

# WILL WIGHT

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

**SPOILERS!**

**KICKSTARTER  
SPOILER SCENE!**

# UNSOULED

CRADLE : VOLUME ONE



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UNSOULED

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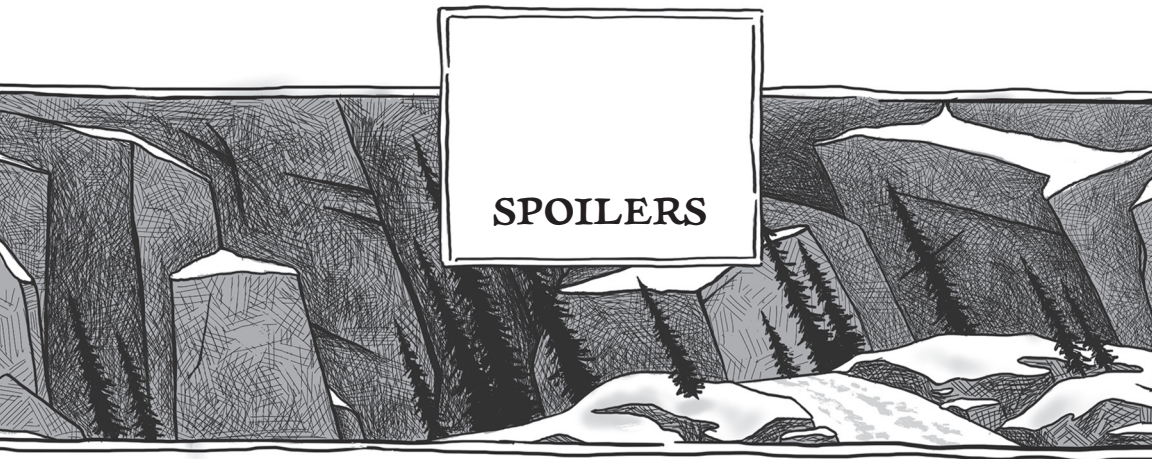
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**Kickstarter Bonus Scene #1: SPOILERS!**

**LOCATION: HALFWAY THROUGH *UNSOULED***

**SPOILER WARNING**

**AUTHORIZATION REQUIRED:** If you have not read *Cradle: Volume 10, Reaper*, you are not authorized to proceed beyond this point.

**Enter Spoiler Territory at your own risk.**

**You have been warned.**

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Eithan looked around at the heads of the Arelius branch families. They were from all across the Blackflame Empire, now seated at the same table, each bickering about how best to guide their new Underlord.

So unprofessional.

“Could you get your feet off the table?” Gaien asked.

Eithan pointed to his shoes, which rested on the polished table surface. “Ah, but how else would you admire the craftsmanship? My cobbler is truly a once-in-a-generation talent.”

Gaien did not look amused. A Truegold whose gray hair was still speckled with yellow, Gaien was one of those most openly frustrated by Eithan’s antics. He wore his beard neatly trimmed in a distant imitation of the late Tiberian.

“Please, Underlord.” Gaien wrestled down a clear look of disgust. “One would think you weren’t taking this conversation seriously.”

“Not taking it seriously?” Eithan cried. “How could that be? Secretary, read back the last few seconds before this distraction.”

The other graying men and women around the table looked to one another, confused. There was no secretary.

From behind his father’s shoulder, Cassias sighed and stepped forward. As expected, Cassias understood him.

“Answering the Underlord,” Cassias said stiffly. “We were discussing the price of exporting soap in the southern jungles and whether we might consider another supplier.”

“And what was the conclusion of this esteemed council?”

“That the prices haven’t changed, so we should stay with our current supplier.”

Eithan clicked his shoes together. “*Riveting* stuff, truly a valuable

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use of our time. In your opinion, Secretary Cassias, are there any topics more urgent that we should be discussing instead?"

Cassias always presented himself immaculately. His back was perfectly straight, his clothes pressed, the rapier at his side polished. Even his Goldsign, the silver bracer on his forearm, looked like a natural part of his outfit, and he clearly cared for his curly golden hair.

That was one of Cassias' greatest virtues, in Eithan's opinion.

After a hesitant glance at Gaien, Cassias answered. "With apologies to my father, I must concur with the Underlord. I do believe our time would be better spent discussing our relations with the Jai clan."

"Nonsense!" Eithan shouted. "We have soaps to import!"

Gaien rubbed his temples. His own Goldsign, the same silver bracer as his son, was weathered with time and age. "Of course we will get to the Jai clan. But we Arelius should know better than anyone how important it is to pay attention to even the smallest details."

"How true it is," Eithan agreed. "Though, of course, the first lesson we learn is how to choose *which* details are worth our attention and focus accordingly. It is my contention that these matters of maintaining the family business are not only beneath me, but beneath all of you as well. Surely you have competent managers better versed in commerce and administration than you."

"Not all of us see combat and advancement as the only worthwhile pursuits in life," Gaien said bluntly.

"Clearly not, Truegold."

From anyone but an Underlord, that would have been a title of respect.

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Gaien's cheeks reddened and his eyes grew sharp. Even the muscles in his hand tightened as though he yearned to reach for his sword.

Though Eithan covered his irritation much better, he was just as frustrated as the other man.

How could *all* his descendants show such a complete lack of ambition?

If Gaien Arelius had been the only one to value the mundane prosperity of the family over all else, Eithan wouldn't have minded. He might have even admired the man. There was nothing wrong with providing for the clan, and certainly Eithan didn't believe that everyone belonged on the battlefield.

But *no one*? Really?

Cassias gave Eithan a disapproving look, which did make Eithan feel guilty. Cassias was a descendant he could be proud of, though not one he could ever ascend with.

Eithan held up a hand. "My words were spoken in haste, Gaien, and I do apologize. I appreciate the years you have dedicated to the good of the clan. My frustration comes from my shared desire to see our family prosper."

"Thank you, Underlord." The other family heads around the table murmured their agreement as well, though Eithan cared much less about them.

Cassias nodded approval to Eithan, which made Eithan crack a grin. Here he was, hoping for the good opinion of his great-great-great-et cetera, et cetera, -grandson.

"Our relations with the Jai clan have strained even further recently," Cassias reported. "Clearly, they believe Underlord

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Eithan plans to supplant their position as one of the great clans of the Empire.”

Eithan had much grander plans than *that*.

“The lowly secretary speaks the truth,” Eithan said. “Jai Daishou has a few years left at most, and no likely successors. He’s vulnerable and he knows it. This is our chance.”

An old Truegold woman responded, her spiderweb Goldsign curled around her shoulders like a cape. “Surely we should be making moves to assure the great Jai clan that we are no threat,” Ozmantha Arelius said.

Quite an unfortunate name she had.

“Before that, Underlord,” Gaien began, “I must request that you stop referring to Cassias as a ‘lowly secretary.’ He is my son, and was the heir to the Blackflame Arelius family before your appearance. He is due at least a modicum of respect.”

“Are we not all janitors?” Eithan asked.

“I don’t mind, Father,” Cassias said with a sigh. “This is how the Underlord expresses affection.”

“See? Cassias understands. As expected of my beloved younger brother.”

“I’m not your brother,” Cassias responded automatically.

His father spoke at the same moment. “He’s not your brother.”

“I sense that I have struck a tender nerve, so let’s stick to safer topics. What actions have the Jai clan taken against us?”

“Nothing too aggressive,” Gaien responded. “To begin with, Jai Daishou made several public comments in an audience with the Emperor that—”

Ozmantha put her teacup down.



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Ozmantha put her teacup down.

“—that the state of cleanliness in Serpent’s Grave had begun to slip. Nothing overt, but they were clearly aimed at us.”

A chill traced a finger down Eithan’s spine. He slid his legs off the table and leaned forward. “What just happened?” Eithan asked quietly.

The Golds around the table stared at him.

“Did you see something, Underlord?” Gaien asked. He extended his own bloodline senses out past the building, looking for whatever had disturbed Eithan.

That chilled Eithan further. He met Cassias’ eyes, and the young man looked like he was expecting some kind of trick.

“Cassias. Did you feel anything strange a moment ago?”

“Like wh—”

“Anything. Anything that caught your attention. Déjà vu, a sudden sense of exhaustion, a feeling that you have forgotten something important.”

Cassias stroked his chin, taking the question seriously, but Gaien sighed. “Can we stay on topic, Underlord?”

“Quiet,” Eithan commanded, and this time there was some Ozmanthus in his voice.

A shudder passed through everyone in the room except Eithan. Cassias straightened. “I’m sorry. I didn’t notice anything strange, but perhaps one of the Truegolds...”

Eithan scanned their faces quickly using his bloodline. Some were disturbed by his sudden serious turn, others were trying to figure out if *they* had seen anything, and others were suspicious that this might be one of his jokes.

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He couldn't read their minds, but he could read every twitch of their muscles, and that was enough. They hadn't felt anything.

That was bad news.

Eithan stood and looked off to the west. Someone had rocked the cradle.

Had they found him?

No, that didn't make sense. If they had, they wouldn't have aimed so far to the west. This was far more likely to be one of the Monarchs meddling in things they shouldn't. As a mere Underlord, Eithan couldn't feel what had happened with any precision; without his millennia of experience, he wouldn't have sensed anything at all.

But someone was playing with delicate forces. For one thing, the central entrance to the labyrinth was in that direction.

The branch heads had addressed him several times, with increasing degrees of alarm, and Eithan finally snapped back to the present. Cassias was standing at his elbow, looking to him in genuine concern.

"Underlord? Are you all right?"

Eithan clapped him on the shoulder and gave him a beaming grin. "That's why you're my favorite, Cassias. See you in a few months!"

"What? Where are you going? Eithan!"

Eithan activated the binding of a minor construct he carried around so he didn't have to bother depleting his soulfire. It sent out a pulse of force that shoved open a window.

Ignoring the host of startled questions, Eithan leaped out of the window. They were at the top of a tower, but of course he fell without concern. He didn't even watch the ground.

He was looking west.



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