbling before tearing the check free and dropping it onto Cole's face. “Have another. For we all know—you could never repay their sacrifice.”

The paper stuck to his bloody cheek.

Cole groaned and forced himself upright inch by inch, his body trembling, joints popping in protest. He peeled the check free, spat blood and mucus across it, and shoved it hard into Justix's chest.

“I don't take handouts,” he rasped.

The crowd erupted—some laughing, others staring in stunned silence.

Justix snarled and drove a fist into Cole's face.

BAM!

This time, Cole didn't fall.

He leaned into the blow, absorbing it, never breaking eye contact.

Justix froze.

What stared back at him wasn't pain—it was raw, unfiltered hatred.

He stumbled backward, heart lurching as a sudden hush fell over the crowd. The air turned cold. Heavy.

Cole's voice cut through it like steel.

"Are you finished?"

Justix said nothing.

"Then we have an accord."

Cole turned and limped back to his car, stuffing the original check into his pocket. The engine roared to life, echoing beneath the ancient arches as he drove west, into the fading sun.

Behind him, the racers stood motionless, suffocated by silence.

A man finally stepped forward, breaking it.

"So—where's my check?"

Justix shot him a venomous glare.

"The accord was settled," he growled. "Now piss... off."

The racer retreated immediately.

Justix stormed to his car, tearing the check from his jacket and ripping it in half before flinging the pieces aside. Beleg turned to the crowd and barked a single command.

"Scatter!"

They obeyed without hesitation, starting their cars and speeding off in random directions.

As Justix settled into his seat, one of the women leaned in with a napkin.

"Here, babe. Let me get that—"

He slapped her hand away.

She recoiled in fear.

Justix stared ahead, watching Cole disappear beyond the horizon, his grip tightening on the wheel.

“F***ing half-devil.”

At the same time.

Cole’s hands trembled as he drove. Every breath sent knives through his ribs. His mouth tasted of copper. He glanced into the mirror and barely recognized the battered face staring back.

“That... hurt,” he muttered.

He blew his nose, then noticed the crumpled check resting in the cup holder—fifty thousand Imperial Credits.

Cole leaned back, eyes burning.

“I’m sorry, auntie.”