

ARC OF FIRE

Book Four of the Caliel Cycle

By
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Prologue

Things Long Hidden

Night enfolded the world of Caliel. Glowing traceries of light scattered across the land marked settlements: the lonely twinklings of isolated villages, the brighter beacons of cities. The brightest lights came from the northwest of the continent, where the great cities of the god Nimrod testified to the majesty of civilization. By contrast, a huge region in the southwest was entirely dark. This was the vast forest of Shael, domain of the goddess Shayna. This land was inhabited, but its people did not build cities as others did, preferring to dwell in places wild and untamed, and in any case the canopy of the trees they lived under blocked out what lights they made from sight.

To the east of these two great countries were the middle nations, those lands in between the domains of the three gods of Caliel. Some had lights nearly as bright as Nimrod's, while others were darker, less urban, more like the Shaelwood. And yet the lights of the middle nations were not distributed at random; there was a pattern to them. In the west they were more numerous and brighter, but further east they grew dimmer and scattered, as if afraid to approach in that direction. Finally, they faded out entirely at the edge of a looming black shadow, a mountain range called the Cordillen that divided the continent from north to south. This natural wall marked the boundary of the lands of Caliel's third deity: Vraxor, the dreaded demon-god.

In the dark, Vraxor's country smoldered. Lights like flames marked his cities. In the north was Ral Ardente, a city of traders and merchant lords on the banks of a black river. In the south was Ral Axen, a conglomeration of forges and foundries on the shore of the Burning Coast. But in the center of the country, where the ominous capitol of Ral Vraxan stood, there was only darkness. The country had recently undergone a civil war in which the capitol had passed back and forth between the warring sides, suffering great damage in the process.

However, to balance the subtraction of the lights of Ral Vraxan, there was an addition: a cluster of lights in the west, just beyond the main pass through the Cordillen. They were bright enough to be the lights of a medium-sized city, but unlike any city, these lights moved from one day to the next. They were heading steadily east, moving in an arrow-straight line towards the capitol.

It was a wild night. The wind stormed and howled at the land, and the skies were starless and black. To the west, the towering shadows of the Cordillen stood like a wall. At the mountains' feet, a thousand fires dotted the landscape, and in their midst was a plain brown tent. Gusts rattled its canvas walls, which twisted and strained at the ropes that held them. Despite this, a fine woven carpet was laid on the ground

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inside, and the canvas walls enclosed a king-size bed blanketed with silk sheets. Candles flickered and guttered.

Inside the tent, the wind shrieked and whistled. But in the quiet intervals between gales, there was another noise, faint but audible. Yet its softness made it all the more blood-chilling. It was the sound, heard from far off, of people screaming.

“Such beautiful screams,” Kyrian Daimon murmured, lying on the bed. He was tall, pale and gaunt, dressed in a red and white silk shirt and black trousers. His watery brown hair was cut short, his bright blue eyes sleepy, half-closed.

“Far be it from me to deny you your pleasure, my love,” said a female voice, low and sultry. Its owner was a shapely woman, dark of skin and darker of hair, dressed in tight-fitting red and purple. “But it was only a peasant village. They weren’t about to interfere with us. Was it necessary to burn *all* of them? The women and children as well?”

Kyrian sat up. “They were all followers of the demon-god,” he said sharply. “The worst kind of filth. None of them deserve to live. This world must be purified of them.”

“Of course, love,” Wyre Tehliari said submissively. She laid a hand on his shoulder. “As you wish.”

“It will all be as I wish,” Kyrian said fiercely. “The death of Myrren Kahliana. The eradication of the demon worshippers. The slaying of the dark god. All of it!”

“Of course it will be,” she purred, “my champion.”

Her lips brushed his, but she drew back teasingly when he tried to kiss her. She moved down, kissing his chin, his neck, nuzzling her face against his. He let out a soft, shuddering breath, and her lips curved in a sultry smile.

Suddenly, she bit his neck, almost hard enough to draw blood. He gasped and scrambled to his feet, but she was already standing, smiling enigmatically at him. He looked at her dangerously, but then his expression softened into a sly grin. He seized her, she pulled him down to the ground, and they tore at each other’s clothing.

A bell outside the tent tinkled, and an officer in a white and gold uniform stepped in and saluted. “Lord Kyrian, there’s an urgent— Ah! Forgive me!”

Wyre looked at the man sulkily, then buttoned up her shirt, without haste. Kyrian rolled over onto his elbows, glared at the officer and got to his feet. His red and white silk shirt flowed open, revealing his pale chest.

“What do you want?” he demanded, in a tone that suggested the answer had better be a good one.

“My humble apologies for disturbing you, Lord Kyrian, but you left orders for us to notify you when—”

Kyrian’s mood changed in an instant. “Bring it to me now!”

“Immediately, lord.” He signaled, and a soldier entered with a wooden chest, which he set on the nightstand.

Kyrian opened the chest. His eyes lit up as he took out a parcel wrapped in paper.

“You have done well,” he said. “Now go.”

The soldiers departed, but he paid them no further attention. He ripped the string off and tore at the wrappings.

“What is this, love?” Wyre asked.

“A book,” he said, drawing it free and holding it out like a prize. It was bound in worn black leather and looked fragile, ready to fall apart. “A book which I’ve been scouring the world to find. And now I have it!”

Wyre pouted. “You never told me about this,” she said, then saw the faded letters on the cover. Her eyes widened.

“*The Prophecies of Noroaster*? I didn’t even believe he existed...”

“He did,” Kyrian said brusquely. He set the book down and flipped through it. The pages were ancient and brittle, and many cracked or flaked at his touch, but he turned them rapidly with no thought for their fragility.

“I learned about him in Cyrene. Most of my instructors thought he was only a legend. They said his prophecies were so vague they could apply to any era... One old man said he was a genuine seer, the greatest who ever lived.” She frowned. “He was always considered eccentric. He died the year after I graduated his class, I think.”

“The old man was wise.”

“But I thought his writings were long lost. Even Cyrene’s libraries only had commentaries on them, not any copies of the actual book.”

“I thought so too, for a long time. But from scraps of rumor, I learned that a few copies still existed. It’s taken a great deal of effort to find one of them... but here it is, mine at last.”

They leaned over the book, Wyre reading over Kyrian’s shoulder.

One unusual thing became apparent immediately. “It doesn’t read like most prophecies do,” she said in surprise, “all riddles and clouded language. It’s... clear.”

Each chapter was simply titled—“On the Great War To be Fought in the Year 2877 Between the Nations of Nejvel and Dirasa,” for example—and written in plain language, like a history book. From the brief glimpses Wyre had of the pages as Kyrian raced through them and her own fragmentary knowledge of the events described, everything seemed to be accurate. Of course, she knew they could have been written after the fact, but...

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“Here!” Kyrian said triumphantly. His finger stabbed down on the page.

Wyre glanced at the chapter heading, the last one in the book. It read “On the Confrontation Between the One of Prophecy and the Dark God.”

She frowned as she saw the thickness of paper remaining.

“Why is it so short compared to the others?”

Kyrian scowled. “He wouldn’t have left anything out,” he muttered doubtfully. “It will have everything we need to know. It must.”

They read on, more slowly and carefully. The ink had faded until it was almost illegible, and they strained to pick out the pale characters from the page.

In the Mists of Times Past, it began, This have I Seen – For it Was that in the Years Following the Godswar, the World of Caliel, under the Reign of its New Deities, gradually Healed from the grievous Wounds inflicted upon it by the Now-vanquished Elder Gods, and Civilization took Hold once More.

“It’s supposed to be a book of prophecy. Why is this old history in it?” Wyre asked impatiently, but Kyrian shushed her.

And Yet it Was that the Dark God Vraxor looked out Beyond the Borders of his Fiery Lands, and Saw the Holdings of his Allies Shayna and Nimrod, and was Jealous. His Heart was still that of a Demon, despite his transformation to Deity, and Deep inside he Burned with unquenchable Desire to be the Only God of Caliel.

And This have I Seen – Cunning Vraxor bided his Time, allowing his People to grow, and then, when he Judged that the Time was Right, flew to wise Nimrod’s lands in Secret with the intent to Strike Him down and Slay Him.

“What!?” Wyre whispered in shock. She had grown up in the dark god’s country, but no psalm or sermon she had ever heard had mentioned this.

“Keep reading,” he said intently.

Yet it was Not to Be. For before cunning Vraxor’s Hand could descend, beautiful Shayna, having Perceived his plan, Sped to wise Nimrod’s Tower to stop him, and expended much of her Divine Power to put her two fellow Gods into a Sleep beyond Time, to maintain the Balance of the World and Prevent them from Destroying Each other.

And so it Was that beautiful Shayna Returned to her Woods and Secluded herself beyond Mortal Sight, fearful of taking any great Action without her fellow Gods to counterbalance her, and without its Gods, the World of Caliel has thrived ever Since. This have I Seen.

The two of them read with eyes wide now. Kyrian turned the page.

In the Mists of Times Yet to Come, These things have I Seen. Behold, out of the East there Shall Rise a mighty Champion of light, a legendary Hero by the name of Kyrian whose Destiny it will Be to confront the Dark God in a Battle to the death. Though his Family and all he ever Loved will be slain, ravaged and Burned by the servants of Vraxor—

Kyrian scowled and gritted his teeth.

—he shall Rise like a Phoenix to take vengeance. His Magic will be of a Strength heretofore unseen in Caliel, a Strength equalled only by his Fury, and he shall repay the servants of the Dark God a thousand times over, Blood for Blood, Life for Life.

And This have I Seen: The Destiny of the Chosen One shall be, in the fullness of Time, to confront the Dark God himself in a Battle from which only one shall emerge Victorious. Once along the way he will Stumble, but he shall rise Again and Grow Stronger than before, Driving into the lands of the slumbering Dark God sowing death and Destruction before him, in preparation for the final Battle.

“Yes, yes,” he muttered. “What next?”

Wyre was trying to absorb what this book had told them, but then Kyrian turned the page and the narration changed. It was now speaking directly to the reader—speaking to them. She had a disconcerting feeling of being watched, as if the mists of space and time had parted and the author was observing them. It had been a long time since anything had bothered her like this.

Know this, Chosen One – While the Dark God slumbers, He is Helpless Against thee, and if Thou reachest him, Thou may’st Strike with Impunity.

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As she reached that line, exultation replaced her unease. She laughed, clasping her arms around Kyrian's neck. "This is wonderful news, love!"

He frowned. "But am I to strike at Vraxor while he sleeps? I wanted to face him. I wanted him to know who was killing him and why."

"But wouldn't you rather be certain you'd win? Don't you want to become a god?"

Kyrian looked disgruntled. He returned to the book.

*Yet though the Dark God Sleeps, He is not
Undefended. Further Know this, Chosen One – His servants
will Defend Him zealously, and to Reach him, Thou must face
great Peril and much Danger. But This have I seen, Chosen
One: If the Heart of Vraxor be Silenced, then no force of this
World shall thwart thy Victory, and Thou shalt for certain Slay
thy Foe and become a God thyself.*

Wyre cheered and laughed, and Kyrian mustered a grin. All the prophecies they had found relating to him, and there were many, were maddeningly vague. Most ancient seers had pleaded ignorance, claiming that the future was uncertain where gods entered into it. This was the first one that promised victory under any set of circumstances. But...

"The Heart of Vraxor?" she said quizzically. Kyrian growled, then closed his eyes and touched his face gingerly as if in memory of some old pain.

"I've seen enough," he said, but she stopped him from closing the book. "Wait, love. There's one more page."

*My Vision grows Faint, and I have Seen but one more
thing. At the very Brink of Triumph, the Chosen One must
beware the Arc of Fire! 'Cross half the Sky I have Seen it vivid
and bright, cleaving the Heavens as a grim Reminder of the
power of the Servants of the Dark God.*

The handwriting grew shaky on that passage, as if the copyist had been afraid to transcribe those words.

*Here ends my Vision. My time grows Short, and I say
to thee, Chosen One, only this: Hail, and may the forces of
Light be with thee!*

And that was the end. Kyrian shut the book, set it aside, and took a deep breath.

"'Arc of Fire'?" Wyre mused.

“I don’t believe shooting stars bring bad luck,” he scoffed. “A superstition of ignorant peasants. I make my own luck, and I’ve been promised victory!”

He raised his fists to the sky. “The demon-god will fall before me, as it is written! He’s doomed by prophecy. At long last, I’ll have my revenge! I’ll bring him death”—his gaze whipped around, as if seeking to pierce the walls of the tent—“and then I’ll put this entire accursed *country* to the torch.”

“And then,” Wyre purred, running a hand up his arm, “once Vraxor is dead, you’ll take his place. You’ll become a god yourself, able to remake this land in your own image. You’ll transform it into a paradise where you’ll live and be worshipped until the end of time, as both king and god. And I’ll always be with you—your queen! Think of it, dearest,” she said seductively.

A faint, crooked smile tinged his face.

He took her arm. “Come, love. Let us watch them burn the last of the captives. I left one Atma Knight barely alive from the last squad Cyrene sent against me. I’ll have them put him on the fire for you.”

Wyre’s grin smoldered. “As my lord wishes,” she said, and arm in arm, they departed the tent. The wind rattled the canvas walls, carrying the sound of distant screams, and the candle flames flickered low.

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Chapter 1 **Discovery**

The southeastern border of Palidia was a flat green grassland, rustling fields of wild wheat growing on rich black soil. In some places, tall oak trees provided shade from the hot golden orb of the sun, while in others the land rolled into low forested hills. Dirt roads divided the earth into geometric squares, some of which had been plowed and cultivated. Low stone walls ran alongside the roads, built over generations of labor by farmers. Crickets chirped and the wind rippled the tall grass.

Despite the tranquility of the landscape, it was impossible to ignore the vast metropolis, hub of all the roads, that stood on the western horizon. It was the great city of Palidia, capitol of its like-named nation, and though it lay a long day's ride away its skyline was plainly visible. A forest of silver and white towers soared into the heavens, and clouds of dust swirled around the city's base, stirred up by the endless bustle of urban activity.

The roads radiated from the city in every direction, but a particularly wide and well-kept one headed due southeast. Several miles in that direction, the farms ended at the foot of a steep, forested ridge that marked Palidia's border. The road climbed the slope, passing through a notch in the ridge, and descended down the other side.

On top of the ridge, there was a small camp off to the side of the road. Four horses were tethered beneath the branches of a silverleaf tree whose pale green leaves shaded out the heat of the sun. In the west, Palidia's skyline shimmered like a mirage.

Sitting against the trunk of the silverleaf, Myrren Kahliana thought the city was not nearly far enough for her liking. She and her friends had fled it earlier that day, seeking to escape a powerful member of the Palidian senate who had wanted to arrest them for their role in an affair that had rocked the city and its democratic government, and they were not yet safely beyond his reach.

A young woman of eighteen years, Myrren was slender and dark-haired with slightly pale skin. She was attractive in a waifish sense, though her face was brooding and world-weary, making her look far older than her years. She wore all black, comfortable yet sturdy traveling garb and high boots. But her most striking feature was her eyes. Their irises were brilliant violet, like polished gemstones. At the moment, they were frowning as she contemplated the city.

"We should have gone farther before stopping," she said. "I don't trust Michal not to send soldiers after us."

"But we have a good vantage point," one of her companions pointed out. "If anyone comes from the city, we'll see them from miles off. It's impossible to sneak up on us here, but that might not be the case if we went down the ridge before we stopped for the day."

The speaker was a young male standing nearby. He looked to be in his early twenties; he was of medium height and was lean and strong. He had short dark brown hair, a stubble-dotted chin and eyes of bright, watery blue. He wore clothes of dark blue, his customary color. A dull sword inscribed with ceremonial designs hung from his belt, and around one wrist he wore a bracelet of thin, dried vines. His name was Kail Adlyn, a young member of the secretive order known as the Atma Knights, and husband to Myrren's closest friend Shial.

"I guess so," Myrren reluctantly agreed.

Kail's wife, Shial Al'enn, was walking close by. Ostensibly she was gathering kindling for their fire, but she seemed content just to enjoy the fresh, sweet air. She was smiling broadly, and breathed deeply with each step as if to cleanse herself of the city.

Unlike Kail and Myrren, Shial was elven, a member of the race that inhabited the vast, wild Shaelwood far in the south. Tall and willowy, she wore green, yellow and brown, the traditional garb of Shael's rangers, and a bracelet of dried vines identical to Kail's. She carried a bow and quiver of arrows slung over her back. Though elves were similar to humans, her freckled features were more keen, more alert; her eyes were bright green, her ears slightly pointed. Her silky straight hair was the reddish color of leaves in the fall.

"I'm just happy to be under the trees again, instead of under a roof," she said. "The breeze, the sun, the leaves. Goddess, I missed this. I'm so glad we're out in the wild again. Don't you agree, Rahze?"

Their fourth companion did not reply. He sat at the other end of the camp, hands upturned and resting on his knees, facing away from them.

"Rahze?" she asked.

He turned to regard her. His skin was dusky dark, and the angular lines and planes of his face, his bone structure similar to Shial's, marked him as having elven ancestry as well. However, his skin tone made it clear that he was descended not from the forest elves that were Shial's people, but the isolated and shunned dark elves. His expression was solemn, his age indeterminate, but he had one feature that was strange, even frightening. The irises of his eyes were bright green, but the whites were as black as his pupils. The overall effect was of two green-banded holes, apertures into emptiness that gave his gaze an inhuman quality. This change had come upon him in the city, and none of them fully understood it.

"Yes," he said. "I agree."

With that, he returned to his silent contemplation of Palidia.

Shial looked askance at him, then shrugged and went back to what she was doing.

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“The wild is all right,” Myrren said, “but cities have their own kind of beauty too. At least, when people aren’t trying to draw you into their plots.”

She decided she was hungry, and reached into the packs in front of her. A moment’s rummaging, however, failed to turn up anything edible.

“Do we have any food?”

“That’s a small problem,” Kail said. “We didn’t have time to take much from Michal’s house. What I was able to grab will last us a few days, maybe a week at most. But nowhere near long enough to last us back to...”

He hesitated. “Where are we going, anyway?”

“Vraxor’s land,” Myrren said firmly. “My home country.”

“Are we really going to take the Dark Heart back to Vraxor’s priests?” he asked skeptically.

“Where else could we take it?”

“How about Cyrene?”

“No,” Shial said. “I don’t like the thought of the Atma Knights having it any more than Vraxor’s priests.”

“But the priests want conquest, love. The Atma Knights want balance.”

“Balance defined in their own way,” she corrected him. “And the ways they go about securing it are no better than what Vraxor’s priests do sometimes. You know their saying: ‘Our goals are pure—’”

“—but our methods cannot always be,” he said. “I know. And that’s true. Still, I’d much rather the High Council have it than the priesthood in Ral Vraxan.”

“I don’t like the idea of either of them having it,” Shial said uneasily.

“It doesn’t matter who has it,” Myrren said. “The Dark Heart is sealed, remember? It takes a conjunction of light and dark magic to activate it, so neither the priests nor the Atma Knights can use it. Only we know that secret, and I’m not about to tell anyone.”

“That’s true. Neither am I,” Kail conceded.

“Nor am I,” Shial agreed. “You have a point, Myrren. As long as we don’t tell anyone how to bring it to life, it’s just a lump of rock.”

She unslung her bow. “Well, I can solve one of our problems at least. I’m going to find us some food. We’ll see if I remember how to hunt after all the time we were in the city.”

“Be careful, love,” Kail said.

“I won’t go far,” she promised.

The day fell. The sky reddened and the sun shaded to liquid gold. Streaks of smoky dark clouds coalesced across the sky, but in the west, the heavens were clear where the sun was setting behind the skyline of Palidia. The city’s white towers faded to red and orange with

the sunburst behind them, and the entire city glowed like the gates of paradise.

But the day's last light did not stay long. The golden-edged clouds faded to red and violet, then to deep blue. The fiery glow in the west died away, and the white towers phosphoresced briefly. Lights came out in the city like fireflies on the plain as stars appeared overhead.

Kail and Myrren had built a small, cheerful fire. Rahze sat motionless at the edge of the camp, facing west. He had not moved in hours. Shial had not returned.

The two of them faced each other over the fire. It cast shifting shadows on their faces as it snapped and popped.

"Do you really want to bring the Dark Heart back to Vraxor's land?" Kail asked. "Why? What if the priests figure out how to use it?"

Myrren glanced at the shadowy-gold visage of the young Atma Knight. She knew something bad had been done to Kail by Vraxor's priests, something that haunted him to this day. Shial had told her that much, but said the rest was up to Kail to tell. She had never pressed him, despite some curiosity.

She shook her head adamantly. "I don't want to bring the Dark Heart back to Vraxor's land. I just want to go home. I don't want to give it to the priests. I don't want to give it to anyone."

She unbuttoned her breast pocket and reached in, and her fingers met a smooth, glassy hardness. Drawing out the Dark Heart, she held it up to the light of the fire.

It was a faceted ruby she held in her hand, too large for a natural gem. Its shade was a dark wine-red, the color of blood or syrup, so dark it was nearly black. Flashes of light glimmered on the gem's planes and sparkled on its facets as she turned it; it reflected an image of the fire in its surface, and the reflections of the sparks the flames threw off seemed to take on a life all their own, becoming dancing sprites that coursed through the jewel's inner depths. Looking into it was like looking down from a great height.

"If I could," she said, "if I thought no one would ever find it again, I'd throw it away. I'd throw it into the sea, or bury it, or hide it somewhere no one would ever go. But I can't. I wish I could, but I don't dare. Things like this have a habit of turning up again, no matter how well they're hidden. If I threw it away, who might find it again? If someone... No, I can't take that risk. You understand, don't you?"

He nodded. "Then why not destroy it?"

"I don't know if that's even possible. It survived a hit from Rahze's staff and a dissimilarity explosion without a scratch. If those things didn't destroy it, I don't know what I could do. And even if it's possible, I don't know what kind of forces that might release, and I don't want to find out."

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Studying the gem, she smiled bitterly. “Once... before I left Ral Ardente... if I had found this and known what it was, I would have taken it to the priests right away. I would have been exalted for it. I would have gotten my own chapter in the *Book of Vraxor*. That would have been my fondest dream in all the world... once.”

It was an effort to take her gaze off the jewel, but she closed her eyes. “So much has changed since then,” she said quietly.

“So much has,” Kail agreed. He was watching Rahze, who sat with his back to them, looking away.

The night deepened. Shial returned to their camp, empty-handed other than for her bow and quiver. She did not look pleased, although her expression softened as the mouth-watering smell of sizzling fat greeted her. Kail had gotten a saucepan and was roasting some bacon over the fire.

He looked up as she returned. “Anything?”

She shook her head in disgust. “But not for lack of trying. I just couldn’t catch anything. I’ve lost my edge.”

Unstringing her bow and setting it aside, she sat down next to Kail. He kissed her, but it did not appear to cheer her up.

“Don’t feel bad,” Myrren reassured her. “We have enough food for now. You just need practice. A little while and you’ll be as good as you ever were.”

Shial nodded. “Goddess, I hope so.”

Myrren wondered if Rahze intended to sit there all night, but when Kail took the meat off the fire and broke the bread he came over and joined them to eat.

They ate in silence while the fire burned down. By the time they were done, its dying light strained to pick out their faces in the dark. Myrren’s eyes, which glowed eerily, made her the easiest to find.

It had been a long day, and Myrren was feeling weariness creep up on her. She assumed they would sleep soon, but it surprised her when Rahze spoke.

“Myrren,” he said, “if you would not mind, I would like to see the Dark Heart.”

She hesitated. For some reason, the thought of Rahze touching the stone suddenly filled her with unease, though she could not have said why.

She glanced around at her companions, as if seeking their advice, but Kail and Shial looked as surprised as she. She shrugged and took the Dark Heart out of her pocket. Overcoming that apprehension, she handed it to him.

The Atma Knight took the gem and examined it, turning it as it glittered darkly in the fading firelight.

“It is very beautiful,” he remarked.

"It is," Myrren agreed. "It's strange that something so pretty could cause so much harm."

"That is the way it always is. It is beauty, not ugliness, that breeds desire, lust, envy, and the other violent passions that cloud men's minds."

"But it's not dangerous because of the way it looks."

"True." He studied the gem and frowned.

"It creates... ripples in the balance," he said, moving it slowly back and forth. "Very tiny ones, but that is probably only because it is quiescent. I can sense them."

"I can too," Kail agreed.

Rahze gave it back to Myrren. She quickly tucked it away.

"Well, it definitely is beautiful," she said, hesitated, then added, "...but it doesn't replace what I lost." She touched her wrist as if expecting to find something there.

Shial patted her on the knee. "We'll find out what happened when we get back."

"I know," she said despondently.

"We will."

Shial looked over at Rahze. "Before we go to bed, there's something else we need to figure out."

"Namely?" the Atma Knight said.

"You know. I think we all do. We need to figure out what's happened to you, Rahze."

Kail nodded. "You took a blast that should have killed you without getting hurt. And then there's your eyes, and your staff."

"I agree," he said. "It is a mystery."

"Do you remember what happened at all?" Myrren asked. "The *senkata* were about to complete the final alignment of the Dark Heart, you leaped, and your staff touched it just as they did..."

Rahze nodded. "My own memory is not much help. I remember that as well, but only a little more. Just as my staff touched the Dark Heart, there was a brilliant flash of light. I remember some sort of shock traveling up my staff and into my body; then the light grew blinding, there was an instant of extreme pain, and I lost consciousness. The next thing I remember is waking up as Ravidel Shand's policemen were arresting you. I was as surprised as any of you when I saw what had happened to my staff."

"Can we see it?" Kail asked.

He shrugged. "Certainly."

"I'll stoke the fire so we can get a better look," Kail said.

He glanced at the flames. Myrren felt a surge of magical energy from his direction, and the fire that had been burning down to embers erupted into renewed brightness, chasing the shadows away. He added

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some logs onto the fire so that it would continue to burn after he had withdrawn his magic.

On one finger Rahze wore a ring, a green emerald stone mounted on a band of silvery-blue adamantine. He drew this off his finger, grasped it in a fist and held his arm out. Softly, he spoke a word of magic.

Shafts of light shot out of his fist in both directions. But although the Atma Knight's staff had once glowed with brilliant white light, it no longer did so. The magical staff that emerged from his hand burned all along its length with a halo of dark gray fire.

"Very strange," he said placidly.

Kail frowned. "I don't understand how it even works anymore."

"Nor do I," he agreed.

"What do you mean?" Myrren asked.

"Every Atma Knight's weapon has a characteristic color,"

Rahze explained, "which indicates how close to balance he is. It is more complicated than this, but you may consider 'balance' to be the equilibrium between physical and spiritual desires. For each person, the fulcrum at which those two forces balance each other perfectly lies at a different point. The color of the weapon indicates where this point is. If the balance point is closer to the physical end, the weapon's color will shift towards red; closer to the spiritual end, it will shift towards violet."

"The actual brightness of the weapon in its characteristic color indicates how close to their own innate balance an Atma Knight is. The closer they are to the fulcrum point, the brighter it will be. Pure white indicates a master."

He looked at his staff, burning silently. "It is not unknown for external events to affect an Atma Knight's balance. But if the two sides of my nature have drifted as far apart as a color this dark would indicate, I should not have been able to activate my weapon. The adamantine could not have sustained such a weak flow of magical energy."

He let go of the staff. The instant it left his hand, it shrank, its fire rapidly fading as it contracted in on itself. It was the emerald ring that dropped into the leaf litter.

Rahze retrieved it and held it up. "As I said, very strange. I do not understand it."

But Kail was frowning thoughtfully. "I have an idea."

"Oh? What is it?"

"An Atma Knight's balance sense is responsive to the presence of another's weapon," he said, for Myrren and Shial's benefit. "It's more pure than everything else. Like an island in a world of ripples."

"That is true," Rahze agreed.

"Your staff, Rahze," he went on, "is especially pure. When it was activated, I felt it just as I always have. Except it seemed to be..." He hesitated, trying to find the right word. "...fluttering."

“What do you have in mind?”

“Give me a moment,” Kail said, “to draw magic, then activate it again. Myrren, will you go along with me? Draw as much as you can.”

Myrren did not understand what Kail had in mind, but there was no harm in it. “All right.”

She closed her eyes and reached out with her mind, and the world faded into the background. A higher reality superimposed itself on her senses: the reality of magic, that omnipresent force permeating reality in an endless flux of forms.

Flowing all around was the magic of the air and the night, cool currents of blue quicksilver. The twinkling stars carried their own magic, ethereal pale red and violet that had traveled across the gulfs of space on beams of light. The trees carried in their leaves the green memory of day and sun magic, and the leaf litter and soil around their feet was reddish-brown, holding onto fading remnants of the life it had once been. In the heart of their campfire swirled red and yellow currents of fire magic. And deep beneath their feet, she could sense the slow drifting fire of earth magic, hard as granite, yet malleable like heated iron or sluggishly flowing lava.

She opened herself to all these sources. Eager to find a new outlet, the magic flooded into her body, becoming a uniform spreading wave of heat that rose up through her. Even as she drew it in, she felt an answering surge from Kail as the young Atma Knight did likewise.

As she drew the magic into herself, time slowed. Her companions seemed to freeze, and she became aware of individual flickers within their fire. Her own blood roared in her ears, with greater and greater intervals between each heartbeat. The only thing happening at normal speed was the continuing flow of magic into Kail.

The more magic Myrren drew in, the slower its flow became. But power was flowing into Kail’s body at a steady rate. She strained to keep up with him.

Half demon, sharing the blood of a race that had an innate talent for magic, Myrren had never met a human who could equal her strength in that area. But Kail was unbelievably strong. She knew Atma Knights had to be, but struggled to match him nonetheless. She had never directly tested her strength against his, but until then she had been certain that she outclassed him. Now she was having doubts.

The heat coursing through her was growing increasingly uncomfortable. The power demanded to be used, but she did not intend to use it, merely to hold it. She fought to keep it under control, and Kail continued to draw power with no sign of strain.

Finally she gave up trying to match him and stopped pulling the magic in. A moment later, the flow into the Atma Knight’s body ceased. He was definitely stronger than her, she admitted to herself, though not by much. It felt like a blow to her pride.

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Ridiculous, she chastised herself. *This isn't a contest. So he's a little stronger than I am. So what? Maybe it's just that magic is the only thing I was ever good at... but I keep getting upstaged lately. First the Ayin in Palidia, and now him.*

She firmly put those thoughts from her mind. *Well, we got this far. Now what?* The heat of the magic coursing through her had subsided, but only to barely tolerable levels. She knew it would get worse, and soon, if she did not use it.

"Nnoooww," Kail said, his voice weirdly low-pitched in the slowed time. Myrren watched as Rahze, with glacial slowness, held his ring out and brought his staff to life.

In slow motion, she saw the staff expand in both directions, dark gray fire igniting along its length. But something was different. The fire seemed to be flickering at its heart.

If I slow it down just a little more, I might be able to see. Unthinking, Myrren reached out for the magic again. It came at her urging, renewing its flow into her. Time slowed fractionally, and she peered closer, into the depths of the magical flames.

She had only an instant to realize her mistake. The power boiled inside her, too much. It would not be contained any longer. The burning warmth became a sudden hot pain.

Reflexively, as if jerking her hand away from a hot stove, she forced the magic out of her body. Heat rose in the air around her, shimmered and dissipated. Time snapped back to normal speed, and she gave voice to a delayed cry of surprise and pain.

But not before she had seen it. She knew what was causing the flickering.

Rahze doused his staff. It shrank back into a ring, and he glanced questioningly at them.

Kail had released the power as well. He spoke, and she was gratified to hear he sounded breathless from the effort. But his tone was urgent. "Did you see it?"

She nodded. "I did."

"See what?" Shial asked. "It looked the same as before."

Rahze nodded. "What did you see?" he asked calmly.

"It isn't gray," Kail said.

"What do you mean?" Shial asked. "We all saw—"

Myrren shook her head. "Kail's right. It isn't gray."

"What is it, then?"

"It's white," she said. "Like it was before. But it's also black. It's both, and it's flickering back and forth so quickly that it looks gray."

What she had seen in that last instant of slowed time was vivid in her mind. For the tiniest fraction of a second, Rahze's staff had been pure, bright white. Then it had shifted to black—roiling, turbulent flame

dark as midnight. Flame that reminded her of the burning of the Dark Heart.

Flame that resembled the flame of a magical weapon she had once seen in a *senkata*'s hand.

They went to bed soon afterward, with more unanswered questions than before. Despite everything, Myrren was exhausted and quickly dropped off to sleep. But the strangeness of Rahze's staff gnawed at her, which contributed to her uneasy dreams that night.

In one, she dreamed of waking up in the middle of the night—or perhaps she did briefly wake up. In her dream, if dream it was, she heard the low rumbling of thunder, and when she looked to the west, she saw distant lightning flashes illuminating storm clouds that had gathered over Palidia. The storm was coming their way, she could tell, and something about its approach was strangely ominous and frightening.

In another, she was stumbling through black woods, lost in darkness, and she knew that somewhere Raine was in terrible danger. She thought she could hear his cries, but although she struggled to reach him she was blind, hopelessly lost. Her feet moved as if sunk in deep mud, each step an effort.

Then the dream changed, becoming something far more real than an ordinary dream. Myrren realized what it was as she was drawn into it, but there was no way to resist.

Her dream was of a dark space—a place that was not a place, that could not be found on any map. It was a dimension of nothingness, an unplace where absolutely nothing existed.

Except for one thing. In the center of this centerless void was a dark red jewel, sparkling with its own internal light as it rotated in stately majesty. It was the Dark Heart, tucked away here where no one could go. No one, that was, except the ones who had stolen it.

A bodiless observer, Myrren watched helplessly as a bar of pure white light burst into the dark space, like a gateway opened into the heart of a star. That beam landed full on the stone, bathing it in a burning glow.

Now motion intruded into the dark space, a shadowy shape distinguishable only by contrast. One of the *senkata* took shape and darted toward the gem with an arm extended. Its black finger touched the Dark Heart, opposing the beam of light. There was a ringing clash as if a gong had been struck, and the dark space trembled. The *senkata* froze where it was, touching the jewel across from the light ray.

Another eruption of light, and another brilliant white beam cut into the dark space, touching the Dark Heart. Opposing it came another *senkata*, a black shape that darted forward to contact the gem and then froze, forming a cross of light and dark with the jewel at its center. There was another great clash as another bolt on the gem's seal was released, and again the dark dimension trembled.

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In reality, Myrren knew that these alignments had happened over weeks, not instants. But time did not seem to flow at the same pace here as in the rest of Caliel. She knew what was coming, and despite the fact that this all lay in the past, she felt fear.

Another searing white laser connected to the Dark Heart, as did a third *senkata*. A third bolt boomed as it shot back, and the void resonated. Now the cross had become a star, three burning beams of light and three black motionless shapes, revolving around the jewel like orbiting planets.

Only one bolt remained, and then the full power of the Dark Heart would be released for the *senkata* to use. But the final alignment had to be different. It could not use the filtered light of the stars as the others had. It needed something closer, more intense—the light of Caliel’s sun, focused and directed. Fortunately, the people of Palidia had provided something suitable. The *senkata* did not feel pleasure, but Myrren could sense something like satisfaction from their minds.

The dark space faded, yet was still there. Overlapping it, without touching, was another reality. It was a great open-air amphitheater, a bowl-shaped valley with aisles running between rows of marble steps. At the center, a circle of obelisks surrounded an altar of white stone. Above the altar floated three concentric rings of glowing blue light: a magical astrological chart, created by the people of Palidia to concentrate the sun’s rays on the first day of summer onto the altar, where a ceremony would be performed to sanctify the year to Nimrod, god of light. The sun was drawing near to its solstice zenith, moving toward the center of the magical rings.

The black void and the white amphitheater had one thing in common. At the center of each floated the Dark Heart, existing in both places at once, like an anchor tying the realms together.

The amphitheater was full of people who had come for the solstice celebration, but that was not a problem. As the Dark Heart appeared, several *senkata* shimmered into being around it. One reached out and killed the priest of Nimrod presiding over the ceremony with a sweep of its arm. A pandemonium of screams erupted, and the amphitheater dissolved into chaos as people fled for their lives.

But instead of fleeing, some headed for the altar: soldiers and policemen in the white uniforms of Palidia’s defense forces, there to protect the ceremony. They stepped forward bravely, prepared to fight the shadow demons.

Myrren felt something like cool amusement from the *senkata* as the soldiers’ bodies filled up with magic. Had these foolish mortals not learned that the *senkata* were immune to the earth fire? With a flicker of attention to make sure the alignment was prepared, they darted forward.

It was a slaughter. Myrren tried to cry out or turn her eyes away, but could do neither. Burning bolts of light magic were brushed

aside, useless, and the *senkata*'s merest touch was enough to kill. Feathery strokes of their hands sheared through armor, flesh and bone. They took their time, slaying police, soldiers and the occasional civilian who was not fast enough getting away. Behind them, as the sun neared the point of conjunction, a converging ray of brilliant white light flared from the three blue magical lenses. The focal point of the beam tracked toward the altar where the Dark Heart hovered.

There was activity in the otherworldly dark space as well. A ring of *senkata* had gathered around the Dark Heart, like a crowd huddled around a fire, their forms passing into and out of existence in a slow, shifting dance. Their eagerness was mounting; its power would be theirs.

In the world of light, the *senkata* completed their bloody work and vanished in a flicker. Another of their own number phased into being, keeping time with the ray of light as it approached the Dark Heart from the opposite direction with a hand extended.

Myrren knew what she would see next: herself, along with her friends, appearing at the rim of the amphitheater and making for the altar in a last-ditch effort to stop the final alignment. The *senkata* paid them a flicker of interest, but no more.

From the perspective of the *senkata*'s memories, she saw herself approaching the altar, ready to physically snatch the Dark Heart away—and then she saw herself flinch back as the crowd of demons surrounding the gem spilled over into the real world, forming a barrier in front of the altar.

Events played out as she remembered them. Shial drew her bow and fired an arrow, trying to knock the jewel out of the way. They spared only a fraction of their attention to destroy the arrow in midflight, like swatting a fly.

Kail drew his sword, and this did capture the *senkata*'s attention. The Atma Knights' weapons were unlike any force they had ever known; it had been thousands of years since the *senkata* had experienced novelty. More, the Atma Knights' weapons were *dangerous* novelty. The shadow demons had survived the Godswar, a war of annihilation waged with the deadliest magics ever conceived in Caliel, without suffering a single casualty. Even after being defeated by Vraxor and banished from the world, none of them had ever actually died. But those adamantine weapons manipulated forces in a way previously unknown to them, and when one of them had been killed by such a weapon several months ago, it had sent them into a catatonia of shock and fear. Dying was an event utterly beyond their experience, and it had frightened them so badly they had almost not returned to Caliel.

But they had overcome that fear, and those weapons no longer daunted them. While they were curious to know how they worked, the *senkata* were patient. Detailed study could wait until they had achieved

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their goal of destroying their ancient enemies, the gods. And besides, the Atma Knights' weapons were only magic, and they knew how to deal with magic.

The young Atma Knight struck at the *senkata*, but they did not allow his sword to touch them. A momentary effort of will redirected the magic into a backlash strong enough to incapacitate him, long enough for their alignment to complete. They felt that sense of satisfaction as they returned to what they were doing—

—and another surge of magic captured their attention: the activation of Rahze's staff. But they ignored it this time. They had dealt with Kail; they could deal with him easily enough—

—and the Atma Knight bounded towards the altar. They felt sudden alarm. If he disrupted what they were doing, he would be caught at the center of an enormous blast. Surely he knew this? But why was he not stopping?

If death was a concept new to the *senkata*, even more foreign was the idea of self-sacrifice. Their shock delayed them for a crucial instant, until they realized he was not going to stop. Frantically they tried to stop him, but he blazed through them with a sweep of his staff—and then, just as the alignment completed, Rahze's staff touched the Dark Heart, the staff and the light ray and the *senkata's* hand, all at the same time.

There was a tremendous explosion. A seething ball of red fire erupted out of the Dark Heart both in reality and in the dark space, consuming the nearest *senkata* in a fury of magical energy. All their work was undone in a split-second, the delicate balance of the three previous alignments shattered.

The fireball continued to expand, filling the void. More *senkata* were devoured by it, and as the rest fled in an agony of shock and pain, the dark space collapsed like a house of cards. Dimensions crashed inward, folding in on themselves. Then that reality imploded and shrank, dwindling into a zero-dimensional point that raged with red flame for an instant longer; then the final collapse took place, and everything went black.

Myrren awoke. Seized by momentary terror, she clutched at her breast pocket to make sure the Dark Heart was there, but her hand contacted its familiar smooth hardness. She slumped back with a gasp of relief.

It was a new day. A morning mist had settled on the world, and fog enveloped the ridge, cascading slowly down its sides. Palidia was hidden from sight, and the plains at the foot of the ridge were silent and grey.

Shial and the Atma Knights were asleep. Myrren considered waking them, but decided against it. She felt better in the daytime; the nightmare fear was already fading.

One thing I'll say about the city, she thought, it's not as scary a place as the wild to have bad dreams. The darkness is so much more absolute out here. But the weight of the Dark Heart in her pocket reassured her. There was no need to be afraid—they had won.

Her friends woke up soon after. They ate breakfast over the ashes of last night's fire, then broke camp, preparing to set out. As they mounted up, Myrren glanced regretfully to the west. The mist had only just begun to clear, and a few dark suggestions of shape, the lines of towers, were all that could be seen of Palidia. She thought of her friend Karah, wondering what the healer was doing at that moment.

Shial caught the direction of her gaze. "She'll be fine," she said.

"I hope so," Myrren said quietly.

They rode along the top of the ridge. After a time, the trees opened up and the ridgetop dropped away, and the land to the east spread out before them.

The land beyond the ridge was a vast, misty basin, dense green from horizon to horizon with a canopy of trees. A silvery-blue web of rivers cut through the marshy forest, and wisps of mist rose from the earth. Both to the north and south, distant blue and purple mountain ranges ran in grand sweeping curves encircling the horizon.

The four of them knew that this ridge marked the southeastern border of Palidia. The land they were looking at belonged to Kajin, a country reserved at the best of times, xenophobic and paranoid at the worst. Myrren was reminded of Shael in more than one way.

"We should avoid the large cities," Kail said, "and stay to less-traveled paths, and we should be fine. The fewer people who see us, the better. The last thing we need is to attract attention when we're carrying something this important."

"I agree," Shial said. "I've had more than enough of cities for a while."

No one argued. They spurred their mounts into motion and descended the ridge.

The ridgetop plunged steeply, but even there the forest grew wild. Trees stood on the precipitous slope, jutting out with roots clutching the mountainside. Mist curled between their trunks, and water trickled down the slope. In some places, erosion had revealed dripping black boulders sunk into the ridgetop, water-scarred, green with lichen and soggy moss. Miniature waterfalls splashed down their sides.

The trail was a narrow switchback, barely wide enough for their horses to pass single file. Mud squelched under their mounts' hooves as they picked their way down.

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“This isn’t much of a path,” Shial said.

“It was once better maintained,” Rahze said, “but Palidia’s trade with Kajin has dropped off since the war. They have been more isolated ever since; the exodus was their first significant contact with the rest of the world in some time.”

As they rode, Myrren told her friends about her dreams. Rahze listened with equanimity as she explained how his act of self-sacrifice had stunned the *senkata* long enough to ensure its success.

“Do you think any of it means anything?” Shial asked.

“The part about Raine, and the storm over Palidia? I doubt it. But the part about the *senkata*... as much as I’d like to believe it was just a dream, I know better. Their thoughts are leaking into my mind again. I’ve been more sensitive to them ever since they put their memories in my head.”

“Are they coming back?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure if they escaped when the dark space collapsed; the explosion hurt them a lot. Maybe they’re gone, but I wouldn’t count on it.”

At the foot of the ridge, there was a swath of grassland, surrounded by tall curling ferns and dripping bushes dense with purple flowers. Behind them, white mist shrouded the slope. The only thing to mark the path was a set of wheel ruts pooling with silvery water that ran into the foliage.

“If we can—” Myrren was saying as they paused to get their bearings.

Suddenly, a black shape rotated into being before them—the silhouette of a human, but faceless, filled only with darkness. It appeared so abruptly and silently that they scarcely had time to react. It was one of the *senkata*.

It curled its fingers like claws. *Greetings, Myrren—*

“Go!” Rahze shouted, and in a panic, she lashed the reins. But before any of them could gallop off, four more *senkata* appeared, one for each of them. Their mounts reared, neighing shrilly in terror, and Myrren was forced to jump down to the grass or be thrown off. The rest of them did likewise, drawing back in a defensive circle as the shadow demons surrounded them.

You have caused us much trouble, Myrren— one said. *More so than any mortal ever has—*

Kail reached for his sword, Rahze for his ring, and out of terror and desperation, Myrren pulled out the Dark Heart, holding it up like a talisman. The *senkata* were undaunted.

You have ruined much of our work— it went on. *Still, we are patient. We will recover the Dark Heart, and we will redo the alignments—*

It held up a hand, and Myrren felt a magnetic force wrenching the jewel out of her hands. She tried to hold on, but in vain. It soared through space and landed neatly in the grasp of the one that was talking. The gem glimmered darkly red against the utterly black substance of its hand.

Of course, to ensure there will be no further interference, we will kill the mortals who disrupted our plans. Including you—

As the *senkata* started to move, Myrren seized the magic. Even in the slowed time the demon approached with horrible speed, and she struggled frantically to force the magic into the shape she wanted. Then time snapped back to normal, the *senkata* accelerated into a black blur, and as she flinched, her magic lanced forth in a bright bolt and struck it. The demon recoiled from the blow.

Simultaneously, Kail ignited his sword in a burst of blue light. Stepping in front of Shial to protect her, he thrust it out, and another of the *senkata* impaled itself on the blade. It froze where it was, then faded out of existence with a thin, reedy death-cry.

But that left three, plus the one that held the Dark Heart. Then Rahze triggered his weapon, and shafts of gray fire rose from between his fingers and shaped themselves into his staff.

And the senkata froze.

Myrren could feel their shock as the Atma Knight held the burning gray staff out. To her amazement, a grim smile lit Rahze's face. He spun the staff in a slow circle, creating a dull roaring sound, and made a beckoning gesture.

What is this?— the spokedemon wondered.

Then they began to move again.

We will open him and find out— it decided.

They resumed their attack, all four at once. A desperate, stinging burst of concentrated magic from Myrren drove one back. A second lunged at Rahze, but he dodged and struck back. The demon shifted rapidly backwards to avoid his staff. Two more drove at Kail, who was protecting Shial with his own body; the young Atma Knight slashed at one, leaped to the side and parried the other's slice at his stomach, his sword leaving burning blue trails in the air.

A single thought consumed Myrren's mind as they fought for their lives. One of the demons held the Dark Heart. It could not be permitted to escape. They had to get the gem back before it disappeared forever!

She concentrated her strength into a focused blast, a cone of force that she hoped would disable or kill the demon rather than merely stunning it. She released the magic, and the power surged out in a rush; but the demon holding the Dark Heart shifted to the side, and the lance of magic shot past it and erupted in the underbrush. There was an explosion of fire and smoke.

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But shaping that spell had distracted Myrren for a fatal instant. Another *senkata* advanced on her, and she desperately threw herself aside as it flashed past. She felt its icy cold touch on her upper arm, and knew it had cut her but could not tell how badly. She landed hard on her back, and the shadow demon loomed over her with hand outstretched.

There was a crack like thunder, and a bullwhip flash of Kail's sword sliced the air in a blue arc above her. The demon darted back to dodge it, prevented from delivering a killing blow.

"Rahze!" she shouted desperately, regaining her feet. "The one with the Dark Heart! Don't let it get away. Get it before it disappears!"

The Atma Knight caught her eye and nodded to her. He was locked in combat with another *senkata*, but the two seemed equally matched. Gray staff and black hands whirled in a deadly maelstrom without either landing a blow.

He glanced over at where Kail was fighting the other two, gauged his chance and jumped backwards. He landed lightly at Kail's side, and his staff whirled and lashed out. One of the two demons barely dodged it. The other, the one holding the Dark Heart, was not fast enough.

The staff slashed an ascending arc through its body, like a sunbeam burning through fog. The *senkata* flung an arm up as if in an extremity of agony, froze motionless, then began to glow with harsh brilliance. Burning holes appeared in the *senkata*'s form, and then—silently, in a violent wave of light—it exploded.

But Rahze's staff was still in motion, slashing through the demon's body and up its outflung arm—the one holding the Dark Heart. As the *senkata* disintegrated, Rahze's staff passed through its hand and struck the stone from its grip. He completed his stroke, the Dark Heart tumbled in a long arc through the air, all of them lunged to catch it—

—and in midair, the gem burst into searing black unlight, shadow that coruscated like flame. It reached the top of its arc, still burning, began to fall, and landed squarely in Myrren's outstretched hands.

The halo of black fire surrounding the Dark Heart grew to encompass her entire body.

The power!

She had not felt this in months; she had almost forgotten what it was like. It surged through her body in an intoxicating wave. For a second, she was drunk with the thrill of it.

Then she remembered where she was. Myrren looked up at the *senkata*—and smiled like a wolf.

If the Dark Heart could banish Kyrian, we'll see what it can do to them! she thought. Energy surged in her veins, eager to be used. A spell suggested itself to her, and she prepared to shape the magic—

—and the *senkata* disappeared. In the flicker of an eye, they were gone.

The black fire went out. The magic was sucked back into the jewel and disappeared, and Myrren stumbled, suddenly feeling cold and empty.

They looked around, then at each other.

“Myrren?” Shial said hesitantly. “Are you all right?”

Bemused, Myrren clapped a hand to her arm where the *senkata* had touched her. Cloth and skin had been sliced; there was a cut there, bleeding freely, but nothing life-threatening.

“I’m fine,” she said slowly. “What about you?”

“I’m all right,” Shial said, shaken but unharmed. Kail doused the fire of his sword and slid it back into his belt loop, but he did not take his eyes off her. They were all staring at her.

“I will tend to this,” Rahze said. He put a hand on Myrren’s cut and murmured a healing spell under his breath. Icy cold mingled with burning heat in her arm as the wound sealed itself.

She looked into the glittering red depths of the Dark Heart, then held it out as if offering it to them. No one made a move toward it.

“I don’t understand,” she said, realizing the enormity of what had just happened. “It’s only supposed to come to life if light and dark magic touch it at the same time. But there wasn’t any...”

She paused.

Rahze’s staff.

Gray fire—flickering between light and dark.

Could it be? she thought in wonder.

The rest of them had come to the same conclusion. Rahze regarded the ring on his finger with detached interest. “It appears,” he said, “that my staff has become a combination of opposing magic types in one. Many of Cyrene’s magical scholars have said that such a thing is impossible.” He shrugged.

Myrren looked around. “It must have scared the *senkata* off.”

Then she burst into laughter, weak with relief.

“Do you realize what this means?” she cried. “We can fight them now!”

Shial was skeptical. “But all the way back to Vraxor’s land? That’s going to take a few months, and I don’t think they’ll give up so easily. Are we going to have to fight them every day? And if they come while we’re asleep...”

That thought dampened Myrren’s good mood. But perhaps there was another way. She peered into the depths of the gem.

“I have an idea,” she said. “Rahze, your staff...?”

The Atma Knight ignited his weapon. He held it out to her and, gingerly, being careful not to touch its magical fire herself, touched the Dark Heart to the end of it.

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The gem erupted into black flame. A rush of power tingled through her body like a hot wire, but this time she kept it under control. The idea she had had was clearer now. She focused her will, and the spell seemingly shaped itself. She released the power on an exhaled breath.

The corona of black fire spread to surround all four of them. Then it shrank and tightened, becoming an invisibly fine covering.

The fire of the Dark Heart died, and Myrren held up her hand and turned it this way and that, studying it, trying to see what she had done. If she looked at her arm edge-on, she could just barely see a hair-thin black outline around it, but that was all.

Kail seemed uneasy about this magic. He brushed at his hand as if expecting to feel something. Rahze accepted it calmly.

“What did you do?” Shial asked, also examining her hands to catch the nearly invisible black outline.

“I think,” she said hesitantly, “I just made us invisible to them. To the *senkata*. While this spell lasts, they won’t be able to detect us, they won’t be able to follow us. We’ll be able to get back without worrying about them.”

“How did you know how to do this?” Rahze asked.

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. She glanced at the Dark Heart. “Though I might have gotten the idea from... from it. If that makes any sense.”

“How long will this spell last?”

“I’m not sure about that either. At least a few hours. We’ll probably have to reapply it once or twice each day.”

Shial shrugged. “I can’t even tell it’s there.”

“It feels like spiders crawling on my skin,” Kail muttered, but then added, “But if that’s what it takes to keep you safe, love.” She smiled at him.

Rahze replaced the ring on his finger. “This is indeed a stroke of luck. We would not have stood a chance against the *senkata* otherwise. What shall we do now?”

Myrren realized, to her surprise, that he was deferring to her. “I guess we should find our horses and get back on the road. We have a lot of distance to cover.”

Rahze nodded. “As you wish.”

He strode off to recover the horses, which had bolted and were milling nervously around the foot of the ridge. Kail went to help Rahze.

Myrren tucked the Dark Heart away in her pocket. “Shall we?” she asked Shial.

Her friend smiled faintly. “Of course.”

She took Myrren’s arm, and together they went to retrieve and soothe their mounts.

Chapter II
Behind the Veils

Three days south of the Palidian border found Myrren, Shial and the Atma Knights riding through the dense forests of northern Kajin. Tall pillars of trees with buttress-like roots, their trunks speckled with moss and cloaked with vines, rose to meet a canopy veined with light. The sun playing on the leaves lent a subtle golden glow to the forest.

They had agreed on a route that would keep them on a southern heading until they reached the latitude of the Augille Pass through the Cordillen, at which point they would turn east. That turning lay some distance off, however, and they had much ground to cover before they came to it.

Myrren felt no impatience. She rode with the warmth of the sunlight on her face, enjoying the beauty of the forest and the sweet, earthy smell of the air. Though she had been raised in the city, she was finding to her surprise that she preferred the wilderness.

She glanced over at Shial, who had a bright, sparkling look in her eyes. The elf's gaze moved constantly around, taking in every nuance of the woodland. It was the gaze of the child inside the elven ranger at play.

Of course, Myrren thought, she grew up under the trees, whereas I grew up hardly ever seeing even one. She has just as much right to love the woods, but this is more of a new experience for me.

Ever since their escape from the *senkata*, their journey had been peaceful. In fact, there were only two things keeping her from fully enjoying it.

One was the spell ensuring their *continued* escape from the shadow demons. Myrren turned her arm this way and that, trying to see it, and finally caught a glimpse of that infinitesimally thin black outline around her body.

While the enchantment worked as she had promised, it did not last long. It dissipated after six to eight hours, and whenever this happened, Rahze had to get out his staff so that she could use the Dark Heart to restore it and once again render them invisible to the *senkata*. This had to be done *every* six to eight hours, which often meant arising from sleep in the blackest hours of the night or the drowsy dark before dawn. Rahze did not seem to mind, and Myrren usually slept lightly herself, but it was beginning to drag on her and make her cranky and irritable. She did not understand how Rahze put up with it.

She glanced at the Atma Knight. They had learned nothing new about whatever change had come over him. His behavior seemed normal in every way Myrren could define. But she was uneasy nevertheless. *Something* had happened to him, and it worried her that she did not understand it.

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But the more important concern was their food supplies.

They were going through their scanty provisions as slowly as possible, but it would not be long before they were reduced to fending for themselves. Shial had claimed that the wild was doing wonders to refresh her ranger skills, but so far she had neither caught anything nor found any edible plants. They had enough food for a few more days, but they had to carefully ration it, and Myrren's stomach was grumbling. *Our horses are eating better than us, for Vraxor's sake. That can't be a good sign.*

But I shouldn't complain, she mused. I'm here in this beautiful place with my friends, I'm alive and healthy, and I know where I'm going. Just a few months ago all I had to look forward to was facing down the senkata. I have everything to be grateful for.

She glanced around at the sun-dappled trees. "Are these the disputed territories Kajin and Palidia fought over?" she asked. "The war Karah told us about?"

"Yes," Rahze said. "Most are just across the border, though. Kajin has always been more aggressive than Palidia, and the Palidian plains are better for farming than forest soil."

"Why's that?"

"On the plains, fertile soil runs deep. Good crops can be grown year after year, especially if the land is allowed to lie fallow between plantings. But forest soil is thin. If the trees are cut down, within several years it will be used up or washed away, and only desert will remain."

"But then why do people cut down forests? Outside of Shael, every nation I've ever seen does that to clear land for planting."

"They don't respect the trees," Shial said sadly.

Rahze nodded. "Most people are not in balance with nature. They see land as a possession whose only purpose is to provide a benefit that they can extract. The Atma Knights—and the elves, of course—know differently. To align oneself with the balance of the world is to recognize that things have their own value; they are not here only to serve another's ends."

Myrren caught a glimpse of Shial's expression. She knew how her friend felt about the Atma Knights' policy of interference and could make a good guess as to what she thought of that statement.

He shrugged. "Of course, I overgeneralize. There are many people who have no choice but to clear forests for planting to survive."

The land sloped downhill, and the vegetation grew denser and darker. Then the forest suddenly ended, and they rode out onto a grassy plain. A village lay before them.

The slope they had been riding down was one side of a natural valley, a basin nestled between tree-covered hills that steamed with mist. There was a small rural town in the valley, houses with thatched roofs

built on what seemed to be stilts that raised them several paces above the ground.

Surrounding the village's houses were flooded fields divided by earthen dams where line after line of neatly ordered green stalks grew. There were people tending the ponds, up to their waists in water as they tended the plants.

As they rode into the village, Myrren saw the reason for the stilts that elevated the houses above the ground: the land was marshy, with a multitude of little streams. *I guess it's easier to build the houses up in the air so you don't have to deal with water in your basement.*

The village was a quiet bustle of activity. Everyone, from boy and girl children to grandmothers and grandfathers, was doing some sort of work, from washing clothes and carrying water to tending fires or flocks of chickens. All wore the same simple robes and wooden sandals. They turned to watch the newcomers, but no one seemed afraid, only mildly curious.

In an open space between two houses, they passed a graveyard, a plot of land studded with wooden markers and shaded by the leaves of a tall, buttressed tree that had not been cleared. One grave, judging by the freshly turned earth, was brand new.

"What do you think?" Shial asked. "Should we stop here?"

"We might as well," Myrren said. "Maybe we can pick up some supplies."

She wondered how she had become the leader of the group. She had expected Rahze, ever cool and competent, to fill that role. She glanced at him and was shocked to see he was surveying the village and its people with a suspicious, almost paranoid gaze.

Nothing looked like an inn or general store, but they found a tree to hitch their horses to and dismounted. *Well, it is in the middle of nowhere*, Myrren thought. *They probably don't get many visitors.*

As they got down from their horses, a small crowd of villagers gathered around them. They all wore wavering, uncertain smiles.

"Hello," Shial said with a friendly wave, but no one answered. She reached out to the nearest man's hand, and he let her take it. He looked down with incomprehension as she shook his hand in greeting; then he smiled widely, beaming like a commoner touched by royalty.

She let go of his hand, and he retreated into the crowd. Someone else came forward in his stead: a dark-eyed young girl holding a wooden bowl in both hands like something precious. She shyly, wordlessly offered it to Shial, who accepted it with a polite "Thank you."

"What is it?" Myrren asked.

Shial took a piece of jerky from the bowl, sniffed at it and took a bite. "It's dried meat," she said, chewing. "With some kind of sweet

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sauce. Thank you,” she said again to the girl, who grinned bashfully but remained silent.

The crowds parted. An old man walked through. He was bald, with a white beard and a grandfatherly face creased with old laughter, and wore a saffron-colored robe.

He put his hands together and bowed his head to them, then spoke fluently in the common tongue. “Hello. I bid you welcome to the village of Rohan. I am Chuangzhi.”

They introduced themselves in turn, and the old man smiled as he greeted them. “I welcome all of you. May I ask why you have come here?”

“We’re just travelers,” Myrren said, “passing through, on our way to the east. Is it all right if we spend the night?”

She glanced at her companions. Shial and Kail offered no objection. Rahze, however, was scowling.

The old monk smiled, seeming not to notice Rahze’s reaction. “Of course.”

As soon as the people of Rohan learned what they wanted, they not only allowed them to spend the night, but insisted on it. Myrren and her friends were ushered to the largest house in the village, a long lodge elevated off the ground on stilts. A staircase led up to a wooden walkway that wrapped around the building, providing access to its sliding panel doors. Lanterns dangled from its eaves, and its walls were a framework of wooden beams and panels of—*Is that paper?* Myrren thought in surprise. *By Vraxor, it is! How can they build a house out of paper? Then again, I guess they have to keep the weight down, so the stilts can support it.*

The interior was a single room, a wide wooden-floored space. Sliding panel windows looked out onto the misty green forest and a stream that flowed below. There was no furniture except for a long, low table; evidently, people were intended to sit on the floor.

The villagers seemed more at ease now that Chuangzhi had spoken to them. Most spoke only a little common, some none at all, but despite the language barrier they were eager to sit, talk and entertain their visitors.

Before long, it was twilight. The sun flamed red as it sank behind the hills, and long shadows spread out from the forest. As night descended over Rohan, people lit the lanterns that hung from the houses’ eaves, creating cheerful strings of light that pushed back the dark. The streams that ran through the town chuckled silver over their stony beds.

Dinner that night was a communal feast. Bonfires burned brightly, throwing up sparks that flitted into the night sky. Lights glowed through the paper walls of the houses; there was singing and music, the booming of drums and the trill of stringed instruments.

In the lodge, Myrren and her friends were the center of attention. Sitting around the table with Rohan's people, they regaled their hosts with stories over bowls of rice. Rahze was gone; he had slipped away before dark without offering an explanation.

Myrren was having trouble figuring out how to eat. All they had given her were two long, thin sticks, which the people of the village held between their fingers and used to pluck morsels of rice and meat. She had not gotten the hang of it yet.

Finally, she leaned over to Kail. "Do you have any idea what happened to Rahze?" she whispered.

"I don't know," he said back. "Rahze doesn't like cities. But this is hardly a city, it's a tiny village. And even in big cities he usually has to be there for a few weeks before it starts getting to him. He should have been fine, unless..."

"Unless what?"

"I'm not sure, but maybe all that time we spent in Palidia sensitized him. Maybe he needs more time in the wild to come to himself. I'm sure he'll be fine."

"You're probably right," Myrren agreed. "I have to do something. I'll be right back."

She got to her feet and went from the lodge.

Kail and Shial exchanged puzzled looks, but returned to the festivities. The people of Rohan had overcome their shyness and were peppering the two of them with questions. They answered in good humor, giving away nothing about where they were heading or why, but describing the places they had seen in terms that made the people sigh with awe. They talked about the great shining white cities of the god Nimrod, and the vast wild green deeps of Shael, and the volcanic wastelands and fiery red forests of Vraxor's country.

A young man asked one of the interpreters a question in his own musical language. The translator, an older man with a halting smile, listened and then said to Kail and Shial, "Jishi wishes to ask, noble guests, what you know of the *kuro gakido*?"

"What is that?" Shial asked the translator politely.

He frowned and spoke to the questioner. Shial immediately noticed their expressions had changed—this was the first time since meeting Chuangzhi that they had seen anything but smiles on these people's faces. Now they looked uneasy.

"The black wraiths," the interpreter said. "Shadows that come out of the night and walk like men."

"What do you know of them?" Kail asked.

"Many have seen them, especially after dark. They do not speak, merely move through the village like the midnight wind. It seems as though they search for something. Until recently they had done no harm, but two mornings ago we found Shiheng dead in his home. He had

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once been a soldier in the king's army, and he was gripping his old sword, lying on the floor stiff and cold like a locust caught in frost."

"We go to monastery," added another, who knew less common but spoke with great excitement, punctuating his words with gestures. "In hills. Monks know nothing of them."

"We have tried all the traditional measures to rid ourselves of demons," the interpreter said. "We light fires, beat drums and chant incantations, all to no avail. None of our sacred scrolls mention them."

Shial felt guilty. *That man died because he tried to fight them, but they were only here because they're searching for us.* She thought of the protective black shield that clung invisibly to her skin.

"The danger will soon pass," Kail assured the people. "They should be gone before long. In the meantime, don't strike at them. Leave them alone and they won't hurt you."

Awed, the people murmured their thanks.

Suddenly the doors slid open, and a procession of people entered. Those at the front were chanting and clapping; those in the rear were carrying heavy bowls full of steaming food. At the head of the procession came Myrren and Chuangzhi.

"What is this?" Shial asked in surprise, but Kail was grinning.

Myrren laughed. "Did you really think I would forget my best friend's birthday?"

"An auspicious day!" Chuangzhi said, smiling broadly. "We are honored that you have come to our village to celebrate it."

"Thank you," Shial said happily, rising and hugging Myrren. "All of you. I'm not the only one, though." She pointed to Kail. "It's my husband's birthday too."

"Is that so?" Chuangzhi asked. "A husband and wife born on the same day? This is a very auspicious occasion indeed!"

Kail looked embarrassed. "I'm afraid it's not quite like that. I mean, it's not really my birthday. I don't remember which day it is. I just celebrate it on the same day as Shial."

"I am sure the gods understand," the old monk said with a wink.

The food was set out. Despite the small size and poverty of the village, there was course after course, so much it surprised them. Most was vegetables and rice, but there was meat as well, pork and chicken that had to be precious in this rural region. There were bowls of cooked vegetables tossed in dark sweet sauce, sun-baked flatbreads, and small cups of potent rice wine. Kail had none of the latter, and Myrren drank some to no apparent effect, but a few swallows were enough to make Shial feel light-headed and tipsy, which the people of Rohan found enormously funny.

They ate and celebrated late into the night. Just before midnight the people brought out tea and sweet cakes, and there was a ceremony

where Shial and Kail lit twenty-six small candles, one for each year of her life, and left them out to burn down with the dawn. Soon afterwards the festivities finally ended, and the three of them retired to bed.

Once the villagers were gone, Myrren and Shial laid out their sleeping rolls on the floor. Kail did not.

"I'm worried about Rahze," he said. "He shouldn't have been gone this long. I'm going to try to find him."

"Be careful," Shial said.

"I will be," he promised.

One by one, the lights of Rohan went out, and night flooded the village. The only sounds to be heard were the soft flowing of water and the chirping of crickets. Only the misty light of one last lantern left any hint that there was a village there at all.

Myrren was worn out from a day of riding, full of good food and warmed by the rice wine. She was more than ready to sleep, but as she lay drowsing, she noticed that Shial was standing at the window, looking out into the night.

"Thank you, Myrren," she said distantly. "For tonight."

"You're welcome," Myrren said, already drifting into sleep.

There was a moment of silence.

"Myrren? I have a confession to make."

"What's that?"

"Remember in Palidia, when we celebrated your birthday?"

"Yes. I forgot all about it until you brought me downstairs."

Shial laughed faintly. She sounded choked up. "Well, I forgot about mine too. It didn't even cross my mind when you said you wanted to spend the night here."

"It's a good thing we have each other to remind us, then."

"It is."

"I didn't want to celebrate your birthday out in the wild. We hardly had any food at all, much less anything worthy of a birthday feast. I wanted you to be happy..."

"Thank you," Shial whispered.

"...so I'm glad we found this place, where we could do it right."

"I agree," she said, her voice wavering, and Myrren realized that her friend was crying.

That realization was enough to shock her awake. She got up and came to stand beside her. Outside, the forest was a wall of shadow, and the silver reflections of stars twinkled and shimmered in the stream. Two trails of tears were running down Shial's face.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

The elf scrubbed at her cheeks. "Nothing," she said, but her voice gave her the lie. "It's just that... everyone getting together for a feast... well, it reminds me of Shael."

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Myrren put a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. “You still miss it?”

“I’ll always miss it. The only way I can deal with it is by not thinking about it. Every time I do think about it and realize I’ll never be able to go back...” She sobbed quietly, her shoulders shaking.

Myrren wished she knew what to say. She wished there *were* something to say.

“You have Kail,” she suggested. “You can have a life with him.”

“I know. And I’m grateful for that. But I need a home, and he’s an Atma Knight. Am I going to spend the rest of my life traveling with him? I couldn’t face that.”

“I thought you settled this.”

“No. We didn’t. We just agreed to put off dealing with it until later, after our marriage, and then there was everything that happened in Palidia...” She took a shuddering breath. “Well, now it’s later.”

She took another deep breath. “All I wanted was to settle down and start a family. Was that so much to ask? But first I get banished, and then my baby dies. I think the gods like kicking me.”

Myrren reached out and hugged her friend. “If it makes you feel any better, you know you’re not alone.”

Her voice grew bitter. “I thought the Broken Ring was a silly legend. Maybe it is. Maybe what happened was just bad fortune. But that doesn’t make me feel any better. You have Kail, at least, but I don’t even have a husband anymore.”

Shial hugged her back. “Myrren, I’m sorry. But why would that make me feel better?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Maybe you like watching other people suffer?”

Shial laughed through her tears and hugged her tighter. “Don’t be silly. But I’m glad I have you. It helps to talk about it. It’s better when I don’t have to keep these feelings bottled up inside.”

“We’ll always have each other,” Myrren agreed with gallows humor. “Sisters in suffering. We should have another feast to celebrate our mutual misery.”

Shial burst into laughter, interrupting her tears. Myrren smiled at her friend’s mirth, feeling her own heart lifted somewhat.

“And then we’ll ask these people their secret,” she went on. “How can they be so happy with so little? I wish I knew how to do that.”

“Maybe,” Shial said thoughtfully, “they’re happy *because* they have so little.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it. All they have are the roofs over their heads, the clothes they wear and their fields. Their life must be much simpler—they don’t have many things to worry about.”

“But wouldn’t it be boring?”

Shial shrugged. “When all you have are the simple things, that’s what you learn to take pleasure in. The land, your family and friends, good honest work. Living in a city may give you more ways to distract yourself, but it also gives you more concerns. The less important things drop away when your biggest concern is making sure the harvest is good so you know where your next meal is coming from.”

Hearing it phrased that way gave Myrren an epiphany.

Suddenly, something that had been gnawing at her sprang into words.

“That feast they gave us,” she said, “they can’t afford to do that every night. They couldn’t even do that every time someone who lives in the village has a birthday.”

“Visitors must be rare here,” Shial agreed. “They probably spare no expense to make the ones they have feel welcome.”

A shadow fell across the doorway. They looked up to see Kail.

“Any luck?” Shial asked.

He shook his head. “No sign of him.”

Then he noticed them standing by the window. “What did I miss?”

“We were just talking.”

“Is everything all right?”

She went over to him and hugged him. “It’s fine.”

But Myrren knew her friend was not telling the truth. “Shial was worried about finding a home,” she said.

Kail’s tone instantly went flat. “I see.”

Her friend gave her an anguished look. Myrren did not know why—it was not as if this was a secret; Shial had said the two of them had discussed it before—but she sensed she had said something wrong.

“There’s got to be somewhere,” she suggested, “even if you can’t go back to Shael. It can’t be that hard to find a place to live. Kail, don’t you have a family?”

As soon as she said it, she knew she had compounded her mistake. The Atma Knight’s blue eyes, glinting in the darkness, turned cold.

“Most Atma Knights have no families,” he said, his tone like ice. “And I’m no exception.”

“Kail,” Shial rebuked him. “Be nice. It’s not her fault; she didn’t know.”

“Know what?” she asked.

“Kail doesn’t like to talk about his past,” Shial explained, then to him, “But Kail, how can you be upset at her if she didn’t know? And why shouldn’t she know, anyway?”

“You know. And Rahze knows. That’s more than enough. I would be happier if no one did, but I’ll settle for you two. But I’m not

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about to spread it around. It's all in the past, and I want it to stay that way."

"Exactly. It's all in the past. So why should it matter who knows? It doesn't have any bearing on who you are now."

"It's not relevant to who I am."

"You're just worried people will think less of you."

"Don't be ridiculous," he said, but he sounded a little strained.

She ran a hand up his arm. "Kail. Did I think any less of you when I found out? Of course not. It will help to let it out—trust me. Things like this only get worse if you try to hold them in. Believe me, no one knows that better than me."

"No," he said adamantly. "You and Rahze are enough."

Myrren watched in silence. She was grateful that the embarrassed burning of her face was invisible in the dark. She did not know what she had said to upset him, but she did not want to be the cause of a fight between Kail and Shial. She wished they would just drop it.

But her friend would not. "Kail, if you can't trust Myrren, who can you trust? We've been together so long, been through so much. I trust Myrren with my life. I have no secrets from her. Isn't that enough?"

He sighed heavily, looked up. Myrren would not meet his gaze.

"Fine," he said. "Tell her. But only the first part," he added hastily. "Not the rest of it."

"Thank you," Shial said softly. She kissed him, then turned to Myrren.

"When Kail was young," she began, "he worked as a servant boy for a nobleman in Vraxor's country. The man treated him cruelly. One day he tried to... do something to him. That's when Kail discovered his magic. He killed the nobleman without meaning to, and when he realized what he had done, he ran away."

"My earliest memories are of working for him," Kail said. "I never knew my parents. I'm assuming they sold me into servitude when I was an infant, but I really don't know. The only reason I know my family name is that the man always called me by it. 'Adlyn boy.'"

Myrren tried to imagine what this must have been like. Of course, she had not been raised by her own parents either. Her father had been away at war for her entire life, and her mother worked as an acolyte to the priests and had no time to care for her, and so she had been left in the care of Arvis, a family friend. But the similarities to Kail's situation ended there. *At least I knew my parents, and I did see them occasionally. And Arvis did as good a job raising me as I could have asked for. But Kail never had any of those things. And I thought I hated my life when I was younger! He's been carrying this sorrow with him for as long as he's lived.*

"I'm sorry, Kail," she said. "Please believe me. I didn't mean it."

He waved dismissively. "Shial is right. I was overreacting. You couldn't have known."

"Have you ever... looked for your family?" she asked, wary of offending him again. "Aren't you curious?"

"No," he said softly. "I'm not. My past is irrelevant to who I am now."

He drew his sword and held it out. The designs inscribed on its sides glittered silver-gray in what little light there was.

"I'm an Atma Knight," he said firmly, "and that's all I need to know."

He put the sword away and spoke more softly. "Besides, where would I even start looking?"

"It has to help that you know your family name," Shial said.

"But I'd have the whole world to search. One lifetime wouldn't be enough."

"Maybe we can narrow it down. If your family sold you to this noble in Vraxor's land, they must have lived there too, right?"

Myrren squinted at him critically. "I don't know about that. You don't quite have the complexion."

"Your skin is lighter than mine," he pointed out.

"I know, but I'm a special case. You don't have any demon ancestry, do you?"

Kail recoiled. "Gods, no."

"I didn't think so. But you could have been born further west and then taken there. Your family could have been captured in a war or something, split up and sold as slaves. It happens. I think you're a little too old to have come from the Wars of the West, but there have always been skirmishes with the western nations."

"But how far west?" he said despairingly. "That could be almost anywhere."

Shial gently put a hand on his chin and turned his face from side to side, examining his profile.

"Ever since I met you," she said, "I've always thought Adlyn sounded like an elven name. But I don't think you have any elven blood."

"I don't think so either," he agreed.

"And Shael is much too far west for him to have been taken all the way to Vraxor's land from there," Myrren said. "If he was born elsewhere, he probably came from one of the border countries along the Cordillen. And probably closer to the north than the south. The people who live near the sea, around Corondor, are a little darker than that."

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“That’s a lot of ground to search,” he said doubtfully. “And there’s no guarantee I’d find anything even if I tried. My family could be long dead. There might not be anyone left who knew them.”

“But it’s a start,” Shial said. “There’s hope.”

“Maybe. But it’s not that important to me. Wherever I came from, I have a life of my own now.” He patted his sword. “This is what matters. This is all I need.”

There was a rapping at the doorframe, and they looked up, expecting it to be Rahze. But it was the old monk and village elder, Chuangzhi, who stood there.

“I hope I am not interrupting,” he said politely, “but I heard voices. Are your lodgings suitable?”

“We’re more than comfortable,” Shial said. “Thank you for your trouble.”

He bowed. “Very well. If there is anything I can help you with, please let me know.”

“You haven’t seen Rahze, have you?” Kail asked.

“I fear not. I saw him leave the village soon after you arrived, but not since then. I can organize a search party if you are concerned he may be lost or hurt?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. He can take care of himself; he just doesn’t like crowds. But thank you.”

Chuangzhi nodded. “Very well. There are no dangerous animals in the woods, anyway. They are too full of Rohanians to stir themselves.”

Myrren and Shial laughed, and a grin even came to Kail’s face. But he said, half-seriously, “If any animals found Rahze, I’d be more worried for them than for him.”

The monk nodded solemnly. “Rahze is a man with much darkness in him.”

“Just like me,” Kail said.

He shook his head. “No. You carry your darkness only to more clearly outline the boundaries of your light. Rahze’s follows him like a shadow, like one of the *kuro gakido* trailing him everywhere he goes. I have seen how he wrestles with it. It is very close to the surface in him.”

Myrren wondered how he knew this, considering he had met them only a few hours ago, but there was something disconcertingly accurate in what the old monk said.

“What are you saying?” she asked.

“I would not presume to tell you your choice of companions. But,” he said ominously, “I fear that if you remain with him for long, he may betray you.”

“That’s absurd!” Kail said. “He would never do that.”

The monk bowed. "I may have overstepped my boundaries. I apologize if I have. I am in no position to contradict you if you say I am wrong. Please forgive me. I did not mean to offend."

But his tone had been too mild and his manner too polite for any of them to take offense. "It's all right," Kail assured him. He seemed taken aback by the old man's comment about his own inner darkness and light.

"We're the ones who owe you apologies," Shial added. "We didn't thank you properly for everything you've done for us. We appreciate it very much."

"You are welcome," Chuangzhi said, smiling again. "I am glad you enjoyed yourselves in what humble comforts our village has to offer."

"We did," Myrren said. "It was more than we could have asked for."

"And yet you are all unhappy." It was not a question, merely an observation.

They looked at each other in surprise.

"You're very perceptive," Shial said ruefully. "I don't know how you knew that, but it's not your fault. We had a wonderful time tonight."

Chuangzhi's expression grew grave. "I would not be a good host if my guests went away carrying such deep sadness. Is there anything I can do?"

"Thank you," Myrren said, "—however you knew—but no. Our troubles aren't your fault, and they're not anything you can help us with."

"May I try anyway?" he said. "Grant a foolish old man his folly. Let me know what burdens you. Perhaps I may be able to assist."

They exchanged looks again. Kail shrugged.

"All right," Shial said, "I guess it can't hurt. We've been talking about what we're missing. Kail doesn't have a past, Myrren doesn't have a husband..."

"...and Shial doesn't have a home," Myrren chimed in.

The old man listened attentively. He nodded, deep in thought.

"Difficult problems," he agreed.

"Do you have any advice for us?" Kail asked.

Chuangzhi did not answer the question. "I was born in Rohan," he said instead, "and I have lived here all my life. The farthest I have ever gone was to the monastery in the hills, when I was young, to be trained as a monk in the ways of my ancestors. And that, as you can see, was a very long time ago." He grinned.

"I have never been more than ten miles from this town," he said, more solemnly. "I know every small mossy-banked brook, every wooded hill and misty fold in the land, every grassy clearing and flat

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stone good for meditation... but that is all I know. You have all been farther than I ever have, seen far more of the world than I have. If in your eyes that makes me unqualified to offer you advice, only say so, and I will withdraw.”

“Of course not,” Shial said. “Why would it?”

“Everyone in the world has problems,” Myrren said, “no matter where they live,” and the old monk broke into a broad, wrinkled smile.

“I am glad that you feel that way. It honors me that you are willing to accept whatever help I can give. But,” he warned them, “there is no easy solution. In fact, the advice I give you is something you have probably heard before. I cannot promise it will work for you, and if it does, the path may be long and difficult. But if you strive to live your lives by it, it may help. Knowing this, do you still want my advice?”

“We didn’t expect a quick fix. We never have,” Shial said. “Tell us.”

“As you wish,” he said simply.

He paused to gather his thoughts. “When I was young, as I have said, I went to the monastery in the hills to be trained as a monk. The first thing I learned was the principle that the monks of Rohan hold above all others: the great truth that all suffering in this world is caused by desire.”

“We desire to cling to the good and push the bad away, but the harder we struggle to do this, the more we end up doing just the opposite. Time is always flowing; the good things will recede inevitably into the past, and seeking to cling to them will only make them seem farther away. Likewise, seeking to push the bad things away will only make them that much less tolerable when they inevitably come.”

“The solution is to live in the here and now. Experience all things in their time, then allow them to pass away, without seeking to cling to them or push them away.”

“Are you saying we should forget the past?” Kail asked.

“Or not plan for the future?” Shial added. “If we don’t—”

Chuangzhi shook his head. “Do not forget the past; only do not seek to dwell in it. Remember that nothing you can do will change it now. Likewise, do not fail to plan for the future; only do not live there, constantly running ahead of yourself, worrying so much about what is to come that you fail to notice what is.”

“But how can we do those things when we have pain and loss in the past?” Myrren said. “It’s hard not to dwell on it. Especially when it’s related to something we’re going to have to face in the future.”

“All things pass away,” the monk said. “When the good comes, enjoy it but do not hold onto it; experience it and let it move on. Life is change, and the more we struggle against that, the more pain it will cause. Let things come and go in their own time.”

He smiled wryly. “There. I have given you in minutes what took me many years to learn. I hope it helps, even if only a little.”

Myrren contemplated the old man’s words. *Live in the present*, she thought. *Be here now. I think I like the sound of that.*

She glanced up. Kail was nodding, contemplating this; Shial looked as if she had been given something precious.

“We’ll try it out,” she said. “I think this may do us good after all. Thank you.”

“You are welcome,” Chuangzhi said with a smile. “If it does any good, I will be grateful. I will not disturb your rest any further. May you all sleep well.”

They bade him good night, and he bowed and departed.

“Does anyone else get the feeling he came here to tell us that all along?” Shial asked.

Kail nodded. “I do.”

“So do I,” Myrren agreed. “I wonder how he knew so much about us.”

“Wisdom can be found in unexpected places,” Kail murmured.

Daylight found the three of them sprawled around the lodge, sleeping. The sounds of a bustling village arose from outside. Like all farmers, the people of Rohan rose with the dawn, but no one had disturbed their guests.

Myrren stirred sleepily. She blinked, sat up and looked around at her friends.

Then a jolt of panic struck her. She fumbled in her breast pocket, pulled out the Dark Heart, and held it up while turning her hand in front of her face. There could be no doubt—the invisible black shield outlining her body was gone. They had overslept, and the spell protecting them from the *senkata* had faded during the night. How long ago, she did not know, but the demons would surely find them soon unless it was reapplied.

And Rahze was still gone.

She scrambled to her feet and glanced around the lodge as if she might have overlooked him. It was no use; he was gone, and without the Atma Knight’s staff, the Dark Heart was useless.

She threw the door open and looked out onto the main street of the village. “Rahze!” she called, as loudly as she dared.

“Myrren...?” Shial said sleepily. “What’s going on?”

“Rahze is still gone!” she said in panic, and they sprang awake as they suddenly realized their danger.

“How long has it been—” she said, and Myrren said, “It’s gone. I already checked.”

“We have to find him,” Kail said. “Right away.”

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But then the Atma Knight was striding through the doors, his ring held out before him. "Be calm. I am here."

"The spell!" Myrren said desperately. She touched the Dark Heart to his fist; he murmured a word of magic, gray fire erupted between his fingers and touched the gem, and it burst into black flame. Relief washed through Myrren as she channeled the smallest part of that power into recreating their shield. A black halo surrounded the four of them and thinned into invisibility.

Weak with relief, she tucked the Dark Heart away. Rahze surveyed them calmly.

"Are we ready to leave?" he asked, as if nothing had happened.

"I suppose we are," Kail said. "But Rahze, where in the world were you?"

"It is not important. I will explain later. Let us go."

As they packed up their sleeping rolls, Myrren suggested, "We're almost out of food. We have money, don't we? We should ask the people if they'd be willing to sell us any."

"I don't know about that," Shial said doubtfully. "These people have so little to spare, and they've given us so much already. I don't feel comfortable asking them to give up any more."

"And what good would money do them?" Rahze pointed out. "There is nothing here for them to buy; they produce all they need. They have no need for silver or gold."

"We'll have to find our own, then."

"We will," Shial assured her. "Being out in the wild has done me a world of good. Don't worry."

As soon as they stepped outside, Myrren was struck by the appearance of the sky. She had not noticed it from the window, but the heavens were a dramatic tableau.

The skies were clouded, and the eastern sky was suffused with pale light that blurred the clouds' outlines and gleamed around their edges. But in the northwest, the direction they had come from, there was a brooding darkness. A gray front like the shadows of thunderheads crouched over the horizon. There was no rain, and the looming front seemed to hang stationary, but the forest trees rustled in waves as the wind swept by. The village's many streams and brooks had taken on a more urgent note as they flowed and foamed over their stony beds. An eerie half-light illuminated the town, and the air smelled like cut grass.

They paused to take in the uncanny sight. "I've never seen a sky like that," Myrren said.

"Neither have I," Shial agreed, "not even during the rainy seasons in the Shaelwood."

She turned to Kail, who was looking up at the clouds strangely. "Is something wrong, love?"

He shook his head. “No. For a moment I thought... no. It’s fine.”

They saddled up their horses and asked a passerby to find Chuangzhi so they could bid goodbye to the old monk. As they rode out, Shial asked, “Rahze, do you know much about Kail’s past? Where he came from? His family? Do you know any of that?”

The elder Atma Knight shook his head. “No. I am sorry. As far as I know, Kail’s life began when the Atma Knights found him.”

Kail looked thoughtful, but said nothing.

Chuangzhi met them at the edge of the village. They said their goodbyes, thanking him for his hospitality, and he responded in kind. Then, out of curiosity, Myrren asked, “Do you get weather like this often?”

The monk’s customary smile became a frown of discontent. He glanced up into the clouds.

“Never have I seen a sky like this one,” he said. “It bodes evil.”

“What do you mean?” Shial asked. “It looks strange, but it can’t mean anything.”

“We will see,” he said simply. He glanced at one of the brooks spilling through its channel, its waters opaque with stirred-up silt. It seemed larger, faster, though it had not rained during the night.

He shrugged. “I will speak of it no longer. Perhaps you are right. In any event, we should not let our parting be marred. Farewells should be a joyous occasion.” He mustered a smile, like the sun breaking through clouds. “I wish you all happiness and good fortune on your journey. May the gods watch over you.”

“We’ll miss you,” Shial said, and Myrren added, “Thank you for everything. Especially what you told us.”

He bowed his head. “I only hope you find use in it. Be careful on your way.” He glanced again at the sky. “There is a storm brewing.”

Promising to be careful, they rode off down the path. The old monk’s warning lingered in Myrren’s mind, and she looked back at him, standing near the edge of the village like a sentinel, and up at the clouds above him until they rode into the shelter of the trees and both were hidden from sight.