

Excerpted from The Sword Falls, by A.J. Smith. Head of Zeus, 2021. Reprinted with permission.

The void sky was a shimmering black, with pinpoints of light, playing across my vision. In the realm of form, the landscape was filled with stone and wood, packed together as buildings, streets and walls. Beyond the glass, in the realm of void, the world was more elegant. The hold of the Silver Dawn was visible only as a faint net, forming boundaries and structures. But only the most significant buildings had actual form in the spirit world. Everything else I could see was pale blue, flowing like sand dunes or rolling waves. Spirits flew through the air, as sparkling birds; or scuttled across the ground, as small, woodland animals, each with a distinct energy, unknowable to the mortal men and women of the Eastron from across the sea. There was a profound sense of peace, as if the troubles of the world could not reach me.

“Highness, let us not stay here too long,” said the man at my side.

I looked down at him. “Does the peace of the void disagree with you?”

“It disturbs me,” he replied. “Because I know it isn’t real. I prefer the realm of form.”

His name was James Silver Born, called Silver Jack, and he’d come with me only because he refused to leave my side. He didn’t like the void, and distrusted spirits. We were both Winterlords of First Port and our people claimed kingship over the Eastron from across the sea. Our power radiated in the void, shining as globes of wyrd across our limbs and framing our heads. Jack’s wyrd was strongest in his arms and over his heart. Mine was a vibrant nimbus across my whole body, flaring at the head and torso.

“We will speak to the Lord of the Quarter,” I stated.

He hung his head. Silver Jack was short for a Winterlord, barely reaching six feet in height, and far shorter than me. But he was a cunning little bastard, and had been my closest adviser since I left First Port. I’d survived an assassin’s blade at the Severed Hand, and my father, the Always King, had insisted I be accompanied at all times. I’d disregarded the multitudes of hulking duellists who’d volunteered, and the knights of Falcon’s Watch, and chosen a middle-aged man named Jack. He hadn’t even volunteered. He’d been drunk in the Eagle House, waiting for one of his many reprimands. When I found him, he’d muttered that he was a terrible duellist and would rather drink his own piss than follow a prince around. It was broadly the answer I was looking for.

“We’ll be missed,” said Silver Jack. “People will worry.”

“David will worry,” I replied. “And you. And you worry about everything.”

“What about the seven Dark Brethren who are following you, highness?”

I sighed, my calm significantly eroded. It was easy to forget who I was in the void. It was the only time I wasn't constantly required to be Prince Oliver Dawn Claw, Protector of First Port. One day I would be the Always King. I would be the seventh since Sebastian Dawn Claw arrived from across the sea and founded the Kingdom of the Four Claws. It was the kind of burden that was impossible to walk away from.

"Why aren't you wearing your armour?" asked Silver Jack.

I looked down at my blue tunic and laced black trousers, tucked into heavy, leather riding boots. I had a short sword at my side, but was otherwise not equipped for combat. My broadsword and armour were in the Golden Keep, casually discarded on a coach. I didn't like wearing them. Partially because they signalled my station, but mostly because they made my large frame even larger. People were *always* afraid of me, but with my armour and a sword, I rarely saw a pair of eyes that was not pointed at the ground.

"The Lord of the Quarter," I repeated, ignoring his question.

He screwed up his face, but resisted further nagging. He followed me across the soft grass of the void, towards a tall tree, with tangled branches stretching out like gnarled hands. Small spirits scuttled away from us, as if repelled by our powerful wyrd. But larger ones – mostly birds of prey – remained imperiously on their perches. On the highest branch, flaring its wings at my approach, was a huge eagle, with gold and silver feathers and ageless eyes of deep bronze. It was the Dawn Claw, totem spirit of the Winterlords.

Ninety years ago, when my great grandfather, King Hector, abandoned the Silver Dawn for First Port, he left the totem behind. The bureaucracy that remained became the Silver Parliament, and vowed to always protect and revere the mighty eagle. Opinion was divided on how faithfully they had kept their vow. Many Winterlords, my father included, believed that the parliament was unnecessary, and the Kingdom of the Four Claws should once again be under the absolute rule of the Always King. He used to muse that, one day, a man of the Dawn Claw would again be the *Forever King*.

I took a knee. "My Lord of the Quarter. I am Prince Oliver and I bear your name. I pay you my respects and ask for your wisdom."

The huge spirit took wing and gracefully glided to the ground. Its majestic feathers ruffled in the gentle breeze, and all nearby spirits paused to marvel at its presence. It was the greatest spirit the Eastron had ever found, and the symbol of all that allowed the Winterlords to rule. It craned its neck downwards to regard me. I was tall and bulky, even for a Winterlord, but the huge eagle made me feel like a child. I would be a worm in its enormous, hooked beak, but I sensed warmth and recognition.

The glass has broken. Soon the sword will fall. Then the sea will rise. The Old Bitch of the Sea has been vanquished. The Night Wing has been corrupted. The Kindly One is ignored. But my voice can still be heard.

The spirit did not speak. Its thoughts vibrated into meaning and entered my head as words and emotions. I shared a glance with Silver Jack, confirming that he had also heard the words and felt the emotions. The Dawn Claw knew that the realm of form was teetering on the edge of something, and it struggled to make us understand. It wanted us to act, but its emotions felt like huge, churning clouds, with no definite form or direction. Perhaps I was just too simple to comprehend the thoughts of so mighty a spirit.

You will be king. You must be king. Or all is lost.

“We should leave,” said Silver Jack. “I think its angry.”

“Angry?” I queried, backing away. “I’d have said it was scared. Maybe sad.”

The Dawn Claw let us leave, but we did so only slowly, muttering to each other about what the spirit wanted us to know. It flared its wings, becoming even larger, and curling its huge talons into the shimmering grass of the void.

“I will visit you again,” I said, by way of a farewell.

We turned from the tree and left the presence of our totem. My time in the void was coming to an end. The glass was a thin barrier, but it held back a world of responsibility and a sea of questions I didn’t want to answer. Unfortunately, the Dawn Claw had offered no advice as to how best to deal with the Silver Parliament. And yet its cryptic words would linger.