

## **The Freedom of Being Chained**

by Jess Lebow

Mikael pushed his left arm through the loop of his backpack and lifted the heavy load onto his shoulders. Securing all of his possessions into place, he stepped out of his hide hut and marched across the camp. Nineteen years he had lived here. Leaving now would be difficult, but it was something he had to do.

He passed through the center of the compound and by the largest of three long houses, built by the Draconum masters of this school as a concession to their human students. Mikael shook his head. Some concession. Nothing here was comfortable. It felt more like a prison camp than a school.

Coming around the end of the rectangular wooden building, Mikael found Master Viljo, a Magna Draconum, teaching a lesson to a group of students. The human apprentices wore the chains of the Scalesworn—bonds that would eventually be broken once they had progressed in their training far enough to have earned such an honor.

Mikael looked down at his own wrists. They were bare. Having never chosen the life of a Scalesworn, he'd never been shackled.

"Master Viljo," he said, interrupting the lesson. He bowed as best as he could with the heavy load on his back. "I must speak with you."

The Magna Draconum stopped and looked at Mikael. "I see," he said, eyeing the backpack. "Can this wait until we finish with our lesson?"

Mikael shook his head. "No. It cannot."

The Scalesworn students turned from their master, glaring at Mikael, but they said nothing.

Master Viljo sighed. "Very well." The dragon man placed one of the Scalesworn students in charge then stepped away from the group. "We can talk inside," he said, pointing to the closest building.

The human and the Draconum walked in silence to the long house. Once inside, Mikael removed his pack, and Master Viljo stepped over near the fire pit to warm himself.

"Master, Viljo, I have come to—" started Mikael.

The Draconum cut him off. "I know what it is you want."

Mikael crossed the room to the fire pit.

"How many years have you been under my tutelage?" asked Master Viljo.

Mikael, settling cross legged on the floor before his master, bowed his head. "Since my first memory, Master."

"Yes." The wrinkled Draconum unfurled his wings, stretching them in the stale air of the wooden longhouse as he began to pace. "And how old are you now?"

"I have seen nineteen years in this life." Mikael watched Viljo. He'd seen his dragon-like master act like this before, and it put him on edge.

"A ripe old age, nineteen."

Mikael got back to his feet. "Master, I have trained many long years for this. You yourself said I was the best student you'd ever trained."

The Draconum chuckled, continuing to pace around a fire burning in the central pit. He clasped his hands behind his back. "And when did I say that? I remember telling you no such thing."

"I overheard you speaking to Master Tiana," admitted the apprentice.

"I see. Do you make a habit of invading others' privacy?"

"Only when it concerns me, Master." Mikael let out a frustrated breath. "But now you are avoiding the subject."

Master Viljo stopped pacing and turned toward his student. He ran his weary-looking eyes over the young man, and Mikael felt as if he were being examined from the inside out. The Draconum's deep, piercing stare made him vulnerable—as if he were standing in the middle of the longhouse completely naked. If anybody in the Land could see through his skin and know what was in his heart, it would be Master Viljo. The thought sent a chill up Mikael's spine.

"I am ready."

Master Viljo took a step closer to his apprentice. "If you were truly ready, you would not be so eager to leave here."

"Since I was a young boy, you have taught me that one must fight for what one believes in."

The Draconum nodded. "Yes, I have, and you should."

Mikael closed his eyes, breathing deeply to center himself and control his fear. He knew what he had to say. He would say it, but only on his own terms. "I believe that whoever killed my father and mother should be brought to justice." He opened his eyes.

Master Viljo nodded. "I know what you believe. I have known you would try to enact revenge for your parent's death since the day you were placed under my care, and I have tried to train you to the best of my ability for this day." He narrowed his eyes at the boy. "If you leave now, on this mission of hatred and revenge, then I will have failed."

"I am not like the other Scalesworn here. I did not choose this life for myself. It was chosen for me." Mikael lifted his arms, showing his master his naked wrists. "I do not wear the chains."

"Yes," replied the Magna Draconum. "I am aware of how you came here, but that does not change what I have said."

"Is that your answer?"

Master Viljo smiled sadly. "You have never needed my permission to leave this place," he said, indicating the door with a wave of his hand. "You are not a prisoner here—" he held up a single scaly finger attached to a long, sharp claw—"though at times I have heard you speak of me as a warden."

Mikael smiled. "When did I say that? I remember telling you no such thing."

The Draconum's wings twitched. "You mock me, though I have seen more than ten of your lifetimes in my own."

Mikael lowered his head. "I am sorry, Master."

The old dragon man chuckled. "It is quite all right. We Draconum have a thick skin." He tapped on his scaly hide to prove his point. "There isn't much that can penetrate it. Least of all words." He looked Mikael in the eye. "I bring up this fact only to point out to you something that should be obvious."

"What is that?"

The old creature shook his head. "I am your Master, Mikael. I have trained you since you were very young, and I do not wish you to go out and undo the good work we have already done. I am aware of your need for revenge, but there will be a time and a place where you will get what you desire." The Draconum paused.

"But first you must choose this life, choose to take on the chains—and break them—to become a full Scalesworn. Only then will you be able to

comprehend the whole." The dragon man shook his head. "But for now, you are not ready. You conveniently forget your lessons about patience, tactical advantage, and emotional control." He put his paw on the young man's shoulder.

"Until you can look at each challenge through well-balanced eyes, you will not prevail."

Mikael stepped back, pulling himself free of his master's grasp. Dropping to his knees, he bowed his head to the floor.

"I am eternally grateful for your guidance and for the wisdom you granted me. While you do not think my seeking retribution for the death of my parents is a balanced act, I see only that the world will remain lopsided until justice is served. You have taught me well, and in doing so you have shown me that above all else, a warrior must fight for what he believes in." He stood up, looking Master Viljo in the eye. "You may disagree with me, but this is something I must do. With or without your blessing."

Mikael stepped past the Draconum, moving around the fire and toward his pack, near the double doors at the far end of the long house. In the time he'd trained with the Draconum—which encompassed nearly his entire life—this was the only act of defiance he'd made against his master, and the consequences weighted heavily on his mind. The sooner he could walk through that door, the sooner the fear in the pit of his stomach would subside.

As he walked, it seemed as if he'd never reach the end of the long house. His life would be over, an eternity passed, before his foot would finally cross through the threshold. Behind him, he could hear the fire crackling and feel his master's eyes on his back. Ahead, he saw the daylight edging through the cracks in the wooden door. On the other side of those doors, was a long road, one that he had wished to walk since he learned of his parent's death, many years ago.

With one last step until freedom, Mikael heard the whisper of his slipped foot hitting the hard floor. Then the fluttering of wings filled his ears. Mikael tumbled sideways, and he could feel the air rush by as the Draconum passed over him. The young apprentice came back to his feet in a defensive posture, reacting by sheer impulse. As he pulled up, he saw Master Viljo standing before the door, his wings stretched out, barring his passage.

"All right, Mikael," said the master, "you have won this battle. I will give you my blessing to pursue your revenge, but I have one condition."

Mikael stood up straight, dropping his hands to his sides. His heart was pounding hard, but a smile spread across his lips. "Thank you, Master Viljo. What is your desire?"

The Draconum lowered his wings. "Only that you allow me to tell you a story."

Mikael was skeptical "You wish to convince me that I am on a fool's errand by telling me a parable."

The dragon man shook his head. "No, Mikael. I am through trying to persuade you. You have made your decision, and now I merely wish to save you some time." Master Viljo opened his palm and held it out toward the fire pit. "Please, be comfortable while I relate my tale."

Mikael nodded and took a seat near the fire.

Master Viljo paced around the pit. His brow was furrowed, and he wrung his hands as he walked. Mikael sat quietly.

Finally, the Draconum began. "I have told you that your parents were killed when you were but a baby."

Mikael nodded.

"And I have told you that you came into my custody shortly thereafter. You know the rest of your own story from there." Viljo paused. "What you don't know are the events leading up to your parents' untimely demise."

Mikael squirmed. Master Viljo's voice sounded so serious, almost nervous.

"Your parents," continued the Draconum, "were Scythrians—gypsies. Some in these parts called them barbarians, but I prefer less judgmental titles."

"Scythrians?" asked Mikael. "I've never met any."

"They move around a lot, as you would expect of a nomadic culture," explained the Draconum. "They keep to themselves mostly, often migrating up and down these Scythrian Mountains, farther to the East during the colder months and up here to the West when the sun stays out long enough to keep them warm."

Master Viljo stopped, turned around, and began pacing the fire pit again, only this time in the opposite direction.

"For years the Scythrians camped all along and around these parts," Master Viljo raised his hand in the air and spun it around, indicating the terrain surrounding the long house.

"Here?"

The Draconum nodded. "Yes."

Mikael scratched his chin. "I've seen their abandoned camps, but never a real Scythrian." He thought about it a moment more. "Well, I think I saw one once, but he was so far away I couldn't be certain."

The old master nodded, looking at the floor. "They no longer come here."

The ominous tone of the Draconum's voice set the small hairs on Mikael's back on edge.

"As I said, for years the nomads came to these parts, camped, then left when the weather turned colder. Never were there any problems between the Draconum and the Scythrian." The dragon-man shrugged. "It could be that they simply didn't know we were here. Or, possibly they chose to ignore us, as we did them. Whatever the case, all was in balance."

"Until?" Mikael could see where this was going.

"Until one season the Scythrians chose to camp in the clearing near the hot spring."

Mikael nodded. He knew that place well. It was nearby.

Warm water bubbled up from deep in the ground, rushing out into three natural rock pools. The one closest to the spring itself was too hot for Mikael to enter, but the other two, fed by the first, cooled substantially, and he enjoyed bathing there nearly once a week. It was part of the ritual all Scalesworn performed, keeping themselves clean so that their Draconum masters didn't have to smell them.

Mikael chuckled. Sometimes he wished Master Viljo was required to follow the same cleanliness guidelines. Human apprentices weren't the only ones who smelled.

"What happened then?"

"Balance was undone," said the master. "The Scythrians are very private, fiercely suspicious people. I suspect they were looking for Magestone, and they did not like sharing the spring with us. The first Scalesworn who ventured over to take their weekly ritual were warned off at spear point and told never to return."

"They did not fight?"

"No," replied the elder. "Would you have?"

Mikael thought about it for a moment. "No. Probably not."

The Draconum nodded his approval. "Why?"

"Because physical might is not the first option but the last alternative."

The dragon man smiled. "There is still hope for you Mikael."

"Thank you, Master. But what does this story have to do with my parents?"

"I'm getting to that. Instead of fighting with the Scythrians, the collected Draconum masters of this camp decided to modify the washing ritual for that season. Late at night, using simple magics to cover our trail, we sent foraging groups down to the spring to bring back hot water. We continued with our lives, in a slightly different fashion, hoping to avoid a conflict and allow the natural order of things to return to its regular state." Viljo shrugged. "And it did. After the season passed, the nomads left, as we knew they would, and things returned to normal."

Master Viljo stopped his pacing to look into the fire. His attention seemed to linger on the tips of the flames, but his eyes were unfocused, and Mikael could tell the old man was elsewhere.

"But the nomads returned," continued the Draconum. "And they camped in the same spot, right beside the spring. Only this time, they set up sentries and guards."

"Why did they do that?"

The old master shook his head. "I do not know. Their numbers seemed dwindled since the year previous. Perhaps they had encountered bandits in the seasons they were away. Whatever the truth may be, I suspect something terrible happened to them, and this was their way of preventing it from happening again. But while they were protecting themselves, they were also preventing us from sneaking down to the spring at night. So once again, things were unbalanced."

"What did you do?"

"The collected Draconum masters once again held a meeting, and it was decided that we would send a delegation down to try to negotiate with the Scythrians. After all, we had as much claim to the spring as they did. We needed it for one of our rituals, and though we had tried to avoid this conflict, we had no choice but to confront them."

"Were you in this delegation, Master?"

"No. Thankfully not. The council sent three Scalesworn and a single Draconum to talk with the nomads. The thinking was that the Scythrians would respond better to humans than to dragon men but that at least one of our kind should go to represent the wishes of the school." Master Viljo rubbed his scaly paw across his face. "That thinking must have been wrong."

"Why do you say that?"

Master Viljo closed his eyes, and a shutter rose through his body. "None of them returned from that meeting."

"They killed the entire delegation?"

The Draconum nodded. "Yes."

"Over the use of a hot spring?"

"No one knows," explained the Draconum. "When we found their bodies, they were several hundred feet from the spring. It didn't appear as if the delegation had even made it to the Scythrian camp. It could have been an ambush, or perhaps they held a meeting right where they first met. Only the heavens know, but of one thing we are sure—their presence angered the Scythrians, and they came here to this camp."

"Here?" Mikael couldn't believe it. "They came here?"

"Not more than a few hours after the delegation left. I was sitting just where you are now, meditating on the next day's lessons, when we heard commotion along the dirt path. Everyone in the long house rushed out to find the entire Scythrian tribe attacking our camp. Two hide huts were ablaze, and a handful of Scalesworn had mounted a defense of the school."

Mikael sat up on his haunches. He couldn't imagine someone so stupid as to attack a Draconum school. "Was it a massacre?"

"Yes and no," replied master Viljo. "The fight raged on for more than a day. Unbeknownst to any of us, the Scythrians had a powerful magic-user among them, and in the chaos of their attack, many, many Scalesworn died."

Now it was Mikael's turn to shiver.

"But it wasn't just the one with the Magestone on her forehead that caused all the trouble. These Scythrians were good at fighting, I suspect from real-life practice and because of the hardships they had endured as a nomadic people."

Master Viljo stopped before Mikael and placed his hands together before his chest as if he were praying. "But as you would suspect, we defended ourselves against this attack. And yes, it was a bloody affair. Several times we gave the surviving Scythrians a chance to flee with their lives, because it was obvious they could not win. But they did not listen, and in the end, all of the invaders, every single one, was killed."

Mikael stood up, suddenly realizing how the pieces fit together. "So my parents were killed in this very camp?"



"Yes. Mikael, I'm afraid they were."

Mikael grit his teeth, squeezing his fists into tight balls. "Were they killed by Draconum or Scalesworn?"

Master Viljo seemed shaken by this question. "Of your father, I cannot say for certain. To this day I am unsure if he was even with the tribe or if he was one of the unfortunate whom we burned in a pyre afterward. As for your mother, it is safe to say she was the magic-user I spoke of, the one with the Magestone embedded in her forehead."

Mikael was furious now, feeling betrayed and bewildered at hearing this shocking news, and he shook as he spoke. "You have not answered my question."

Master Viljo nodded. "She was killed by a Draconum, Mikael." The dragon man stood up straight to his full height. "She died honorably in combat against me."

Mikael's blood ran cold. He couldn't move or even blink. It was as if all the world had stopped moving, and he was forever doomed to stand at the point of ultimate understanding, never able to go forward, never able to go back, for the rest of existence.

The Draconum master stepped back and bowed once to his apprentice. "After she fell by my hand, I found you, in a bundle strapped to her back. I took it upon myself to train you and give you the opportunity to challenge your mother's killer when you were strong enough."

Master Viljo unfurled his wings, taking a fighting stance with his feet, lifting his hands into a classic defensive position.

"If you feel you are ready, then I am prepared to accept your challenge. But I warn you, I will defend myself, and though I will feel sorrow for your death, I will not hesitate to treat you as an enemy."

Mikael snapped out of his stupor and struck a counter pose to the one his master had shown. Inside, he was conflicted with a rush of emotions—anger, terror, pride, and confusion fought for control. He had never faced a Draconum master, not even in a sparing match. But this creature—the figure who had raised him since he was but a baby—had murdered his mother. More than anything in his life, Mikael had been driven by visions of this moment and the sweetness of his revenge.

But never in his wildest dreams had he imagined it like this.

"What is your desire, Mikael?"

Mikael narrowed his eyes. Hatred burned in his heart. Sorrow filled his breast. He was drawn in two directions at once, and every cell in his body tingled in anticipation to discover which way he would go.

Then he lowered his fists. "I will not challenge you today."

Both men stood staring at each other for a long moment, then Master Viljo folded his wings and stepped out of his defensive posture. "Perhaps I was wrong about you."

"What do you mean?"

The Draconum smiled.

Jess Lebow has been writing fantasy fiction for about five years, and has plans to continue until his ninety-fifth birthday, if he lives that long. His third book, *The Darksteel Eye*, will be out in stores this coming January. And his previous book, *The Wind of War*, is up for an Origins Award this year.