

The Sparks

BOOK ONE OF THE FEUD TRILOGY

KYLE PRUE

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This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Dedication



To Seacrest Country Day School.
It truly was a magical journey.

In memory of Drew Harrison.
I never would have had the courage to
express my creativity if I hadn't met you.

Characters



The Vapros Family

- ~ Neil Vapros
- ~ Rhys Vapros
- ~ Jennifer Vapros
- ~ Victoria Vapros
- ~ Sir Vapros



The Taurlum Family

- ~ Darius Taurlum
- ~ Michael Taurlum



The Celerius Family

- ~ Lilly Celerius
- ~ Anthony Celerius
- ~ Lady Celerius
- ~ Sir Celerius
- ~ Thomas Celerius
- ~ Jonathan



The Empire

- ~ The Emperor
- ~ Saewulf
- ~ Carlin Filus
- ~ The Empress
- ~ Virgil Servatus
- ~ Quintus
- ~ Captain of the Guard



Citizens of Altryon

- ~ Bianca Blackmore
- ~ Robert Tanner
- ~ Anastasia
- ~ Alfred the Bartender
- ~ The Pig



Altryon



THE SPARKS

Part One

The Families

Vox Populi Vox Dei
The Voice of the People is the Voice of God

KYLE PRUE



Chapter One

Taurlum Mansion

Neil

Slide the knife between the third and fourth rib.

Neil's father's words rang in his ears as he pulled his dark, ornate hood over his head and raised his cloth mask to cover his mouth and nose. He knew all Taurlum had several weak spots on their bodies, but only one was vulnerable enough to cause an instant kill. All he needed to do was thrust his knife directly between the ribs (*the third and fourth ribs*, he reminded himself) and straight through the heart. Neil's father had taught him this trick on his tenth birthday. It had been one of the more pleasant ones.

He spent a moment adjusting his mask, making sure his face would remain concealed. Not that it really mattered; during the middle of the day, the mask would do little to camouflage him. Any Taurlum would spot a Vapros like him from a mile away. The disguise had been given to him mostly for the sake of preserving his identity. Nobody needed to know *which* Vapros boy had made the kill.

Neil ran his finger over the hilt of the knife. His father had presented it to him upon completion of his assassin's training. Engraved in the handle was the Vapros family crest. The background of the crest was purple and black, with a raven embedded in the center. The Raven was the family nickname, as the black-haired, green-eyed descendants seemed to favor their swift, calculating animal mascot. The raven was known as the bringer of death: an appropriate symbol for the trained assassin. The family motto was inscribed along the bottom: Victory Lies Within the Ashes. Neil loved his knife; it made him feel like a real assassin.

Neil craved the assassin's glory but knew in his gut that he desperately needed another assassin to assist in this mission. Two stealthy ravens against a Taurlum bull was still a risk, but they would have the element of surprise on their side. Alone it was a certain death mission, but his father's orders were clear. Neil was desperately alone.

Making it into the giant Taurlum mansion had been easy. Navigating its giant corridors would be harder. Neil glanced carefully around the marble corner. A single guard stood watch. The man wore simple plated armor with red and gold war paint but had removed his helmet to reveal his entire head. *Not a Taurlum*, Neil thought. The guard lacked the golden blonde hair shared by every direct descendant of the Taurlum line; therefore, this man was not worth his time or effort. Neil squinted in concentration, and then threw all his energy into dematerializing. He reformed a split second later on the other side of the corridor. The guard continued watching the hallway and never noticed Neil materialize just behind him. As silently as he could, the Vapros boy made his way down the hallway toward the communal baths where his target would be waiting.

A Taurlum family crest hung above the door to the bathhouse. Its colors were the same gold and scarlet that covered the uniforms of the Taurlum guards who roughed up villagers in the market. A proud-

looking bull stood in the center of the crest, eyes narrowed, as if challenging all who dared to oppose the name of the “great Taurlum.” At the thought of eliminating his first Taurlum man, Neil’s heart began to quicken, jump-started by adrenaline. He reached for his crossbow and fired a bolt directly into the bull’s pretentious forehead. Then he opened the door and dematerialized as quickly as he could.

He reappeared behind a marble pillar a few feet away from the entrance. The inside of the Taurlum mansion was lavishly decorated with red and gold, from long velvet banners to giant tapestries depicting the family’s crest. The manor itself stood in the center of the marketplace so that all the merchants affiliated with the Taurlum could get home quickly if the mighty Vapros warriors showed up. Even though Neil was disgusted at the opulence of the mansion, he couldn’t help but admire how impressive it was. The entirety of the Taurlum mansion was made of polished marble to accommodate the great weight of its residents. A marvel like this had never been built before and was quite a change from the wooden and brick buildings that filled the city.

A door on the opposite wall opened. Neil risked a glance around his pillar. Two towheaded men wearing red and gold swimwear came into the bathhouse. Neil resisted the urge to snort. They never missed a chance to bear their family colors and boast of their “superior lineage.” The two Taurlum were young, one looked to be Neil’s age, the other a few years older, and they were unarmed. But their skin, Neil knew, was hard to pierce. The boys might as well have been made of iron.

Neil glanced around the corner to look at their swimwear. He had never seen anything like it. Most people in Altryon didn’t have the money or opportunity to swim for fun, but when they did, their swimwear covered their chests along with their legs. These boys wore nothing except what appeared to be swim shorts. This was most likely because they wanted to show off as many muscles as possible. The taller one chatted loudly and

easily to his companion. Neil dared to relax. They didn't suspect he was here. The shorter Taurlum was quieter, but the proud, almost cocky way he held himself when he walked made Neil roll his eyes.

"So," the taller boy was saying as he walked into Neil's line of vision. The Vapros boy held his breath. "Did you hear about the Pig?" Neil recognized this boy now: Michael Taurlum, known as "the Nose" among the villagers because of his prominent snout. He wore a gold ring on every finger, and the multitudes of bracelets adorning his arms clinked loudly. Any normal man would struggle to carry all that jewelry, but Michael's skin bore the weight easily. His droopy, yet unsettlingly alert eyes were fixed on his Taurlum companion and he had a thin, blonde beard growing on his iron jaw. He didn't see the Vapros enemy behind the pillar, which was incredibly fortunate for Neil. Michael wasn't well known for his mercy.

The younger, clean-shaven boy sank into the warm bath water. "The Pig?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Michael climbed into the bath beside him, not bothering to remove his jewelry. "Come on, Darius, learn the damn city." His voice was louder and bolder than his brother's. It was almost as if he wanted the entire city to hear him, and to hear him clearly. It made Neil want to shoot him on the spot. Patience, he reminded himself. He couldn't make his move yet. If these two realized he was here, he would not only fail his mission, he would probably also be killed, or worse, held for ransom. Even if his family paid the ransom to get him back, Neil's cover would be blown and he would be forced to spend the rest of his days working as a socialite. That was not the life he'd been working toward for all these years. He was trained to be an assassin. He could not mess this up. Failure would not be tolerated.

"The Pig is the guy who owns the mask shop in the market," the Nose was explaining to the one called Darius. Neil focused his energy and rematerialized behind another pillar a little farther away from the boys.

Darius cocked his head. “And why is he called the Pig?”

Michael waded into deeper water and smiled. “Because he’s a pig,” he chuckled. “And because he’s famous for forcing himself on women.”

Darius’s mouth stretched into a grin. “You shouldn’t be talking. You’re kind of famous for that, too.”

Michael’s smile quickly turned to a frown. Behind the pillar, Neil nearly laughed out loud. This Darius wasn’t afraid to speak his mind. From across the room, he heard the men continuing with their conversation, but he couldn’t stay to listen. There was a mission at hand.

He rematerialized behind a new pillar, edging his way closer to the other side of the room where the door to the next room was waiting. Coming to the baths had been a waste of time; neither Darius nor the Nose was his target. Neil could still hardly believe his father had chosen him for this critical mission. His target was the Taurlum grandfather, the titular head of the Taurlum family. The Vapros controlled the nightlife district and the production and distribution of ale. The Taurlum controlled the markets. But in an unexpected power play, the Taurlum were attempting to corner the market on barley, wheat, and hops, buying up the ingredients needed to produce the Vapros ale. This assassination was in direct retaliation for this ill-advised maneuver.

Neil dematerialized again, and then again, and then stopped short; he was out of pillars. Nothing but empty space stood between him and the door, but it was too far. He wasn’t strong enough to rematerialize that far away. Neil felt his heart begin to pound and he ran his hand through his raven hair angrily. He was stuck.

He considered his options. He could try to make a run for it. Darius was sitting with his back to the exit, but the Nose wouldn’t sit still. If he turned at just the wrong time, he would spot the Vapros boy. Neil pulled his knife from its sheath. It had been specially curved so that it could slip in between a man’s ribs. However, that tactic would prove ineffective

against a Taurlum, unless Neil was perfectly precise. The only way to kill a Taurlum was to press the knife into a pressure point. Once the knife pierced the skin there, and the Taurlum started to bleed, he was as easy to kill as any other mortal. It wouldn't be so hard to sneak up behind Darius and stab him, and then it was just a matter of Michael. The Vapros loved to tell stories about how much of a brutish monster he was in combat. Michael also had the added advantage of his massive size. Neil estimated that he stood at nearly six-and-a-half feet tall, and every inch of his body was composed of hard muscle. Darius was smaller and leaner, but Neil didn't let that fool him. Darius was lean, but he had an athlete's hard body and definitely wouldn't go down without a fight. If Neil could only strike down Michael first somehow

Suddenly, the door Neil had come through burst open, and a guard came running into the bathhouse. "Sirs!" he cried. "We have reason to believe there is an assassin in the house!"

Neil almost dropped his knife. Michael leaped out of the pool, bracelets clanging obnoxiously against each other. The other boy didn't move. "What makes you think there's someone in the house?" asked Darius with a raised eyebrow.

"There was a crossbow bolt fired into the Taurlum seal over the door to this very room," the guard said nervously. "A Vapros weapon, from the looks of it. We are on high alert. Either one of you could be the target."

Neil shoved a hand through his hair and cursed his own arrogance. He slid the curved knife back into its sheath and planned his next move. Fighting had seemed like a good idea when it was only two boys in a bath, but now he had lost the element of surprise.

On the other side of the room, Michael scoffed, "I fear no assassin. I am going to go get my hammer and then I am going to find him and use his insides to decorate the floor."

Darius stepped out of the bath and put a restraining hand on the Nose's

shoulder. “Settle down, Michael. The guards will take care of this. Any assassin stupid enough to fire a bolt into our crest is not stealthy enough to stay hidden for long.”

Darius and Michael left the bathhouse together, leaving puddles in their wakes. Now, only the lone guard remained. Neil waited as patiently as he could but the man didn't seem to have any intention of leaving. Neil took a breath and tried to still his hammering heart. He had never actually killed a man before. Carefully, Neil raised his crossbow and fired a bolt into the back of the guard's head. The guard let out a surprised gasp as he began to fall. Neil materialized behind him and grabbed the back of his neck before he hit the ground. As he held onto the lifeless body, he began to gather all his energy and then, with a strong exhale, he released it. The guard's body instantly dissolved into ash—clothes, weapons, and all. Every fiber of his being was cremated in less than a second. The ability to dissolve his enemies into ash was a useful one, but for Neil, it only worked on bodies that were already dead, and it would be ineffective as a tool in the coming assassination.

Neil doubted anyone would notice the ash on the ground until he had already completed his mission, but he kicked through what was left of the guard for good measure. A pang of guilt began to arise in his chest and he clutched his stomach. He felt his face grow warm and for a moment, he was sure he would faint. He very quickly found himself vomiting onto the marble floor. He sighed and approached the pool. With cupped hands, he brought some water to his mouth. He swirled it around and then spat it out. *Don't feel guilty*, he told himself. *Any guard who decided to work for a prominent family like the Taurlum understood the risks*. He started toward the door, but fatigue and shortness of breath made him pause and double over. Materializing took an inordinate amount of energy. He had been stupid to use his powers so often in such a short amount of time. He stumbled to one of the pillars and leaned against it

as he tried to stay conscious. A full minute passed before he felt well enough to stand, and as he made his way to the exit, he promised himself not to materialize again unless it was absolutely necessary.

The exit took him to the bottom of a giant spiral staircase. He climbed the steps with as much vigor as he could muster in his weakened state, panting a little from the effort. By the time he reached the top stair, he was gasping for breath. Before him stood a giant door which stretched up to over three times his height. Why was everything in this house so tall? It was as if the Taurlum mansion was built for a community of elephants, instead of men who just happened to have tough skin.

The door didn't have a handle. Neil threw himself against the wood with all his force, but it held fast, and with a sinking heart, he realized someone with the strength of a Taurlum warrior designed the door. No one without such strength would be able to push it open. Not for the first time in his life, he wished it were possible to materialize through walls.

As Neil backtracked a few steps to try throwing himself against the door again, it was pulled open with a staggering amount of force from the opposite side. The Vapros assassin found himself face to face with a familiar pair of Taurlum brothers, now armor-clad and holding weapons. "Got him," the Nose said to Darius, brandishing a hammer high above his head. Neil forgot every bit of his training and made a run for it.

In spite of promising himself not to, Neil materialized behind the two brothers and bolted into a circular room filled with armor and weapons. He gasped as he entered and realized this was a dead end. He didn't have the energy to materialize again. The two Taurlum turned to face him, amusement spreading across their faces. Michael stood back and watched as Darius began to walk forward to confront Neil. "Remove your hood, Vapros," he commanded.

Neil pulled away his hood and mask to reveal his face for the two young men. Michael seemed slightly surprised by his age, but Darius held his icy

composure. Neil was finally able to see Darius up close. He had wavy golden hair and something in his blue eyes that was almost intelligent. Neil quickly decided that Darius's eyes didn't show wisdom but more of an ironclad determination. Unlike Michael, he didn't wear any jewelry. It was as if his entire outfit had been designed to be practical and battle efficient. This didn't stop Neil from noticing the blood smeared on his armored chest. Neil was ready to bet that it wasn't his. "Who are you here to kill?" Darius asked, advancing slowly. Neil backed away until he was pressed up against a giant floor-to-ceiling stained glass window. He glanced over his shoulder. The window would be easy to shatter, but a fall from this height was risky.

"The oldest Taurlum," Neil answered finally. "Your grandfather probably. I haven't exactly looked at your family tree recently."

Darius narrowed his eyes. Neil braced himself for a deathblow. "You're kind of an idiot, aren't you?" the Taurlum boy said, a hint of laughter in his eyes.

This question caught Neil off guard. "Not exactly. I'm just unlucky. Why?"

"Look at you!" he laughed. "You've run right into a dead end. You aren't even remotely in the right part of the house, if you're looking for my grandfather. Was that your intention?"

Neil tried to stand up straight as he responded sarcastically, "Well, if you could point me to the right part of the house I'd be on my way."

Michael sighed heavily through his oversized nose and rubbed his bearded face leisurely. "On with it, Darius. I want to continue my swim."

As Darius took a step closer to his target, Neil realized he might have stalled long enough to gain back sufficient energy for one last escape. He concentrated his energy and prepared to materialize somewhere near the door. Darius realized what Neil was doing too soon, and before Neil could disappear, the Taurlum had planted his right foot against Neil's chest and kicked him straight through the window.

As Neil fell, he used the last of his energy to rematerialize slightly closer

to the ground. He hit it chest first with a thud. Neil groaned as he tried to get up. His breastplate was horribly dented and his mouth tasted of blood. He slowly made it to his hands and knees and realized he was facing the markets. The city walls loomed in the distance, shrouded by a thin fog.

He rolled around and tilted his head back to glare up at the window. He made eye contact with Darius, who now held a mammoth war hammer. A small smile played around the Taurlum's lips as he raised the weapon above his head. Neil realized what was going to happen just in time. The hammer hit the ground with such force that it tore apart the bricks where Neil had been lying a moment before.

"Is that the best you can do?" Neil shouted. Darius scowled and stepped straight out of the broken window. He plummeted to the ground (as did Neil's jaw) and landed so hard that the cobblestone street beneath him shattered and sent up a cloud of dust. He rose from the rubble, dusted himself off, and swaggered over to Neil. "If you value your life," he said, pulling the massive hammer from the ground, "you should run."

A group of villagers had come running when they saw the boy thrown from the third story window of the Taurlum mansion, but as Darius advanced on Neil they turned to flee. The citizens of Altryon knew what happened when members of opposing houses came across one another. Better to get as far away from the coming brawl as possible.

Neil met Darius's icy gaze and tore away his dented breastplate. For an instant, he considered fighting. Darius raised a challenging eyebrow and stretched out his arms threateningly. Neil took a step forward, threw his breastplate to the ground, and turned tail to run for his life. Darius smiled and waited a few seconds to give Neil a decent head start. Then, hoisting the hammer above his head, he let out a roar and chased after the terrified Vapros would-be assassin.