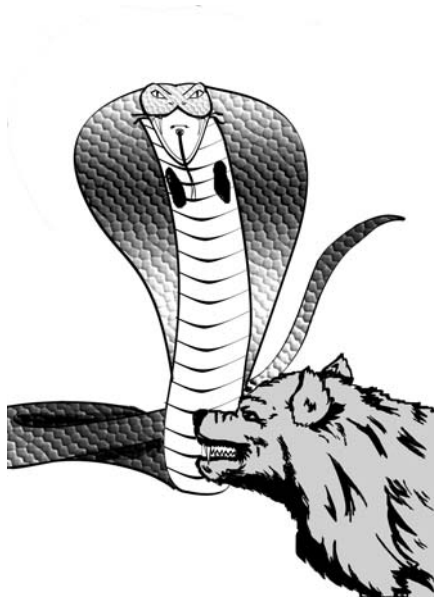


**ASULON**  
**The Sword of Fire**  
**Book One**  
By **William R. McGrath**  
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**CHAPTER 3**  
**THE WOLF AND THE COBRA**

They sharpened their tongue as a serpent,  
Poison of an adder is under their lips.  
– **The Book of Psalms- 140:3**

In a large, but otherwise unremarkable stone house in the oldest part of the city of Eboracium, the Builders Guild meets. A short, pale man with hair like a poorly constructed bird's nest speaks. He is Dew, head of the government teacher's guild. Anyone reading the faces of those present would get the impression that Dew had been speaking for quite some time—anyone, that is, but Dew himself.

“A war comes, gentlemen, a war between the old and the new, between the rough and hoary shamans of the decaying religions of the world and us, the tellers of truth, the philosophers, men of learning and of science.

“Know that we are engaged in a revolution, gentleman, but not a tumultuous revolution of the sword and the catapult. No, we fight a quiet revolution of the mind. Our battle will not be on the plains and in the valleys of Asulon, but in each and every school chamber in the land. We fight for the greatest prize of all; the future of humankind, for we wage our battle in the very minds of our children. Shall we continue teaching our children mere facts or shall we strive for something higher: to teach our children how to think and, indeed, how to act for the greater good?”

“Who, then, decides what a child will learn? Her father, though he be an unschooled and illiterate farmer, or professional teachers like myself who have studied long and hard, whose very life’s breath is education?”

“I know what you in this room feel and I am gratified.”

Dew held up his hand as if to forestall applause. He eyed each man in the silent room with the self-satisfied air of those secure in their own righteousness. He continued.

“How, then, shall we free our children from the rigid attitudes, narrow values and false beliefs taught by parents blind to the new and better path we have chosen? Parents, whose only hold over these children is the mere biological accident of their birth?”

“My friends, I bring you the news that we have already won our first battle in this war, and fittingly, with barely a blow being struck, for our enemies did not deem the territory taken of any great value. We now control the schools that teach our future teachers the noble art of teaching. I am happy to report that these schools view our curriculum with the same reverence that the most rabid followers of the old religions view their ‘holy’ scriptures.

“The next battle will be a far greater struggle, though, for it must be waged in the schools that instruct our youth, and the enemy realizes the value of that prize. I am confident we shall prevail, however, for this battle will be fought by the very teachers we have trained, who now see themselves as apostles of a new faith—a religion of humanity based on tolerance for all things and a love of self, a religion where every person finds his or her own way and own truth, so that humankind can rise above the myths and legends of the old religions that have held us back for far too long.”

Dew paused dramatically to take a slow meaningful look around the room.

“But we have enemies, gentlemen, who would try to hold back this new age of progress. Let me read to you what one Senator has said of us.”

He drew a small scroll from beneath his robes, unrolled it and began to read aloud.

“My countrymen, disguise the fact as we may, there is in this country today, and in both political parties, an element which is ripe for centralized despotism. There are men and houses of vast wealth, whose iron grasp spans this whole continent, and who find it more difficult and more expensive to corrupt the thirteen provincial legislatures than one High Senate. It was said of an Etruscan emperor of old that he wished the people of his land had but one head, so that he might cut it off with a single blow. And so it is with those moneyed kings who would rule this country through bribery, fraud and intimidation. It is easy to see how; with all the powers of government centered in Eboracium they could at a single stroke put an end to Asulonian liberty. But they well understand that before striking this blow the

minds of the people must be prepared to receive it. And what surer or safer preparation could possibly be made than is now being made, by indoctrinating the minds of the rising generation with the idea that ours is already a consolidated government; that the provincial legislatures have no sovereignty which is not subordinate to the will and pleasure of the High Senate, and that our Founding Laws are the mere creatures of custom, and may therefore be legally altered or abolished by custom? Such are a few of the poisonous doctrines which hundreds of thousands of Asulonian children are today drinking in with the very definitions of the words they are compelled to study. And yet the man who dares to utter a word of warning of the approaching danger is stigmatized as an enemy to education and unfit to be mentioned as a candidate for the humblest office.”

Dew looked around the room in triumph, the truth of his case obvious to him. He knew none in the room could deny his cause.

“Gentlemen, you must agree with me that these reactionaries, these obstructionists, these self-deluded men who see the phantasmal hand of conspiracy in every good work of ours, must be defeated! The next election for the members of the High Senate will be upon us before we know it. Our candidates must be properly funded in order to vanquish the foes of progress. Our cause is just. Our people stand ready. The time for action is now!”

“Thank you, friend Dew,” said Sargon, leading the polite applause. It took Dew a moment to recognize the signal for him to take his seat.

One by one, other men rose to speak and various other matters were discussed. Finally the general meeting came to an end.

“Surely you see the urgency in what must be done,” said Dew to Sargon, as he was guided towards the door.

“Yes, yes, of course you are correct,” replied Sargon. “I will speak to the financial committee about funding your candidates this very day.”

The great iron chamber door closed, echoing round the room.

The members of the financial committee remained in the chamber, the inner circle of the Builders and its true leadership.

A man with silver hair spoke. “I think we should give Dew his gold, if for no other reason than to relieve us from the need to hear his twaddle again.”

“If you think success will close that windy orifice he calls a mouth, then you do not know our friend Dew,” said Sargon. The men around him chuckled. “But we will fund his candidates nonetheless, because his enemies are our enemies.”

They agreed upon an amount. No scribe took down the vote, for no scribe ever attended a Builders Guild meeting. Later, Sargon would have a scribe write out a document authorizing the funds to be transferred from an account set up for such purposes.

Sargon knew that the teachers in the government schools adamantly opposed anyone else teaching Asulon’s children; this was what had brought Dew to the meeting today. These teachers spoke loudly of the children’s good, but, in truth, simple fear of economic competition fueled their furor. In recent years, parents in Asulon had taken to pooling their money to fund small private schools or to placing their children into schools run by houses of worship. Some even revived method

successful for millennia, though mocked by the government teachers, where parents teach their own children in their own homes.

The Builders Guild opposed these alternative methods of education for their own reasons. The Builders saw the true nature of independent education. It created a source of intellectual competition, which the men in the room could not allow if their plans for the future of Asulon were to succeed. Dew and his goals would be supported, for his enemies were indeed their enemies.

A generation ago, the Guild began a program to wrestle the government schools away from the beliefs common to the people of Asulon and toward a belief system more favorable to a world led by men like themselves. To this end, they began with the schools that taught the teachers, conditioning them to think only in certain ways and to believe only in certain things. The old ways of Asulon were mocked. Independence, faith, self-restraint, a common morality, all these were cast aside. Courses of study were watered down so that all could pass. Instead of creating independent thinkers prepared to investigate the world around them, the government schools turned out ignorant but happy sheep, who preferred soft slavery to hard freedom and the responsibilities that freedom brought. Gradually this thinking crept into the government schools at every level until it became the ruling orthodoxy among teachers across the land.

Sargon knew that, ironically, none of the men in the room had sent their own children to government schools, though they advocated such education for others. No, their own children had received private tutoring and curriculums not very different from those in the religious and private schools that their fathers publicly opposed. Learning to be sheep was good enough for the masses, but their own children would learn to be leaders.

A merchant across the table from Sargon mimicked Dew's whining pleas to the amusement of the others. Sargon rapped his knuckles on the table. "Now let us move on to something of truly immediate concern," said Sargon. He looked gravely round the room and the men became silent.

"I have received a report from a fortune-teller in my employ..."

"What? Are you listening to 'the spirits' now, Sargon?" interrupted the head of another banking house, (publicly, a sharp competitor of Sargon's) who thought himself rich and fat enough to make a jest at Sargon's expense.

"No, but many men and, in this case, one woman, foolishly speak things to those 'spirits' that they would never tell to mortals," continued Sargon. "I keep many people in my employ, including those to whom men will confide things beyond anything they would tell a wife, brother or priest. Tavern owners, prostitutes and, yes, fortune-tellers have their ears open for news and their hands open for my gold. The wife of a certain senator close to Argeus recently visited one such fortune-teller."

At this news even the rival banker leaned forward with interest.

"This senator's wife came to my fortune-teller seeking counsel," continued Sargon. "It seems that the Senate will vote today on a new law dealing with the minting of coins and the Senator's wife wished the 'spirits' to tell her how she might profit from this proposed law."

"And why is this important?" asked the banker.

"It seems that Argeus has been made aware of our plans concerning the Freedom Transfer Boxes."

Sargon paused so that his next statement would hit them all the harder. He would need them fully committed to accomplish the next step in his plan.

“There is more. Argeus has seen the medallion...”

A man across the table let out a curse. Another struck the tabletop with his fist.

Sargon held up his hands for silence, “...and now Argeus proposes a law that will maintain the use of gold, silver and copper as the only metals to be used as payment in Asulon, defeating our entire plan before it has even begun. The Senate votes on the law today. I have sent word to the few senators we still control, but I fear it is too late. I could do no more than state that we did not want the law passed; I could not tell them why for obvious reasons. If we had had more warning, we could have mounted a campaign against the law—convinced the common people that the law would only benefit the rich and all the unusual rubbish they so willingly swallow. But, as things stand, I believe that this new law of Argeus’s will pass.”

“But how is this possible?” demanded the head of the largest shipbuilding concern in Asulon. “You assured us the medallions would not appear until we had regained control of the High Senate.”

The powerful old men in the room grew angry, but fear lay under that anger. They were not young zealots willing to die for a higher cause: they fought for their own wealth and power, a cause that might now be in jeopardy.

“I have discovered the leak,” said Sargon. “A low-level clerk assisting in the counting of the medallions managed to smuggle out a defective medallion, due to be melted and remade.”

The fat banker shifted his great bulk back into his chair. “So tell us. Who was he working for and has he been dealt with?”

“He worked for no one, as far as we can tell,” replied Sargon. “It seems that he found religion at some temple. The other clerks tell of him coming to work one morning, acting unusually cheerful and trying to convert them all to the worship of Yeshua.

“When I found that Argeus had seen one of our medallions, I ordered an investigation. This clerk was an obvious suspect. Under interrogation, he told all. It seems he believed that drivel about the Tri-Hex being an evil number, stole a medallion and turned it over to his local priest, who then apparently turned it over to that meddling cleric Simon.

“And that is why religion is such a dangerous element in society. It makes men unpredictable. They do things that defy all logic. The clerk is dead now and for what? A number on a coin?”

“But does Argeus actually believe that rot about the Tri-Hex?” asked a man who made his wealth through theaters of the cheapest type. “I would have thought an educated man such as he would not believe in those children’s tales.”

A tall, distinguished man rose to speak. A famous retired senator who had led a public crusade to raise taxes and “soak the rich” as he put it, he had inherited great wealth himself. It amused him that none of the laws he had ever proposed touched his own fortune, but instead prevented the very people who voted for him from becoming wealthy themselves.

“It always escapes the notice of religious fanatics that the Tri-Hex can be read from any angle and thus easily read on a coin or medallion,” said the former senator.

“In a device like the transfer box, even should a medallion be put on the box upside down; the box will still be able to read the central three numbers of the medallion. This way a merchant using the box will know to simply turn the medallion around, rather than send the whole blasted box back to us as defective!”

“Well said, sir, well said,” agreed Sargon. Sargon knew what angered the man so. The Gauls experienced this very problem two years ago, when the medallion was introduced there and did not yet bear the Tri-Hex. The creators of the box suggested adding a prefix, a three-digit entry code that could be read by the boxes whether right side up or upside down. That number turned out to be six hundred and sixty-six. If the central three digits were read as nine hundred and ninety-nine, the box would still recognize these as numbers and signal the merchant to turn the medallion around. The final medallions, and even the tattooed marks that would replace them, included the prefix.

The direction of the discussion, so far, satisfied Sargon. But would they be willing to go the distance with him? What he sought had been done only once before in his lifetime.

“It seems,” continued Sargon, “that Argeus believes himself to be the moral pinnacle of Asulonian monarchy and that any king who comes after him would misuse the power that the Freedom Transfer Boxes would give the king.”

“But removing coinage from society would benefit every citizen in the realm,” protested the head of one of the three largest scribe services. “Outlawing coins and making transfer boxes the only means of buying or selling, will destroy every black market in Asulon. Theft will be a thing of the past. Only criminals need fear our system.”

“Perhaps Argeus fears that one day things that are now legal would be made illegal,” said Sargon, before someone else raised the point better.

“Balderdash!” replied the ex-senator. “New laws that outlaw formerly legal things pass the Senate every day, and you don’t see the prisons overflowing with common citizens now, do you? No, the common man learns to conform to a new law like a horse to a new rider. The people do not riot, cause chaos or revolt because they know that the majority of laws are, in the end, made for their benefit. They abide by them. The few troublemakers there are, are soon found out and sent off to prison. The transfer boxes will simply mean that the foxes cannot stay underground for long.”

“Do not forget,” said an owner of a large western bank, “how much our houses would prosper with such a system. No more bits of parchment to be carried back and forth between merchant and banking house, no more fraudulent writs, no more ‘my boy will send round your payment in the morning.’ The savings to our houses on clerks alone will be monumental. We will be faster, more efficient and much more profitable”.

He addressed Sargon. “And now you tell us Argeus wants to stop this progressive move that will end so much crime in Asulon and profit us all?”

*Well done*, thought Sargon.

“He does, and it goes beyond any prejudice to progress he has shown in the past,” said Sargon. “If he succeeds, millions that should have been ours will be lost.”

He fell silent, allowing that last sentence to sink into their minds and do its work.

“That man is impossible to deal with,” said the shipbuilder. “This is not the first time his actions have cost us. Remember what he did to us with the Senate’s terms. Only two terms per senator! Now many in the Senate think they no longer need our gold or our council. Half the old Senate gone, and what did those new fools do once they came to power? Pass that idiotic sales tax law, undoing all we have worked so hard on these many years.”

The new tax system was simple, direct and fair and thus hated by many who had used the old system to gain and retain power. Men, including many in that room, who had never paid any great amount in taxes before, now had to pay the same percentage as every other person in Asulon, which rankled them to no end. Politicians, from senators to local magistrates, who had previously made millions by changing the tax laws to favor one group or another for a time and then made millions more to change the laws back again, now had no say in how taxes were collected. The powerful men in this room now had one less avenue to corrupt officials and influence policy. Argeus, in their eyes, was the ultimate author of this tax law, for he made it possible for these new senators to be elected and thus pass the law: and that was a wound they would never forgive.

Sargon looked around the room and saw men almost visibly shaking with rage. In his mind’s eye he saw them as a pack of caged wolves, snarling and snapping, fangs dripping hatred, eager for the cage door to fly open so that they could tear their prey apart.

“Argeus is the wrong king for this time,” said the fat banker.

“Argeus is a senile old fool and should not be king at *any* time,” called out another man, giving voice to what they all had been thinking.

“Argeus’s son is not yet of age to become king,” said Sargon, “and Argeus himself will not step down until the prince returns from his training in Logres ten years from now. If Argeus’s term ended *prematurely*, for whatever reason, Aram, his Prime Minister, would be made steward-king until the prince’s return.” He looked around the room. “I have it on good authority that Aram would be far more reasonable in regards to our plans than Argeus. Remember, gentlemen; a steward-king may propose a law as easily as any king.”

He paused for a moment, then, giving each word careful emphasis, he said, “Just as men are not immortal, neither are their laws. What one man has brought to life, another man may *kill*.”

The room grew deathly silent as each man weighed the risks of what hung unsaid in the chamber.

Then the cold hard men in the room looked into the cold hard eyes of their neighbors and found agreement.

“Are we of one mind, then, that this problem should be dealt with expeditiously?” asked Sargon.

“Yes,” said the southerner. “Aye, let it be as you say,” said another. One by one they gave their consent.

“I will see what can be done,” said Sargon, smiling within himself.

The meeting ended and the men in the room made their way to the door without a word. The chamber door closed and Sargon had the room to himself. After a moment he heard a slight scraping of stone behind him, but did not turn around.

He knew the sound of the concealed door opening. Only he and one other knew of its existence, or of the tunnel behind it.

“Sargon, you did well, but you did not do all,” said a voice from the tunnel’s entrance.

Sargon turned to face a man so old and gaunt that Sargon wondered, each time they met, that he could draw breath, let alone walk. The old man’s thin skin stretched like parchment over his bare skull. His bony hands were all protruding knuckles and twisted blue veins. His white robes hung loosely about him and overly long in back, so that they hissed against the floor when he walked. Sargon always believed that the

effect was deliberate. He reminded Sargon of a very old and angry cobra searching for one last victim to set his fangs into before he died.

Sargon bowed his head and greeted the old man in the expected manner. “Welcome, Aesculapius, Master of the Great White Brotherhood, Greatest of the Round Table of Nine, Philosopher-King of Philosopher-Kings. High Priest of the Illuminati, I greet thee.”

Aesculapius bowed his head in acceptance of the praise, though he knew that Sargon was loyal to no one but Sargon.

The old sorcerer came to the council table and sat down, taking Sargon’s seat at the head of the table.

“You made no mention of our agreement regarding Prince Daniel at your council with the merchants,” said Aesculapius. He pronounced ‘merchants’ with a hiss, as if the word were distasteful to him.

“Our own discussions about the prince do not concern them,” replied Sargon. “Keeping *one* secret of this size will be difficult enough without compounding the problem with *two*.”

Aesculapius’ eyes grew cold. “I have told you that both Argeus *and* his son represent a danger to us—the son more so, for the prophecy concerns the boy. The father merely sired him.”

“Prince Daniel can be dealt with much more easily in Logres, in a hunting accident perhaps, than here with his father’s guards watching,” replied Sargon.

The moneylender hated these religious fanatics, but Sargon needed the Illuminati for their control of the secret of the transfer boxes. Whether, as he sometimes suspected, they stumbled upon some long dead alchemy or, as they claimed, they created it themselves, he could not say with any certainty. But he did know that they held the keys to the success of his grandest plan. He himself could never be king in Asulon, but what if he could choose and control the next king? Would that not be just as good? The transfer boxes would give him the power to do precisely that.

Aesculapius tilted his head back and closed his eyes.

*Oh no*, thought Sargon, *here it comes*.

The sorcerer began to speak in a low, breathless voice.

*In fire’s ring, where angels sing,  
In holies’ home, sheathed in stone.  
Where blood was spilt, one for all,  
To make amends for the Fall.*

*The first of swords awaits the finding,  
Of one whose oath, blood is binding.  
Wisdom, strength, honor finding,  
To whose arm the sword is binding.*

“When we received this prophecy we were glad,” said Aesculapius, “for we thought that it foretold this great weapon, the first of swords, given into our hands. But then another prophecy came. Destiny, it seemed, had given us a rival. And that second prophecy was this.’

*When True West’s king dies without heir,  
And elder successor marries the fair.  
Scion lone shall find under stone,  
The first of swords, in fire’s home.*

*Awaits your master an avenging death,  
Ashes for words and smoke for breath.  
In all the world there is no room,  
For your prince to flee his doom.*

“Yes, yes, you have told me of these prophecies from your soothsayers before,” said Sargon.

Aesculapius’ eyes snapped open as he turned on Sargon. “They were given in the year of Argeus’ birth, though at that time we had no way of knowing that they referred to him. Now we have seen with our own eyes King Absalom die without an heir and Argeus, with a lone male offspring, take his place on the throne. We did not wish to move against the House of Asher directly, hoping that the greatest of weapons would be delivered to us before this day. But my Master does not wish to wait any longer.”

“Your *master*?” Sargon was surprised. Aesculapius never before had referred to any authority in the Illuminati higher than himself.

The old man’s eyes came alive. “A man, great in power and secret knowledge, like one of the Enlightened Ones of old, is our earthly prince and our strength. He must live, for if he dies my order dies with him. My Master’s Master has ordained it!”

*His ‘Master’s Master’?* thought Sargon. *This old scarecrow never speaks but in riddles.* Sargon tired of Aesculapius more quickly than usual. But he smiled when he answered nonetheless.

“I did not appreciate the urgency of the matter. It will be my pleasure to see to a result that pleases you, *your* master, *his* master and any other masters you have.”

“Do not even *think* to patronize me, child,” snapped the sorcerer, eyes flashing. “You will do as I say to gain your precious black boxes. But know this: Prince Daniel will be dead before he leaves Asulon or you will stand before us and explain why you failed.”

With that, Aesculapius turned and disappeared into the blackness of the tunnel. Sargon pressed the concealed lever and the door closed, the wall becoming a wall once more. He stood for a time staring at the wall, then, satisfied that the

sorcerer would not return, closed the hidden grate that had allowed the sorcerer to hear what was said in the room.

*Pity I can't have the tunnel sealed up with that snake within it,* he thought.

Sargon knew he could deal with this new law Argeus proposed. In fact, it would serve him well, for it ensured that every Guild member's hands were as bloody as his. They would not dare give his name in any future investigation, lest they be caught up in the net as well. All in all, the death of Argeus would strengthen Sargon's position as leader of the Builders Guild. The Guild would never know that the king's death had been planned long in advance, and had been ordered by those outside of the Guild. To the retired senator, the fat banker and the others, it would be Sargon who had killed a king, it would be Sargon who could get big things done quickly.

Sargon found that he was suddenly very hungry. A bowl of apples, a remnant of the previous autumn's crop had been brought up from the cold cellar and set upon the council table. Sargon reached out and took the topmost apple from the pile, knocking two more apples from the bowl onto the table. About to put them back into the bowl, he stopped, held up the first apple and smiled.

*Here we have useful fools like Dew,* Sargon thought to himself.

He held up a second apple before him. *And here, the pack of wolves I lead, but dare not turn my back on.*

He placed both pieces of fruit in his left hand and took up a third in his right. *And here we have those lunatics of the Illuminati.*

Smiling to himself, he tossed first one apple, then the other, into the air, juggling them.

*Keep this one happy, then that one, now this one here.*

He kept the fruit flying through the air.

*I am not a moneylender, I'm a juggler!*

He threw the fruit higher and began to laugh. He tried to catch an apple in his mouth but missed. Sargon bounced the falling fruit off his knee and deftly caught it on the top of his foot where it miraculously stayed balanced. Surprised at himself, he took another apple from the bowl and began to juggle those three while standing on one foot balancing the fourth. Growing more daring, he kicked the apple from his foot into the air and tried to add it to the three but missed and all four apples fell to the floor.

"Well, sir," he said out loud, "you should know how to quit while you are ahead—and you do."

Sargon left the chamber.