

A Fluttering of Wings

by Paul Worthington

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Book One of *Servants of the Last Falcon*

CAMDEN-1

A story is told of a boy, fully grown but still at least two or three years from Ekjo, the full strength and endurance of his body, who in the dead of winter arrived at the farmhouse of the village of Dume, which lies in the foothills south of the Norgold Mountains, and calmly announced that it was his intention to travel to the Summerlands imagined by dreamers to lie beyond the mountains.

And just how do you intend to do that, the people of Dume asked him, with near-hostile dubiousness. The northern peoples have a saying, known though not often used by those of us from farther south, "They died in the Norgold Mountains," which is used to describe failed undertakings that everyone except those attempting them realized were doomed to failure—as when, for example, Jumpolayo Ruppertz of the town of Yobo (which is about a two-day walk from Dume) tried to make a living by selling icicles. This saying alludes to the many rash, and often brash, attempts that have been made over the years to cross the Norgold Mountains, which have resulted at best in glum returns of hitherto confident adventurers and would-be conquerors expelled by the unforgiving mountain, and at worst in the intrepid fools never being heard from again. That's in the summer or early autumn, or maybe late in the spring: if you were to suggest to those who had lived in the shadow of those mountains their whole lives, respecting their power and mystery, that you were going to cross them in winter, or that such a thing could be done, they would think that you were either joking or insane, or otherwise were insulting their modest spirits, which is rather what the consensus was when the boy, Innikno, made bold his claim.

But when the boy, who had a quiet manner about him, and I daresay a modest spirit, himself, admitted that he had no idea how he was going to do it, and indeed had hoped to find in Dume a knowledgeable mountaineer and winter traveler, and a

willing guide, their spirits warmed to him. They told him with kind sincerity to wait until summer to run his fool's errand, or better yet, not to do it at all. Old Charles Phant, the de facto spokesman for the town, told him, "Enjoy life, it's short enough as it is."

"I can't wait," he told them, "A girl's life is ebbing away, and I must retrieve a molgrehu from the Summerlands." Their spirits warmed to him yet further, then, for it was plain that instead of seeking fame, or glory, his motives were pure; and deceived by the untainted innocence of his heart, he believed the legend of the Summerlands, and more than that, of the molgrehu, the snail of the Summerlands, the slime of which is said to be a panacea.

It is very sad that she is dying, they told him, with much compassion, it is a tragedy when one must die young, but it would be a greater tragedy for *two* to die young. It is a difficult thing to accept, but those mountains have never been traversed in the summer, and of a certainty not in the winter. Go back home and celebrate what life this girl has left to her; you cannot save her.

"That I cannot do," he replied, "I love her: I am her servant and I will never abandon her." Then, they felt a true and deep compassion for him, for it was clear now that his was indeed a noble spirit, and that moreover, he, as a servant, had been commanded to do this and had no choice in the matter. So, while yet urging him to desist from his impossible charge, the villagers helped him in any way they could, short of accompanying him on his trek. The most experienced hunters and trappers told him everything they knew about the mountains and about how to survive in cold weather; the warmhouse cooks supplied him with as much food as he could carry, dried and preserved so that it would last long and provide an optimum of nutrients per unit of weight. The elders of the village gave him all manner of advice, from which trees and berries to look for in the lower regions of the mountainside, to what to do if faced

with an avalanche, to how not to cause an avalanche. Charles Phant told him, in the direct and yet obscure way that northerners often have, “Don’t overthink things. You learn up here in the north that most things are what they seem they are: If you hear a chitter behind you, that’s a snow rabbit; if you hear a snort, that’s a woolly goat, if you hear a rasp, that’s a bobcat; if you hear a roar, that’s an avalanche; if you hear a great beating of wings, well, if you don’t want it to be a dragon, don’t look back.”

When the villagers accompanied him to the edge of town, and on past the final line of spruce trees which sheltered the town from the mountain winds, and watched him heading upwards until he was nothing more than a solitary dark speck in the distance, threading a winding path up the monstrous white hulk of the mountain, more than a few tears were shed for him, the noblest of the many who had disappeared into that whiteness never to return. And never did he return, but he was always remembered.

Who tells this story? The people of Dume tell it during the long cold evenings of Vathgor and Buuchuu and Lhael after the work of the day has been completed and supper eaten, huddled in their abodes in total darkness but for the flicker of a flame and the glow of coals. The people of Dume are a patient people, slow-moving, hardy, lovers of stories, lovers of the voices that arise from silence with subtle inevitability and carry the stories across the darkness and the cold. They rest together in the embrace of the enduring aroma of supper’s meat and grease and salt and smoke, and at some point, into a lingering silence, when commentary and conversation has ceased, someone will say, “A story is told...” and introduce the what or who about which their story will be. A story is always begun this way, so that the persons present can decide whether they want to listen to it, or to remain among their own thoughts. When they have concluded their story, they say, “The story is told,” to indicate that they are now finished speaking and that anyone

else is free to begin a story, and also to mark that the story has been given to the listeners, who are now free to tell it themselves. The story is told.

A story is told of a boy who in the slow awakening of spring came trudging down out of the roughs of the Norgold mountains, into the town of Yobo, near frozen, indeed covered from cap to boot in a fine frost, eyelashes and eyebrows as white as an old man's. The people of Yobo thought he must be a boy from Dume or Ista, Den or Kolk, gone to the lower reaches to hunt game, who had gotten lost; but ignoring their pleas to stay the night at the town's warmhouse before heading home on the morn, he hurried on, southward, taking the still snow-covered Calan Way, east and south. He bought a plate of mutton and steamed chiffow at the town's meathouse before he went, however, and while savoring his small meal, overheard that Ulfon Rognon, the town blacksmith, and a father of seven, was near to death with an infected injury in his thigh. He asked to see this man, and the townsfolk, though thinking it an odd request, were curious (Yobo has a reputation for curiosity), and took him to the man's house, where removing a small vial of translucent yellow gelatin, he rubbed it on the man's blackened, oozing skin. He gave some of the gelatin to the man's wife, Kan Noron, and told her to her rub it on her husband's wounds a couple of times per day.

"Maybe it'll work," he said, with an encouraging smile, and then left the town, a congregation of well-wishers watching him go.

"That's one strange young man," someone commented, and everyone present nodded. But Ulfon's wounds began to improve that night, and within eight or nine days, he was back at his forge. Who tells this story? The people of Yobo, of course, and especially Kan Noron, who still considers the boy to have been a wild messenger of the deity Witoo, who looks after children. The story is told.

A story is told of a human boy moving in the pine and spruce forest of the lower reaches of the Omoa, the white abyss, which is what the snow elves call the Norgold Mountains. He was moving upward when the elves saw him, blundering, they thought at first, like a fool to his death, which humans are wont to do; but watching him in their white and green cloaks from the camouflage of the trees and snow, they noticed that he was possessed of an awe of and respect for the *ryuun*, which is an Elfin word both for world and abode, which they seldom had witnessed in humans. He seemed to know which of the few of the year's remaining plants and leaves were rich in fiber and nutrients; he talked to the woolly goats, they whose sentience humans have always refused to acknowledge; he went fearlessly among the yelgs and longcats, who sensing his fearlessness, avoided him; and he exuded an understanding of the sacredness of the ground upon which he walked; and he went on, upward and out of their domain, a most singular human. Who tells this story? The snow elves do, and from them it has passed southward to the Forest Elves of Roncala and even on down to the Forest Elves of the woods around Clarks Hill. Aye, they know it, they tell it, and of how they, who never show themselves to humans, so that we think they are but legends, revealed themselves to him and showed him how to make an effective temporary snow house. The story is told.

A story is told of a boy coming to the shelterless heights of the Norgold Mountains, where, beyond the domain of trees, the only vegetation are hardy shrubs and weeds that grow on the slopes of rises and hills screened from the brunt of wind and snow. There, he convened with woolly goats, some of whom it is rumored, as with Nokan bulls, have sentience, some ancient northerners believing they are descended from unicorns. He drank melted snow and ate from a pack well-stocked with that staple of the northern traveler's diet, *road sausage*: heavy bars, strips, lumps, or rods of dried berries, beans, oat grain, and meat all compacted together and covered with a skin of sheep. He

traveled all day, and at night, built himself a snow house for shelter in the manner of the snow elves, and slept until dawn, when he rose again to face the endless steep. Sometimes, when the texture of the snow wouldn't allow him to work it, or else he waited until too late in the day to begin making his shelter, he slept with the woolly goats among some shrubs in the shelter of a rise or hill, shivering through the night. He went ever onward and upward, passing on, one timeless white day, from the domain of the goats. Who tells this story? The goats do, in the wordless way that animals remember things, and in the subtly different way that they reacted to the herders when they came up the mountain the following spring with their tame goats. The story is told.

A story is told of a boy cresting the Norgold Mountains, in the middle of winter. There, at the world's highest point, he gazed upon the unending beauty below, of snow and forest and plain and river and sea, and then started downward, moving through snow of varying texture and depth, until coming to a pass where the snow was deep enough and soft enough that even with the excellent snowshoes he had fashioned for himself in a warmer place somewhere, he sank in to his waist and couldn't go another step.

The vast white steep before him, an arduous journey behind him, his pack near empty of food, and the ice of the mountain within his bones, he almost despaired. I must go on, he said to himself, and with great effort was able to move his leg a boot-length forward. I must go on, he said again, but this time was able to move forward only a half-boot length. The feeling in his feet waning away, he reached down for every last bit of strength he had, seeking, seeking within himself for *nuok pon*.

"How can they fly?" he'd asked his mother long ago, "they're too heavy," and she'd told him, "It is *nuok pon*, the 'extra strength.'" He reached, then, with no other recourse, into the core of his being, and *screamed*. His brain screamed, his

body screamed, his being screamed; and at the same time he sent a scream echoing down the mountainside. Then, having forgotten the world, his purpose, his name, and with his blood afire, his body atremble, and tears squeezing out from the corners of his eyes, he took a single, full, step.

“Only 10,000 more,” he laughed, and repeated this effort again, and then again, and then again, moving with ceaseless determination through that white abyss. Who tells this story? We all do, when we face our own abysses, and every day thereafter as we tell our own stories in the paths of our lives, in who we are and what we do. The story is told.

A story is told of a boy who came down out of the Jyasu, the borderlands of the world, as the Frin call the Norgold Mountains, to the scrubland and gray plains below, which stretch to the sea. He surveyed his surroundings, perhaps, to judge from his body language, surprised by what he saw, perhaps disappointed, perhaps surprised *and* disappointed. But not crestfallen; he said, musing, “That’s interesting,” and then, whatever disappointment he felt, he wasted no time stewing in it, but went to work at once, patching a makeshift oago together from fallen timber, and dragging it to the sea. Using a flattish branch of cedar as a paddle, he made boldly northward, fearless of the endless gray sky, and the ice floes and choppy waters of the northern ocean.

He went onward without rest for two days, until his crude oago began taking on water, and even then, he alternated bailing and paddling, until the craft broke apart, at which point the Frin, the water elves, or white elves, as the fishermen they trade with far to the east call them, who had been watching him from their great, loose, chain of rafts with great curiosity, picked him up. Finding to their surprise (for they had assumed him smote with brain poison) that he was not only coherent but could speak a broken dialect of their tongue, they asked him what purpose was behind his actions. When he told them that he was in search of the molgrehu, which he had been informed

dwelt in the Summerlands on the north side of the Norgold Mountains, and asked them if they knew where these snails could be found, they told him, to his chagrin, that they knew of no such animal. “By your eyes and by your bearing, you are sane,” the rower of the raft that had rescued him said, “but what you say makes no sense. We understand the individual words that you speak, they are Frin, but they do not form a whole. They may be coherent in the not-the-world, but they are not coherent in this reality. Nevertheless, while your purpose is obscure to me, I do not think it dark. You may stay with us until the thaw comes, and we come again to shores of men.”

He did stay with them, eating well of fish and seaweed, and to their surprise rowing well, for eleven days, as they drifted into warmer and warmer waters; and in all that time, they wondered at him. He watched the horizon with an unending intensity that they thought must hurt his eyes. He seldom spoke; he had the silence of a Frin, not the garrulity of a human. But perhaps, they thought, he *isn't* human; he had come, after all, from the not-the-world, which is what they referred to anything beyond the Norgold Mountains. Who tells this story? The Frin do, from time to time, with wonder in their grey-green faces, to each other and to the eastern fishermen they trade with, who themselves tell a story that begins something like this: “You won’t believe this, but this Frinian told me a story, yes, a *Frinian* told me a story; and...” The story is told.

A story is told of a small island, a green atoll at the tip of a spade-shaped archipelago of inhospitable, uninhabited sprawling hulks of rock, where among a profusion of unusual animal and plant species, the molgrehu dwelt. The boy, recovering his strength in the salt spray of the Frin crafts, scanned the horizon every minute of every day for he knew not what—*something*, some clue, some gleam, anything that might light him a new avenue in his quest—and one morning, espying far in the distance a shape, nothing more than a speck, really, of what could be something green, or not, he asked the rower of

the raft what it was, and that solemn Frin told him, "Islands; nothing; rock."

The boy was curious, though, or perhaps desperate or thorough, and asked how long it would take them to row to it. A half-day, the Frin told him, and seeing that his young passenger's soul would not be easy if he didn't see for himself that those islands were nothing but rock, disengaged from the Frin raft-chain, and took him to the island, where, wading ashore, the boy rejoiced to see the green abundance. Within hours he had discovered, among a plethora of lizard species, flightless birds, and tiny, friendly, goats, a large population of striated snails, the slime of which, testing upon a couple of scratches on his fingers, he found possessed healing properties.

He took from his pack the vial that had crossed the mountains with him, and filled it with the slime of hundreds of these snails. One, two, three at a time, he would hold them in his hand while they crawled to and fro leaving slime in their wakes; then, after putting them back where he had found them, murmuring "There you go, thanks, thanks a lot," he would scrape the residue of their zigzagging paths into the vial. This process he repeated until at last the vial was full.

Then he turned homeward with the painful knowledge that he now had to make the same journey he'd just made, in reverse. Waving to the Frin pilot, who was fishing offshore, he said to himself, "Well, I did it once, I can do it again," and wading into the ocean, headed home. Who tells this story? Innikno did once, in his quiet, modest way, for his mother, the girl's mother, and the girl's uncle, when the little girl was well again. The girl's mother, a keenly intelligent woman who understood the hearts of men, said to him, "I think you will never tell that story again," and he replied only, "The story is told." The story is told.

ROWAN-1

“Mind, is my name Rowan?” I asked.

“Why would it not be, Rowan?” Mind replied, using the Jaji pronunciation of the name, which was strange since I hadn’t mentioned it to him until now and had pronounced it using the Leniman phonemes my tongue was accustomed to.

I hadn’t mentioned my new name to Mind because I hadn’t spoken with him since Romulus had named me, a thing which was strange in itself, since in all the time I’d known him he’d never found it necessary to call me by a name.

“Well,” I informed him, “Dr. Mulgar calls me Romulus and so does Dr. Bowusuvi.”

“Is that not the name of your friend in the back room?”

“Uhhh...” That was a difficult question to answer. A few days before, while doing some fractions that Dr. Mulgar had assigned me, I had, in the course of preoccupying myself with various fraction-oriented curiosities unrelated to the assignment, such as determining what fraction of the digits on my hands were thumbs, decided to figure out what fraction of my life I had known Romulus (or more precisely, the entity I was soon to come to know as Romulus), *namely*, my friend in the back room.

To answer this question, I needed two numbers: my own age, and the length of time that I’d known him. I knew my own age, because Dr. Mulgar had informed me of it several days before: He had burst into my room and announced that it was my birthday and that I was now six years old. To be sure, he had added, “Well, five years and a quarter by the usual reckoning, but who’s counting, we’ll call you six!” which was a somewhat mysterious caveat but which, I decided, didn’t alter the pertinent bit of information within his statement, which was that I was six. Mind was ever admonishing me that most statements which seemed complex at first could be simplified by identifying the most pertinent information within them.

The other number I needed for my calculation, that is, the length of time I'd known Romulus, was more problematic to assess. I could only dimly remember a time when he hadn't lived in his cage in the back room, or the gray room, as I thought of it, so we'd known each other for quite a while, a few months at the very minimum. We'd been conversing long enough, at any rate, to have taught each other our respective languages well enough to communicate without much confusion or need to repeat or clarify ourselves in either of them, or the pidgin of the two that we often used. I had decided that I had known him about one year.

But he had never been "Romulus." We had never called each other by name—by any names. It seems strange, now, that we knew each other for that many months before we learned one another's names, or even thought to address one another by some kind of designation; but the strangeness of it never occurred to me at the time, nor did it ever occur to me to ask him his name. He was just *him*, to me. I didn't think of him as "the Jaji" or "the Forest Elf," which is what the Grail called Jajis—"those denizens rural of folklore, the Forest Elves," to quote directly—or "the Walnuthead," which is what the Fathead guys called him, or "the person in the back room" or "the person in the cage." He was just *him*.

One day, by chance, Dr. Mulgar and I happened to be conversing in the hallway that led to that back, gray, room that served as Romulus' domicile. I can't remember why we were there (usually, we had our lessons in the main room or in my bedroom), but as we talked, Dr. Mulgar saw fit several times to call me Romulus, which was the name he and Dr. Bowusuvi had for me.

Keen-eared Romulus (or, again, the entity who was soon to tell me that he was Romulus, and who I would come to know as Romulus) overheard us, and after Dr. Mulgar departed, told me he couldn't call me Romulus because that was *his* name, and it would be too confusing for both of us to be Romulus. Since

we had gone months without knowing each other's names, this seemed like a non-problem to me, but he was insistent that we couldn't have the same name, and he wasn't insistent about many things, so I allowed that *he* could be Romulus.

He asked me what, then, he should call me—that's just how he said it, in the stilted way in which he spoke Leniman, "What, then, shall I call you?" I gave him to know that howsoever his taste guided him would be fine with me, to which he responded that he would call me Rowan. As a point of fact, it's not "Rowan;" that's my Lenima-zation of it: The word—the name—he pronounced sounded to my ears a lot like the name of a rare tree I'd seen on the Grail (and I'd spent a fair bit of time perusing pictures of trees, so taken was I by their subtle but endless variety of leaf shape and crown shape and by the interesting combination of qualities they exhibited, of prodigious size and delicate intricacy) and thereafter I pronounced the name he had given me as I pronounced the name of the tree. The initial sound of the Jaji word is quite different from the initial sound of "Rowan," but I couldn't pronounce it; it's not a phoneme that occurs in Leniman. The other sounds in the word are subtly different from those in the Leniman word, "Rowan," as well. But, I liked the sound of it, both as he pronounced it and as I did, and I told him as much, and thereafter he called me Rowan, or more precisely the Jaji word that sounds sort of like "Rowan," which I found out later, means, roughly, "servant."

I didn't question that his name was Romulus, the very name that Dr. Mulgar and Dr. Bowusuvi had always called me, or even consciously consider that it couldn't be Romulus—if he wanted to be Romulus, that was fine with me—but it seemed *off*, somehow. I think that already having a rudimentary knowledge of the Jaji language, I realized at some level that "Romulus" couldn't be a Jaji word, or name. The initial sound, the same as that at the beginning of my Lenima-zation of the name he gave me, never appears in Jaji, and moreover, Jaji words seldom end with a voiceless sibilant.

So, “Uhhh,” was the best I could do in answer to Mind’s question of whether Romulus was not the name of “my friend in the back room.”

“You were saying?” Mind prompted when my “uhhh” drifted into silence.

“Yes,” I admitted, “he said he was Romulus. But, uh, we can’t both be Romulus?”

“That is what he declared, is it not?”

“Hmmm,” I mused, as I often did in response to Mind’s questions.

Mind waited, as patient as an iguana on a rock.

“So, Dr. Mulgar is wrong then?” I asked. If somebody had been watching me, I would have looked as if I were mumbling to myself, with recurrent changes of expression and an occasional gesticulation. It wasn’t until midsummer of that year that my communications with Mind began to be camouflaged by silent reverie.

“Perhaps from Dr. Mulgar’s point of view, Dr. Mulgar is correct, Rowan.”

I pondered this, and got nowhere. It seemed to me that my name was either Romulus, which Dr. Mulgar and Dr. Bowusuvi called me, or Rowan, which Romulus called me, and which Mind was now calling me, even though he’d called me Romulus heretofore. Both couldn’t be correct; one had to be right, the other wrong.

At length, I said, “But from *our* point of view, he’s wrong?”

“From my point of view,” Mind said, in his usual mild, carefree tone, “he is neither correct nor incorrect. Whether he is correct or incorrect from your point of view is something that you will decide for yourself.”

“Hmmm,” I mused once again, trying to think of how to induce him into giving me the information I sought. As usual, he was, to use a phrase I learned much later, acting the mule, refusing to do what I wanted him to do for no reason beyond

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