

PERFECT SHADOW

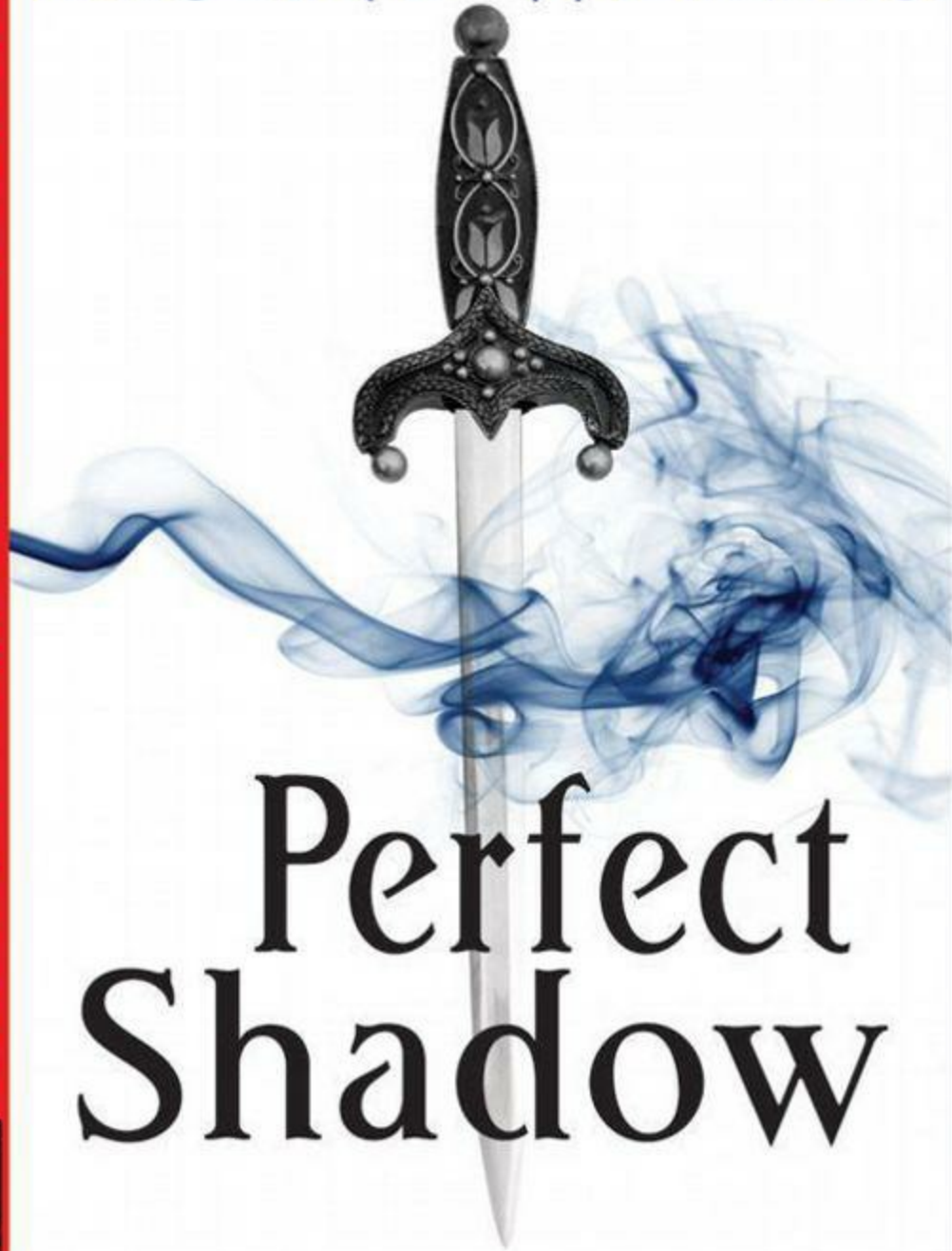


BRENT WEEKS



ORBIT SHORT FICTION

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Perfect
Shadow



Perfect Shadow

A Night Angel Novella

Brent Weeks



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Perfect Shadow

Chateau Shayon is supposed to be impregnable. I love it when they say that. Crushing a bare rock just offshore with their weight, the chateau's sheer walls ring the entire island, actually overhanging the waters of Lac Shayon in places.

This was to be my first kill for hire. It's good to start with the impossible. Make a name for myself. Enter with a splash.

I emerged from the water with little more than a ripple. The walls loomed before me, above me. There were no shallows to stand in. In those few places where there once had been, some lord or another had sent masons to chip away rock to a depth of three paces below water. I was naked to the waist, skin smeared with fat and ashes for insulation and invisibility. Clothes would have simply filled with water, slowed me down.

As it was, I was bleeding from a slash along one cheek and several cuts along my forearms. Defensive wounds. I didn't want to stay in the water any longer than I had to. There were more of those damned things out there.

But I waited. Clung to the rocks, buffeted by the waves, studying the wall. There were easier ways to do this, of course. The *ka'kari* could make most anything easy. Except those things that it makes damn near impossible.

~You don't want to do this, Acaelus. Murder for hire? You?~

None of that. That's not my name. Hasn't been for a long time.

The overhang of the walls was lined with machicolations or rocks, murder holes for arrows, and spouts for jellied fire. I could see two sentries above me in mail and wool, chatting, checking the lake from time to time. It was a clear night, lit by a full moon. Not a night that required much vigilance. I saw six other men atop the wall, eight. Far enough away that I shouldn't have been able to see them in the darkness.

But darkness welcomes my eyes. It was one way I couldn't help but use the *ka'kari*. It forever altered how I see.

Almost every window of the chateau was shuttered against the cold night breeze. I wasn't looking for an open window, though. Every window was

barred, and every iron bar was in good condition. There were no balconies over the picturesque lake; that would only give grapnels a place to hook. This chateau had been built for defense, and not by fools.

A simple assassin would fail.

Only on the third story did the windows of the chateau—again barred with stout iron—glow with cheery firelight, shutters thrown open. That would be the great hall, where Baron Rikku was entertaining his vassals. Baron Rikku was a proud man. Proud of his parties. Proud of the fine Sethi wines he served. Proud of his ornaments, his silks, his art. Proud of his piety. Proud of seizing this little island chateau from its previous owner.

Unfortunately, the previous owner of the island hadn't actually owned the island. He'd merely been holding it for another. One who wished to keep her ownership anonymous. One who wasn't impressed by the baron. One who wouldn't forgive him for his ignorance, or his theft.

But that's what sucks about running an underworld, isn't it? Tell people what you own, and you invite attacks from those strong enough to challenge you; don't tell people what you own, and you won't dissuade those who fear you.

Right, poor Sa'kagé, you really get the ass-end of life.

I checked the position of the moon, judging how far it had moved since I'd entered the water on the other side of the lake, some two thousand paces distant. The baron would retire from the party, make love with his wife in her chambers or with one of her ladies or a maid in a side room he kept for the purpose, and then use the lords' privy before retiring to his own chambers on the top floor.

Classic defensive weaknesses of any fortification: how shit comes in and how shit goes out. Here, the garderobe overhung the water, so I was able to find the privies by their smell. The chute was narrow, probably as much to minimize how much wind blew up on your nethers as for defense. The chute didn't start until five paces above the water, and its narrowness meant every surface was slick with effluents. With slimy fresh diarrhea caked over the top of crumbly feces dried and aged into soil, there was no telling where the cracks in the rock were.

I glanced up, saw that none of the guards were looking, and then something caught my eye behind me: a shadow in the waters.

More than one. Dozens. Fucking fanged fish. Undeniably stupid, but I'd heard they could smell blood for a league. Apparently I should have believed

it.

With a surge of my Talent, I shot out of the water. I stabbed fingers and bare toes into the shit-slick walls, pushed off, twisted, leapt for the inside wall of the chute, twisted, and had both my left hand and left foot betrayed by bad holds.

I fell, fingers clawing at the walls, toes scratching, tearing off toenails, finally stopped. I gave myself a few deep breaths and then launched upward again with magic-augmented strength. This time, I bounced lightly from one side to the other.

Almost at the top, I found the remains of a grate. It must have been installed hundreds of years ago, because the iron was corroded to little more than nubs sticking out of each wall. Too much trouble to replace, apparently, or too gross. Now it made good footholds for the very kind of man it had originally been intended to keep out.

The problem with a place like Chateau Shayon wasn't that it had a weakness. Every castle has weaknesses. The problem was that when you steal a chateau from Gwinvere Kirena, you have an enemy who knows your weaknesses exhaustively. If I'd thought there was a grate in the chute—well, *I* could have made it through regardless—but most assassins wouldn't have tried the garderobe. Certainly not first.

Balancing on the stubs of the grate, ignoring my bleeding toes, I drew a plane saw. The privies were a simple board: oak, with three holes in it. Three so you and two friends can drop mud together, I guess. Call me unsociable, but no thanks. Regardless, if Gwinvere's intelligence were still accurate, the board was fitted with a lock and bolted down. No one even had the key to that lock any more. I picked the middle hole, setting the plane saw to work inscribing a circle slightly larger than the current one.

~This goes against everything you've lived for. Gaelan, this isn't you.~

No, this isn't Gaelan. There is no Gaelan. I'm nameless.

No one came to use the lords' privies in the time I was there. Lucky. It does happen. That's the thing. If you're prepared to get shit on and do your work anyway, sometimes you get lucky. Over the distant sounds of laughter and carousing—*You will be alone. You will be separate. Always.*—I listened for footsteps.

None. I scraped some feces off the wall next to my head, reached my hand up through the right side privy-hole, and plopped the feces on the seat. I pulled an empty leather winebag, smaller than my clenched fist, from where

it was rolled flat under my belt. I opened it, balanced somewhat precariously on the grate-stubs, and pissed in the bag.

Then I poured the urine liberally around the left-side privy's seat.

I'd barely finished when the door banged open. The baron. He was preceded by a soldier carrying a lantern.

The soldier searched the room for intruders, though there wasn't much searching to do. The room was bare rock with a low ceiling and only the one entrance. Apparently the baron was nervous.

The soldier walked toward the privies. I pressed myself against one wall and drew the shadows around me. It wasn't anything like invisibility, but it helped. And the lantern's light was diffuse—that's the problem of using a lantern to look straight down: the base gets in the way. The man's head appeared, but he was light-blind.

"Quickly, would you?" the baron said. "I'm going to die of a burst bladder here."

No, you're not.

The light above steadied as the soldier put it on a hook, and then the door closed.

A moment later, I heard the baron swear, mumbling to himself, "...swine. Can't even piss without missing the hole... whoreson Alitaerans." There was a rustle of clothing as he dropped his trousers, and his ass blocked out the light over the middle privy. "...wines from Seth, chef from the best Modaini...Probably shat on the edge on purpose."

He was a lean man, but the wood groaned slightly where I'd incised the larger circle. But it didn't give way. Not yet.

I let him finish his business. Never say I'm not a gentleman.

I was once the avatar of retribution. Now I just try to be polite.

A moment later, the baron disappeared down the privy without a trace. When his soldiers grew suspicious and checked, he was simply gone. You'll forgive me if I don't dwell on the details. You see, this isn't the tale of Baron Rikku's death. It's the tale of mine.

But afford me a moment for my professional pride and let me say this: in the Chateau Shayon, no one ever again shat unworried.

* * *

"What I don't understand is why you came to Cenaria. There's nothing here. It's a hole," Yvor Vas says. He's a skinny, freckled redhead who—

improbably enough—hails from Ladesh.

“They don’t know me here,” I say. I’m drinking ale. He’s drinking ootai—all Ladeshians are addicted to the bitter drink, apparently even the redheaded ones—in a little safe house I’d purchased in the Warrens on the edge of swampland. This conversation is too dangerous to risk it being overheard. “In the last fifty years, I’ve become famous in most of the great nations. There’ve been so many wars, and I always seem to end up in the middle of them.”

He says, “You were Vin Craysin in eastern Alitaera, Tal Drakkan in Seth, Gorrum Qesh in Modai, and Pips McClawski in western Alitaera?” Trying to impress.

“You know I found a collector who had Pips’s dice in Aenu? And no, I wasn’t Gorrum Qesh, though I fought with him for a time. You Society folk, always so curious.” I wasn’t Vin Craysin either, but I don’t like to reveal all of my cards, even when it doesn’t matter.

“The Society of the Second Sun would like to be an asset for you, Master Starfire. Allies who will help you, regardless of your circumstances. Think of it!”

“I have,” I say. I pause, deep in thought. “And I want to tell you everything.”

His eyes light up.

Everyone thinks they’re special. It’s what makes lying so easy.

* * *

“Gaelan Starfire! What an honor. Thank you for agreeing to meet me.” Gwinvere Kirena owned the kind of beauty that made a man remember being twelve and unable to speak in the presence of a girl. Gaelan had met great beauties before. The truth was, most of the encounters left him convinced that people were idiots. Great beauties and stunningly handsome men were accorded virtues: people found them funnier, smarter, more insightful than they actually were.

Conversely, he’d met women reputed to be great beauties who’d been merely attractive but with great confidence, charm, and vivacity. Gwinvere Kirena might be the former, but she definitely wasn’t the latter. He’d heard her described as “the courtesan of the age.” She was maintained by many men, owned by none. And this, at perhaps thirty years old.

His pause had to have been obvious, but Gaelan guessed Gwinvere was used to men finding lead in their tongues—and iron in their...elsewhere. “It’s not my usual kind of gathering, but you roused my curiosity,” Gaelan said.

He was looking at her eyes, not her generous cleavage, as he said “roused.” A beauty, much less a courtesan, would be accustomed to men’s advances, from the most vulgar to the most genteel. Her eyes gave away nothing. Either she’d missed it, didn’t care, or she chose not to give anything away.

“Are you enjoying the party?” she asked.

Gaelan’s back stiffened. It was a masque, held in some absent lord’s rented manse. He hadn’t seen such degeneracy since the waning days of the first Alitaeran Empire. He was reasonably handsome and very athletic, but no less than three women had *groped* him in the time between his coming through the front door and coming to this study. He’d even recognized one of them—the young wife of an earl, her face covered with a swan mask, and not much else covered at all. She’d laughed and addressed her friends by name, apparently not concerned about being identified. Gaelan hadn’t seen anyone actually copulating, but the night was young.

“It’s been an education,” he said.

Gwinvere Kirena herself had opted for a thin, high-collared, shockingly red dress perfectly cut to show every curve. She was bedecked with narrow gold chains, crossing between her breasts, bound with a padlock that hung in front of her hips. On a ribbon choker around her neck, she wore a little golden key. Some tailor’s fantasy of a Khalidoran harem girl, complete with chastity belt.

“I held it for you,” she said.

“I’ve never had anyone hold an orgy for me,” he said honestly. Not in 680 years.

She chuckled. “I was testing your rectitude,” she said. A slight pause before *rectitude*. Setting him up for the double entendre, if he wished. Allowing him to pursue her, if he wished.

But what she meant was that she was seeing if Gaelan Starfire would turn around and leave such a party before he even met her, or if he would tolerate debauchery. What kind of a man is Gaelan Starfire? she was asking.

A good test, devised by an incisive mind.

“Say your piece. You didn’t invite me here for my wit, or my cock.”

Her eyes widened for a moment, then a smile curved her full, rouged lips. She lay back against her divan. “I hadn’t *thought* I had,” she said. “You’re making me reconsider.”

He folded his hands behind his back, legs apart, bearing military.

Her eyes played over his figure. She said, “Gaelan Starfire, farmer from

nowhere turned hero of the Ceuran Campaigns, master of the longbow, master of the warhammer. Single-handedly freed a hundred of his imprisoned comrades. Five times refused promotions. Held the ridge at the Battle of Blood Grass all by himself. Suspected of being Talented, but twice refused to be examined by the Sisters. Quarreled bitterly with the Alitaeran commander, and then left suddenly. Recently accused of murder and hunted by armies from Alitaera and Ceura both.”

“Stories. Half true at best. They bore me.”

“The Alitaeran commander turned up dead a month later,” she said.

“Really?” he said, too slowly. How could she know that? “Serves that bastard right.”

“When he recruited you, he promised you vengeance on the Ceurans, didn’t he.” It wasn’t a question. “Then he took *their* bribe to call off the campaign.” Again, not a question.

“So you think I’m a murderer. You want me as an assassin?” Gaelan asked. “What? Some pretty rival slight you? A lover spurn you?”

He intended her to take offense. Wanted to see her angry.

She smiled indulgently. Full lips, beautiful smile, light in her eyes at being challenged. Enjoying being challenged. “I’m Sa’kagé, Gaelan.”

“Of course you are.” The underworld lords, the Sa’kagé, ran all of the significant crime in the city under the watchful eye of their ruling Nine, who were in turn watched by a Shinga, whose power would make kings jealous. One of those Nine ran all of the prostitution in Cenaria. That man, the Master of Pleasures, wouldn’t let a beautiful woman like Gwinvere Kirena operate independently. So maybe that was it. Maybe she wanted out.

“I wasn’t finished.” She stood, walked over to check the lock on the door. He noticed that the gold chains actually disappeared into a cut in her dress, apparently wrapping beneath her body to emerge at her bare back, which it covered in an artful golden lattice of bondage. Her beauty made his breath catch and his mind slow, and he needed his mind with this one. “I’m one of the Nine,” she said. “The Mistress of Pleasures.”

It was not a secret to be casually shared. “Young to be—”

“I have a plan, and I need you for it.”

He thought about it. Gaelan Starfire was supposed to be forty-five years old now, and he looked at least a decade younger. Gaelan was famous, but he had few real friends, and many enemies. Maybe it was time to move on, let that name die. There were worse things than to ally yourself with a beautiful,

intelligent woman.

“What’s your plan?” he asked.

She turned. “There’ll be time for that. First, we need to take care of something.” She extended her hand. He took what was in it.

It was the golden key she’d been wearing on her choker.

He cocked an eyebrow, trying to ignore the shock running to his loins. Having the body of a young man meant having the reactions of a young man, too. “Why?” he asked.

“Because if we don’t fuck tonight, you might fall in love with me. But if we do, you’ll probably still desire me—in fact, I’ll consider it a professional failure if you don’t; this *is* my work, after all—but you’ll never trust me. You’ll know that I’ll do the same with any other man who catches my fancy. It’ll make things simpler.”

~An honest whore. A rare woman in a dozen ways. She’s poisoning the well and telling you, Acaelus. Is tat really what you want?~

“And you?” he asked her. Are you in no danger of loving me?

She came close, slowly, gently, into his arms. The scent of fine perfume and the insidious softness of silk and skin. Cold gold chains on his skin and a warm breath in his ear. “I intend to enjoy my work tonight.”

* * *

In their little farmhouse, Gaelan held his wife’s bare ass, balanced on the edge of a table he’d made himself. She held his shoulder and the back of his head, her pupils wide, hips trembling against him with the aftershocks of their lovemaking.

She dug her fingernails into his shoulder painfully, playfully. “You know Ali could be home any minute.” But her eyes were shining, and she didn’t uncross her ankles from behind his butt, didn’t push him away.

“There’s worse things than a girl finding out her father still finds her mother irresistible.”

She grinned, and squeezed him with her thighs.

“Your smile is a century of solace,” he told her, trying to lock her face in his memory. She was beautiful, hair atumble, face flushed with sex and joy. Content and content with him. It was a treasure. She would grow old, die, and he would remain, young, immortal, following the directives of a long-dead king. A long-dead friend.

“Flattery already got you everything you’re going to get,” she said.

He laughed and pinched her ass.

She swatted his hand, eyes aglow.

“Why is all our happiness doomed?” he asked her.

She looked into his eyes, loving, gentle. “You are a cipher, my lord.”

“No, I was Samon Cipher six lives ago,” he said, winking, trying to salvage the moment.

“Mother!” a girl’s voice called out, right outside the door to their little cottage.

Gaelan pulled back, hiked his trousers up, yanked his belt tight, and slapped at his hair, trying to flatten it. Seraene hopped off the table, smoothing her skirts, grabbing a rag so she could pretend to be cleaning.

The door opened and Alinaea stepped in, carrying a basket of fresh-picked herbs in one hand and the day’s eggs in the other. If she’d been much older, he and Seraene would have been totally caught. The smell in the cottage wasn’t exactly subtle, and neither was the sex flush visible on Seraene’s chest, or the stubble-burn from his whiskers in the bit of cleavage her dress showed. But Alinaea was eight years old. Innocent. She was the light of Gaelan’s eyes.

“Da,” she said, serious, cocking her head to one side. “I’ve decided. I’m old enough now for a little brother.”

Gaelan looked over at Seraene. She was beaming. She put her hand on her belly.

“This? This is how you tell me?!” he demanded.

She laughed.

By all the gods that were and all the gods that had never been, how he missed Seraene’s laugh.

* * *

The pleasures rolled over Gaelan—and passed, leaving him cold. Gwinvere was astride him, clad only in those delicate golden chains. She stopped once he finished, not having climaxed herself. This was business for her, after all, not pleasure. But she didn’t get off him.

She stared at him, her hair tussled, figure magnificent, letting him bask in her radiance, letting him store up the image of a woman of her supernal beauty, making love with him. She leaned over him, and something like pity flashed through her eyes.

“You are a god clad in flesh, Gaelan Starfire, and you’re more fragile than you know. Be ware.”

She lay on his chest and tucked her head into his shoulder, but just for a

moment. The room was cool, and he was warm; maybe she was just appreciating that physical warmth and nothing more. She got up almost immediately. She began dressing, and he knew with a cynical twinge that she must have practiced dressing like this in a looking glass, because every move was graceful. She wasn't just a whore; she was an artist, and this last impression he would carry of her was as important to her as the first.

"I want to fuck again," he said. "Now." This time he wouldn't think of Seraene. Gwinvere was a wonder. He should appreciate her. He should please her.

"So do I, but I've three other men to bed before dawn, a fourth if he's kind."

"Was I your first—" He cut off. Ridiculous question. He couldn't believe he'd asked it. He didn't know where it had come from.

"Yes, Gaelan, I was a virgin until just now," she said flatly.

"I meant of the night," he said in a rush, flustered. "Never you mind. Stupid question."

She looked at him, hesitated. "You're magnificent. Distracted, but magnificent. Let's fuck tomorrow, after I finish dinner with the ambassador. Then you can tell me if you accept my business proposal."

Proposal? She hadn't even asked for anything yet.

* * *

A few minutes later, Gaelan pushed through a fog of riotweed, through which he saw the vague outlines of the debauched. Silent servants, costumed uniformly as black horses with blinkered eyes, tended to those who'd overindulged, carrying off those who were ill, tucking pillows under the heads of the unconscious, and covering nude bodies with blankets. The earl's wife, now wearing nothing but her swan mask and one silk stocking, ran toward Gaelan squealing, pursued by two lascivious lords whose masks had fallen off.

Before she could run into him, or look to him for protection that she really didn't want, Gaelan ducked into a noisy side room. Musicians were sitting behind an opaque curtain, muscling out a bastardized version of Haranese tribal beat. Two older lords smoking ornate bowls of riotweed were watching a third lord as he danced with a woman. Gwinvere.

The big ape had his fist wrapped around Gwinvere's slender neck. She ground into him sinuously, her back to him, running her hands down his hips.

She saw Gaelan, missed one beat, and then continued dancing. As she took

fistfuls of the young lord's trousers and pulled him tem" against her ass, she didn't look away.

Gaelan did. He ducked out into the party, and then out into the night.

He was followed.

* * *

Whoever was following Gaelan, he was good. Very good. But Gaelan had options. The hunted always has options, and Gaelan's futures spun out as simply as the different men he'd been over the last 680 years. Different men, different choices, different futures, splitting:

As a young man, the man he'd been born, as Prince Acaelus Thorne, he identified a choke point that even a careful pursuer would have to pass through lest he lose his quarry. Acaelus hid behind the first good corner and waited. He gathered his Talent, ready to overwhelm his pursuer, capture him, hit him a few times to find out who had sent him. He waited—

No, no, that wasn't true. Prince Acaelus hadn't had even that much subtlety.

Hiding? Acaelus? Ha!

No, Acaelus turned as soon as he became aware of his pursuer. Stopped in the open street.

"I know you're there! Come out! If you want a fight, I'll give it to you. If you want to know where I'm bound, come ask. I am crown prince of the dead kingdom of Trayethell, and I'll not have this mummery. Face me!"

The spy fled. Acaelus heard the skittering of scattering gravel, zeroed in on the sound, and ran in pursuit. His Talent lent strength to his muscles. He ran faster. He drew his sword, rounded a corner that was too sharp for the speed he was running.

He leapt, pushed off a wall, blasted the spy off his feet. The man tumbled head over heels, lay still.

Acaelus approached the spy. The little man lay on his back, hooded and cloaked.

At the last second, the spy convulsed. Two daggers flew through the air, straight for Acaelus.

With preternatural speed, Acaelus's blade swatted left, right, riposte. The daggers were batted aside and his sword was in the spy's heart before he had a second thought.

...And he learned nothing.

Not that Acaelus had ever had second thoughts. Not that he would doubt

his own actions.

No, Acaelus had been a noble fool. His way would be a disaster. Rejected.

Dehvirahaman Bruhmaeziwakazari would have—no, the Ymmuri stalker was a canny hunter, but he would have never come into a city. His leather pouches and camouflage cloaks had been perfect for his natural environs, but here clothes mattered in a different way. Rejected.

Rebus Nimble. There was a life that might have had some success here. Rebus was a sneak thief turned folk hero for making several hundred pounds of a corrupt king's gold rain in the streets in every market in town simultaneously. Rebus would have headed to the rough side of town. Here, the west side, the Warrens.

Rebus took a circuitous route, as if careful of being followed but not aware that he actually was. Spies always like to think they're good.

If the spy were simply some lord's or lady's llem">Acy, he'd get nervous and break off his pursuit as Rebus crossed the Vanden Bridge into the Warrens. He didn't. That meant the spy had been sent by someone formidable. Rebus abandoned his apparent caution once he reached the slums, walking quickly, which always made his limp more pronounced.

He limped down an alley. Took a left, a right, two lefts, followed a street so narrow his outstretched hands could touch both slumping walls to either side. And after three hundred paces with no outlet, reached a dead end. Dammit. These weren't the slums of Borami, where he knew every bolthole. In fact, he might have just played right into his hunter's hands.

He turned. The spy stood there, dual longknives drawn. So, not a spy, an assassin. And two archers who looked like they knew what they were doing stood on either side of him.

"Rebus *Nimble*," the assassin said, lifting his chin toward Rebus's twisted right foot. "Irony?"

"Older I get, the more I hate irony. But I was young once. I made it up when I started serious body magic. Making your arms and legs longer makes you clumsy as all hell for a while. I was hoping to make the name ironic eventually."

"I'll guess we'll see how that turned out."

Arrows streaked forward, burning holes in the night.

More blood, more death, and no more answers.

No, Rebus's instincts were all wrong. Besides, in his fine clothes, Gaelan might get jumped by robbers in the Warrens before he even had a chance to

get cornered by an assassin. Rejected.

So Gaelan, those men you've been are no help to you. What will the dirt-farmer-turned-war-hero do? Who will you be now? Who will you be next?

Gaelan wouldn't let the spy dictate to him. He was done with that. He simply didn't care. Truth was, Gaelan—the Gaelan he had envisioned when he discarded his previous life as Tal Drakkan, the Gaelan he had been for the last twenty-five years—was plain and direct. More like Acaelus. Until the end. Now, that Gaelan was dripping away, like a wax mask exposed to fire. And he wasn't sure who was emerging. Or what.

He walked to his inn by the most direct route. There was only one good place for an assassin to attack him—if assassin he was. Gaelan walked through it. No attack. He went straight to his room, bearing a lantern that the sleepy-eyed porter handed him. He opened the door into the darkness of his room, stepped inside, and blew out the lantern.

The garish light of the lantern should have spoiled the night vision of any assassin, if one waited in his room. And the sudden darkness should leave him blind.

But Gaelan wasn't blind. The shadows had welcomed his eyes since he bonded the ka'kari. No one was in his room. His magical seals on the windows remained.

He went to bed, not having confronted anyone, not having killed anyone. It was the right move. Patience was a lesson immortality should have taught him long ago.

Wisdom is boring.

* * *

"You're the best I've ever had," Gaelan said, after their fourth round of lovemaking.

"I get that a lot," Gwinvere said. Teasing, but keeping her distance, her professionalism. They lay together in her bedchamber, naked, her head on his chest.

Not from men who are 680 years old.

He tweaked her nipple in punishment. She laughed, and he joined her.

"Someone followed me here," Gaelan said. "One of your people?"

A half second of hesitation, a bit of tension in her body against him. A yes. But she didn't try to lie. "He followed you last night, too. I wanted to see if you'd report to anyone that I was trying to hire you."

"Mm-hmm. So what you want me to do is treasonous. And all you know is

that I don't have to report daily. Maybe I'm just on a long leash." So he had done the right thing. Killing a servant of the Nine mightn't have been the best way to start in a new city.

She traced designs idly on his chest, weighing her words. Finally, she said, "You're a risk I'll take. You've heard of wetboys?"

"Magic-using assassins?"

"There's only a limited number of them at any one time. No one ever knows how many. But they all swear a magically binding oath of fealty to the Shinga. They can't harm him or take contracts without his approval. Right now, there are only five wetboys. I want you to kill four of them."

"And the fifth?"

"Will train you. He was the man who followed you last night and today. Ben Wrable."

"Scarred Wrable?" Gaelan had heard the name, but not much else.

"He's got a few...quirks."

There was only one reason you'd get rid of all the Shinga's assassins if you were already on the Nine. "And after I kill these wetboys? You want me to kill the Nine as well? The Shinga?"

She sat up, and despite his satiety, he couldn't help but look at her body first, then her eyes. "No," she said. "I'm taking care of them in other ways."

"So you become Shinga, and I become a wetboy who hasn't sworn the oath of obedience to you. After using me, won't you find me too dangerous to keep around?"

A pause. "You're a clear thinker, Gaelan Starfire. I like that. Most men would have expressed some shock at being asked to kill. Or some doubt about a woman running the Sa'kagé."

I've known Irenaea Blochwei and Ihel Nooran. No doubts. "So?" he said instead.

"You'll look into my history, of course. See how I've treated prostitutes who retire. Find out how I treated rivals who ended up working for me. See what place malice and vengeance hold in how I rule."

"Tell me." He would check, too, of course, but he liked to hear it from the woman herself.

"Vengeance only when my power is in question. Not for personal satisfaction. I don't throw away tools lightly. Especially sharp ones. If I send you after four wetboys and you kill them all, and you learn the secrets of the fifth, how could I possibly threaten you? I would rather keep you."

“A pet?”

“An ally. A lover—insofar as you don’t interfere with my work or who I bed.”

“You won’t ever ask me to take the magical oath?”

“I don’t think I’ll need to.” She smiled. Beautiful.

“That’s not what I asked,” Gaelan said.

She smiled more broadly, pleased to be matched. “I won’t ever ask or compel you to take any sort of oath of obedience.”

“So if I do this, what are you going to give me? Aside from piles of coin and the best lovemaking of my life? Which I take as a given.”

She smiled again, then said, “A network of spies who will find the man you’re looking for.”

A fist of stone wrapped around Gaelan’s chest. A long moment. He couldn’t breathe. “Very well,” he said finally. “Assuming everything is as you’ve said. I’ll check, and you have this Scarred Wrable meet me at my inn tomorrow night.”

She smiled. Traced her fingers down the lines of his abs. Lower. “One more time?” she asked.

* * *

Scarred Wrable was a lanky man of Friaki ancestry. Round-cheeked and sallow-skinned, with hair like a sheaf of black wheat and the long, lean muscles of a martial artist. He was seated in Gaelan’s bed, in his locked room. The seals on the door were intact, the lock not obviously picked. Professional pride.

“Ben Wrable?” Gaelan asked. Gwinvere’s story had checked out, as he had expected it would. She was ferocious when crossed, but magnanimous when she could be. Generous to the best or those she suspected could be the best. Never one to destroy what could instead serve. Liked kids.

Ben rose and two daggers popped out of nowhere, flying, hilts first.

Gaelan snatched them out of the air, unthinking.

Ben grinned recklessly. “The Night Angels favor you,” he said.

“Night Angels?” Gaelan asked. His heart dropped into his guts. The wetboy opened the window, cracking the magical seals Gaelan had put on them.

Scarred Wrable said, “Come, the Devil’s Highway awaits. Follow as well as you can. First test.”

* * *

“I still don’t understand what this has to do with the ka’kari,” the little redhead Yvor Vas says. He is a member of a secret organization called the Society of the Second Sun. They are ostensibly dedicated to studying the ka’kari. In truth, they study immortality, which they believe the ka’kari gives. They’re a loose-knit organization, though, because for all that they hope otherwise, the ka’kari-given immortality can’t be shared, and most of them suspect as much.

“The ka’kari is what brought me to Cenaria in the first place,” I say.

“Looking for one? Or because the one you already have told you to come?”

I drain another flagon. Every since I bonded the ka’kari, it takes me a lot to get drunk.

* * *

It wasn’t the first time that Gaelan had traversed the rooftops of a city—both Rebus Nimble and Dav Slinker had had rocky relationships with the law. But both of those men had lived in cities with more stable construction materials. It was one thing to jump from wattle roof to wattle roof or from stone to stone, quite another to jump from slate and bamboo to thatch to crumbling terra cotta. Cenaria grew or mined very little of its own resources, so builders used whatever they could get.

In cities where you could trust your footing, you could move faster, take great leaps. Here, Gaelan and Ben Wrable moved at little more than a sprint, jumping lightly and landing lightly.

Gaelan landed on a section of terra cotta that crumbled under his feet, rolled, and sprinted on.

“Good!” Ben shouted from a far rooftop. “You pass. Second test!”

Ben crossed his arms over his chest and stepped off the peaked roof he was standing on.

Gaelan leapt across the gap to the roof and ran to the spot where the wetboy had disappeared. There was nothing there. Wind. Misting rain. He searched the darkness, muscles tensed. But even his preternatural sight didn’t help.

“Here,” a voice whispered.

Gaelan whipped around, daggers coming out, dropping low. There was nothing where the voice had come from.

Something slammed into the back of his knee and swept him off his feet. He fell, tumbling down the steep roof. The daggers went flying as his

fingertips fought for purchase on the slate tiles.

He fell off the roof. He swung his hands, expecting a gutter—some kind of edge. Nothing. There were only a few decorative dog gargoyles. He reached. Missed.

Phantom hands made of pure magic whipped out beyond his own fingers and snagged the gargoyle. He pulled so hard he ripped it right off—and threw himself back up and onto the roof.

He landed in a fighting stance, a Plangan style, almost ludicrously low, but helpful with the steep pitch of the roof here in case he had to use his hands.

But Ben Wrable was standing, arms folded, chuckling.

“Looks like you don’t know everything yet, sword swinger.”

“You can throw your voice,” Gaelan said.

Ben smiled.

“You won’t catch me like that again,” Gaelan vowed.

Ben walked over to the edge, looked down at where the dog gargoyle lay shattered far below. A crowd had gathered, alarmed, looking up. “Enough entertainment for the locals.”

* * *

“Where’d you pick up this style?” Gaelan asked as they sparred the next night. Ben Wrable’s style with the staff reminded him of Peerson Jules, one of the last non-crazy Lae’knaught underlords. That had been two hundred years ago.

“Made it up,” Ben said. “My own master only did bladed weapons.” He grabbed a pair of sais off the wall and slowly faded from sight. Embracing the shadows, he called it. In bright light, it reduced him to a man-size smudge of inky blackness—nothing close to invisibility, nothing close to what Gaelan could do with the aid of his ka’kari—but on a dark night it was pretty damn good.

He could muffle his steps, too.

They trained with every weapon imaginable. Ben was fast, and Gaelan was a fast learner. Ben was obviously impressed with the warrior, though Gaelan tried to hide some of his more impressive skills. Ben also mentioned other wetboy skills that he himself didn’t practice and gave Gaelan an enormous tome of poisons: “My master had, uh, an accident before he could teach me most of this, and I’m a bad reader.”

“That’s awfully generous.”

“Don’t worry. I’m charging Gwinvere for it.”

Ah. Ben couldn't read the coded notations, so the book was worthless to him, but it wasn't the kind of thing you could fence. Who'd buy it? If someone did, they might be your enemy. Far better to charge a friend full price and make it their problem. Clever.

Ben wasn't much help with disguises, though, saying with his scars he wasn't going to pass as anything other than himself.

He watched Gaelan shoot the bow, nailing a bull's-eye ten times in a row from a hundred paces—Gaelan was justly famous for his archery—and said, “Looks like we won't need to cover that.”

Gaelan couldn't master the art of throwing his voice, though. Ben could mimic voices perfectly, as well—something Gaelan was certain was akin to the more massive sorts of body magic he himself did.

Teaching Ben a few of his own tricks would have been only fair, but much as Gaelan liked Ben, the man was a stone killer. Gaelan wasn't going to teach a wetboy those abilities.

One day, two weeks in, they were fighting sickle against chain spear. They'd been working for ten hours, sweating copiously from the fire they kept going in the room to refill their Talents. Ben threw off his tunic and Gaelan saw the rest of the man's scars for the first time.

The Friaki were much more likely to scar with keloids than people of other nations: their bodies pushing scars outward, giving them a raised appearance. Ben Wrable was covered with self-inflicted keloid scars from his neck to his fingertips.

“I was a *gorathi*'s son. A prince, if you will. I was kidnapped as a young boy from my clan. A great insult to my father. In Friaku, a son is his father's strength. I was brought here and sold into the Death Games, where I excelled. When I won my freedom, I went back to Friaku, but my clan had been massacred long ago. No one knew their names. For all I know, the slave traders lied, and I'm just a peasant's son. I'll never know.”

The Friaki had a taboo against speaking about the dead. Ben might have spoken to his own uncle, and if he hadn't approached the subject just the right way, the man would have denied knowing anything. Not having been raised there, Ben wouldn't have known.

“What's that one for?” Gaelan asked. Most of the scars appeared to be gibberish. Designs interspersed with guesses at Friaki script. In the center of his chest, though, he had cut a large circle, split halfway by a single line, straight down his sternum. That scar had been cut and recut many times.

“I had a pendant, made of two iron horseshoe nails. It was taken from me when I came to train for the Death Games. I cut it into myself so I’d never forget. No one I spoke to in Friaku had seen it before. Have you?”

“No,” Gaelan lied. Ben Wrangle was a man cut off from a home he would never know. A man who’d been destroyed while still a child. A man trying to hold on to one small thing, driven near madness trying to hold on to his Friaki identity, because he sure as hell didn’t belong anywhere else.

Besides, referents change, especially the referents of universal symbols like lines and circles. And it had been a long time since Gaelan had lived in Friaku.

But the truth was Gaelan just didn’t have the heart to tell Ben what it really meant.

* * *

There is no heroism.

There is no justice.

There is no heaven.

Gaelan wasn’t dressed in black. It wasn’t night. He wore a plain blue tradesman’s tunic and a big, worn hat, and he had his cloak draped over his lap. He was sitting on the ruined base of an old statue—long since torn down—and eating a loaf of bread and cutting sausage to go with it. The sun was going down, and this Warrens market bordering the Plith River was beginning to close for the day. A few stalls would stay open for another hour or so, hawking hot food for those heading home. But the boat shops that came and docked and sold their wares were already pushing off, not willing to spend the night docked in the crime-ridden Warrens.

It was busy, but not packed. Gaelan saw his target enter the market from the far side. He was a plain man, could have been a tradesman himself. But Gwinvere’s sketch had been very good. It was the wetboy, Nils Skelling. He was reputed to be the best man alive with an axe, despite his small stature. Great climber. Fearless swimmer. Excellent in unarmed combat, said to have killed fifteen Lae’knaught Lancers with his bare hands. Said to have quite a sense of humor, too. Nils was walking along the edge of the pier. The crowd tended to be thinner there, because sometimes when the crowd suddenly swelled, those at the edge would get pushed into the sewage-befouled water.

A wetboy wasn’t worried about such a thing.

There is no sixth sense.

There is no hell but life, and death is worse.

Gaelan coughed a few times, pounded his chest, and walked, still eating, cutting a piece of sausage. Among the bustling, wheezing, sniffing masses, he might as well have been invisible.

The wetboy passed between Gaelan and the water. In his eyes, Gaelan saw murder. It was enough. Gaelan slammed the knife into the man's kidney. A lethal blow, and so painful you couldn't cry out. In an instant, with the hand under his folded cloak, Gaelan clipped a lead weight to the wetboy's belt, and with a hand of magic, he propelled the man gently toward the water.

Still walking purposefully, putting distance between them, Gaelan faked another loud coughing fit to draw attention to himself as the wetboy sank to his knees, and slipped right off the pier into the water. The slight sound of him hitting the waves was covered by Gaelan's coughing. The weights dragged the body into the depths. And it was done.

There is no glory.

There is no light.

There is only victory.

* * *

"You can't tell me once you start killing," Ben Wrable said. "I'm still bound by my oath to the Shinga. If I *know* of a *direct* threat, I'll have to go report it. You understand? Not 'I'll have to do it because I'm so honorable'—it's a magical compulsion."

Clever Ben Wrable, he knew exactly the bounds of his compulsion, and with Gaelan, he was pressing right against them.

"If the Shinga orders it, I'll have to try to kill you, Gaelan. So you need to do your business before they even know it. I won't have taught you everything, but if you're successful, I can teach you the rest at our leisure. I report to the Shinga in two weeks. He doesn't always remember to do so, but if he asks if I know of any threats to him, I'll have to answer honestly."

"Fair enough." Two weeks. So the water clock was grinding away. Good. Gaelan liked to feel the press of time. It had been too long.

* * *

Like most of the wetboys, Polus Merit worshipped Nysos, the god of blood, semen, and wine. He was already half drunk when Gaelan ran into him in the brothel. He was a big man, fatter than you'd expect a wetboy to be. But then, his specialty was poisons. And claymores.

Another product of the Death Games. He'd been an apothecary who got too far into debt to the wrong people and had been forced into slavery, along

with his wife and children. They hadn't made it—Gaelan knew no more than that, and didn't want to. When Polus had been pushed into the Death Games, no one thought he'd last a day. But he'd taken to it with relish. Now, he was forty-five, bald, paunchy. Still powerful under the fat, and with a massive Talent.

He took a deep drink of a Sethi red, looked down the bar at Gaelan. "You've got a dangerous look about you," Polus said.

"Bugger off. You're not my type," Gaelan said. He had seen the man's eyes. There was murder-guilt there. It was enough.

Polus scooted to a seat closer to Gaelan. "You know how other gifts sometimes come along with the Talent?"

"Hey, fuck off."

"I got a bit of prophecy. Not enough to be useful, you know. Just glimpses. My wife dead, things like that to keep me up late at night. I had this vision that I was going to be killed by forty men, all at once. Queer, huh? But now that you're here, I see they're just you. Durzo Blint."

What? That wasn't a name Gaelan had ever had. It wasn't a name he'd ever even heard.

Polus Merit chuckled quietly, drunkenly. "Don't suppose I could stop you. You know, it's foretold now and all." He grinned. "Worse times to go, I guess. My favorite girl was working tonight. She did me right. This wine could have been better, but, meh." Polus shrugged, pulled out his coin purse, put it on the bar and waved to the server, a woman in low-cut dre "See this all gets to Anesha, would you?"

"You drunk, Polus?" the server asked.

He smiled at her. Shook his head.

When she left, Polus turned back to Gaelan. "I don't ask you to make it fair. Gods know I don't deserve that. But I'd appreciate it if you make it quick."

Gaelan looked at him like he was crazy. But he felt transfixed. A talent in prophecy. If the man started shouting everything he saw, Gaelan could be wrecked instantly. Forty men in one. Who could that be but an immortal?

"I'm going to go for a walk," Polus said. "Down along the river." He got up.

After the man left, Gaelan went out the back way quickly, in case Polus was setting up an ambush in front or in back. The man wasn't there. Gaelan made it up to the rooftops, jumping from wall to wall. He strung his long bow

and checked his arrows.

True to his word, Polus Merit was walking slowly, not two blocks away, along the edge of the Plith. A quiet section where it would be easy to dispose of the body. A hundred paces away.

~You're better than this. This isn't you, Acaelus.~

It is now. Half a breath out, the blessed stillness before murder.

He released the arrow. Perfect shot, base of the skull. Instant death. Polus crumpled.

When he went to roll the body into the river, Gaelan found a note in Polus's hand. It had just two words: "Thank you."

* * *

Nigh unto seven centuries ago, there was a magical conflagration at the Fall of Trayethell, the Battle of the Black Barrow. Magic to blot out the sun, to rend the earth. Magic seen two hundred leagues away, and felt across the oceans.

It was said that on that last day, having lost friends, wife, and battle, and hope, the Emperor Jorsin Alkestes took up the two greatest magical artifacts ever made or found. He was the first and only man ever to hold both at once. With them, his magical abilities, already legendary, were amplified a thousandfold. He took in all the power of Iures and Curoch—and it killed him.

But it didn't kill him alone.

* * *

"What do you know of the ka'kari?" I ask Yvor Vas, draining my fourth ale.

"I know about them," the freckled idiot says. "Otherwise why would I be talking with you? And you know *everything* about them, so why are you asking?"

"I know what I know. What I don't know is what you *think* you know. And if you use that tone again, you'll be picking it up from the floor."

"What tone?" Yvor asks, petulant.

My fist crosses the boy's jaw. He flies off his stool and lands flat on the floor. Most satisfying.

"That tone," I say.

"You broke my fucking tooth!" the boy complains. His lips are bleeding.

"My knuckles, on the other hand, are pristine. Odd."

Hot, barely restrained rage flares in his eyes. The boy picks himself up and takes a moment to master his anger. I watch his eyes closely. Finally, he says,

“There were six ka’kari. One for each of Emperor Jorsin Alkestes’ Champions of Light. They were created by Jorsin’s archmage, Ezra, during the Battle of Black Barrow. The Society of the Second Sun believes they confer immortality—the bearers of the ka’kari can still be killed, but if not killed, you live forever. Maybe not forever, but at least seven hundred years, which seems close enough to me. Most in the Society believe that you were originally Shrad Marden, bearer of the blue ka’kari, friend of Jorsin Alkestes.”

Friend? Did you have friends, Jorsin? I thought I was one, but now I’m not so sure. “And you? What do you believe?”

“I think you were and are Eric Daadrul, the bearer of the silver ka’kari. Impervious to blades and able to form them in your hands by thought alone.”

* * *

“There’s a small rumor that Polus Merit might be dead,” Gwinvere Kirena said. “Something about him giving a fortune to one of my girls.” They were in one of her houses, in a small, well-appointed library. She was wearing a casual blue dress that still managed to accentuate her curves.

“Can you hush it up?” Gaelan asked.

“This is the kind of thing that can get worse if you try to quash it. Wetboys frequently disappear for weeks at a time. Sometimes they give money to their favorite rent girl in case they don’t come back. It doesn’t mean anything yet. I don’t know the girl well enough to lean on her and be completely sure what she’d do. So I’d say we have four nights.”

“Who’s next?” Gaelan asked.

“Saron and Jade Marion.”

“Two at once? Siblings?”

“Husband and wife. More than a little crazy.”

“Anyone who chooses this work is crazy,” Gaelan said.

“They have a seven-year-old son.”

“So I’m making an orphan. Fantastic.”

“They’re already teaching him the business. Crazy.”

“Oh, so now I’m doing him a favor?” Gaelan asked.

“In this life, some people are finished before they begin, Gaelan.”

“You’ll take care of him.”

Her eyebrows lifted. *First you were worried for him, now you want me to kill him?*

“I mean, provide for him,” Gaelan said. “You’re not going to put him on

the street. He gets a chance. Small as it may be.”

“Done,” Gwinvere said.

* * *

They were beating the boy when Gaelan arrived, landing on a neighbor’s rooftop. He supposed that should have made it easier. The Marions’ home, bamboo and rice paper with a steep slate roof, was in a nicer area on the southeast side of the city. The home itself was small, but had a large yard, surrounded by a high fence so their neighbors couldn’t watch them train.

It was oddly careless for two wetboys, but then Gaelan supposed if you had a child, it was hard to move surreptitiously between safe houses. And any robber who accidentally came here would quickly wish he hadn’t. And if someone knew he was attacking two wetboys and decided to do it anyway, he was probably powerful enough to find you regardless.

Still. Odd.

And it was the mother doing the beating. “Faster, Hubert! Pathetic. You disgust me.” The boy was curled up on the ground, and she was punching him, her fist stabbing in past his blocks, efficient, crisp, remorseless.

Will you serve me in this?

~What are you doing, Acaelus?~

Serve me or abandon me, black heart. I’m going.

Gaelan leapt from the roof. There were good tactical reasons to do this—there were doubtless booby traps on the fence, on the wetboys’ own roof, and at their doors—but really, he just wanted to get it over with.

Problem with jumping—you can’t change course in midair. Jade screamed something just before Gaelan descended. Gaelan’s sword was out, aimed squarely for Saron’s back, going for the heart.

But Saron jumped instantly, and used his Talent to do so.

Gaelan’s sword struck deeply enough that the blade stuck and was ripped out of his hands by the force of Saron’s jump.

Gaelan hit the ground off-balance and rolled, popping to his feet and throwing a pair of knives at Jade.

She stood still, apparently stunned by his appearance.

The knives passed through her, and she *popped*.

Mirage! Of course. Jade was a master of illusions.

A door slammed. The back door of the house. Jade had already escaped.

The boy had risen. He was staring at Gaelan wide-eyed.

“Sorry, kid,” Gaelan said. “Nothing to do with you.” He jumped over the

fence into the neighbor's much smaller yard—approximately where he thought Saron should have landed.

Saron was in the yard, standing on trembling legs, leaning against a sapling for support. Gaelan's sword had entered his back and exited below his belly button. The force of his jump had yanked it downward, but it hadn't cut all the way through his pelvis—so the blade was sticking out of his crotch, angled down. Blood dripped off the sword's point like piss dribbling off a penis.

"You won't get it," Saron said.

"Get what?" Gaelan asked, playing along.

"The red stone. The fire ruby."

The red ka'kari? What the hell? "You're dying," Gaelan said. "If you don't make your move soon, you won't have the strength."

Saron shifted, and a gush of blood and worse splurged onto the ground fr his groin. A knife tumbled out of his nerveless fingers. He grunted, face contorted in pain. "Too late. Curse you."

"How much does she love you?" Gaelan asked quietly.

"What?" Saron's eyes suddenly showed a bit of real fear.

Gaelan lowered his voice further. "Because I want to know if I'm going to have to chase Jade down, or if she'll come back if I stand here talking to you long enough."

~You're despicable, Gaelan.~

Spare me.

"I'll kill you!" Saron shouted.

Raising his voice. Doubtless to cover the approach of—

Gaelan threw himself to the side.

A spear pierced the air where he'd stood a second before. A mistake. She should have attacked with projectiles. She thrust again immediately as he moved in. The blade cut his tunic as it passed between his torso and his arm.

Gaelan locked his elbow around the spear's shaft, trapping it as he twisted, bringing up his other hand and snapping the shaft below the spearhead before Jade could snatch it back.

Give her this. She'd been overcome by emotion for a moment—wanting to kill him immediately so she could tend to her dying husband—but she was cool now. She instantly lashed out again with the broken weapon, using it as a staff, unfazed.

Unarmed, Gaelan dodged behind the sapling where Saron was leaning,

dying. Her strike rattled the whole tree, making Saron groan.

She stabbed at Gaelan, right past Saron. Once, twice. Gaelan dodged, dodged, then blocked, absorbing the blow and throwing her back. He ripped his sword free of Saron's back.

Jade was blonde, with appropriately green eyes, hard and skinny. A muscular beauty.

She began spinning the staff in great, fast circles, while she circled Gaelan widdershins. Saron was groaning again. He'd fallen to the ground, propped awkwardly against the little sapling.

Jade made no move to attack, her face a mask of intensity, stance low, staff whirling.

Gaelan would have been fooled if his eyes weren't so good, ka'kari aided. But there was a slight shimmer to Jade's figure. And that spinning staff made no noise as it cut the air.

Dropping low, Gaelan spun, attacking *behind* himself, his sword cutting a gleaming arc—batting aside a shadowy sword as the real Jade, shadow-cloaked, attacked from behind him.

Gaelan's lightning-fast riposte cut halfway through her neck. Jade dropped instantly. His blade had cut her spine. Arterial blood jetted over his face as his sword slid out of her neck. The shadows she'd wrapped around her body retreated. Disappeared.

The illusion of her—her distraction, her doppelganger—continued circling, whirling the phantasmal staff. Jade had split it off from herself when Gaelan had turned away to grab his sword. Then she'd wrapped herself in shadows, and had circled him the opposite way. Clever.

The illusory Jade circled all the way to Gaelan, intent on her staff.

At Gaelan's touch, the illusion fell apart.

When Gaelan turned again, Jade was dead. Her illusions had outlived her.

Not so different, are we?

The Marions' little boy, Hubert, came running into the yard with a little, child-sized crossbow in his hands, crying. "Father! Faather!"

Not ten paces away, wrapped in shadows, gathered in the arms of the night, Gaelan watched. With one hand, he rubbed his temples.

"Mother! Mother!" The boy, the orphan, ran to her corpse.

Darkness.

* * *

Gwinvere guided Gaelan to the basin, washed the blood off his hands. He

knew he should snap out of it, but he was wooden, leaden, numb. Dead.

Jade, blond hair stained into a black halo around her head, neck cut at a sharp upward angle from collarbone to chin.

Jerissa, petite Cenarian with brown eyes, expression blank, never again to show her quirky grin, dress matted with blood from a single sword stroke through her heart.

Ysel, round Ymmuri face angelic, chest crushed, every rib snapped.

Lithel, kinky Ladeshian hair pulled into many small braids, eyes open, blackballed from the blow that had crushed the back of her skull.

Hannan, still a beauty at seventy, hair like ivory, smile lines by the dozen. The bruise prints of strangling hands around her neck.

Direla, her dusky Sethi skin fine, nose patrician, hair almost blue-black. The violence that had killed her hadn't left any marks—at least not on her face.

Fayima, features so demolished he wouldn't have been able to recognize the young princess if not for the little mole on the side of her neck.

Platinum-blond Ahnuwk. Aelin, the fire dancer. Kir, exiled duchess turned pirate.

And on it went. A line of women, young and old. His wives and lovers from over the centuries. All dead. All dead because of him. One way or the other.

He turned and saw a line of dead children. His children. His dead. His fault.

Gwinvere pulled his tunic over his head like he was a child. He was standing beside a steaming tub of water. He hadn't even noticed it being brought in.

* * *

“You've come a long way, Tal Drakkan—or is it Gaelan Starfire now? So hard to run from the past, isn't it?” The man sat astride his fine midnight warhorse. A self-satisfied smirker. He was the kind of man you knew was headed for a fall, but not for a while.

Gaelan sneered. Said nothing. Continued walking home.

“You're a duke, not a dirt farmer. This is beneath you. You're a warrior! I want you to fight for me, Gaelan Starfire,” Baron Rikku said, “and I won't take no for an answer.”

“Oh yes you will.”

* * *

Gaelan was working in the field, repairing his fence after the heaving and shifting of the ground in the winter, stacking the big, flat rocks back into their places while his big, shaggy aurochs looked at him quizzically.

“Sure,” he told the big one he called Oren. “Pretend you won’t try to jump this soon as I turn my back.”

Gaelan found one of the boulders that had slipped and rolled from its place. He looked left and right to see if any of the neighboring farmers were within sight. They already wondered how he was able to do so much of the heavy work by himself.

No one.

He grabbed the boulder and, with his Talent surging, picked it up and set it back in place.

“Not bad? Huh?” he said, slapping his hands free of dirt and mud.

Oren didn’t seem impressed.

Gaelan liked being a farmer. Enough physical labor to keep him fit without the use of body magic. The imposition of order on the chaos of nature. The straight lines of plowing. The simplicity of his neighbors, who didn’t ask anything of him except a helping hand once in a while for a barn raising.

He fixed a full league of fence before darkfall. And walked home, dirty, sweaty, and happy.

When he got home, on the big oak out front, he found his daughter and his pregnant wife. Hanged.

He dropped to his knees. Screamed.

* * *

“Seraene. Alinaea.” The names came out as sobs.

“Shh. Shh.”

Gwinvere held him in her bed, her arms around him, protective. She stroked his hair over his temples.

When he woke in the morning, Gwinvere was already up. She looked at him with what he swore was real desire in her eyes. “Take me,” she said. “You’ll feel like yourself again afterward.”

Truth was, he *already* felt better. He’d slept the memories off like a bad batch of mushrooms. But only a fool would turn down a woman as beautiful as Gwinvere Kirena. He pulled her into his arms.

* * *

“There’s only one kill left,” Gwinvere said. She was in her dressing gown, her cheeks still flushed from their lovemaking, but she was abruptly all

business.

Gaelan sat up in bed. “Who?”

“Scarred Wrable, Gaelan. He’s the only one who knows who you are. He’s the only one who can guess what I’m doing. And he’s been ordered to report to the Shinga. Tonight. I’m sorry to ask you to do this, but it’s the only way.”

* * *

“*Arutayro*?” a voice asked next to Gaelan’s table. It was an old wetboy tradition—an oath of nonaggression for one hour. The inn was dark, smoky with tobacco and riotweed. The kind of place where no one asked questions of strangers.

,” Gaelan affirmed. On the table, wrapped in a sash, were all of his weapons.

Ben Wrable set his sash full of weapons on the table next to Gaelan’s. He sat. “I didn’t expect you to know *arutayro*, Gaelan. That’s old. Real old.”

“So am I.”

“I doubt that. I bet I’m older than you are,” Ben said.

“Hmm. How long we got?”

“I’m to report in three hours. So if you’re going to try to kill me, you’ll need to—”

“I’m not.”

“Go on, Gaelan. Give me the dignity of honesty. I know Gwinvere. I don’t take it personal. Her back’s to the wall. If you let me go, the other wetboys will...” He trailed off. His eyebrows climbed. “You already got the others?”

Gaelan nodded.

Ben cursed. “Even Jade and Saron?”

“They were tough.”

Ben whistled. Thinking he was being summoned, a serving man came over. “Uh, two ales,” Ben said. The man left. “If you don’t kill me, Gaelan, the Shinga will order me to kill *you*. You’ll only push your problems back a day or two. And he’ll send the bashers and all the apprentice wetboys after you.”

“I lied to you about that symbol you cut into your chest,” Gaelan said. “I have seen it before. It’s a pictogram. Literally, it means split-head. Moron. Idiot.”

Ben’s face darkened, fingers twitched toward his sash. Then he laughed ruefully. “I could tell you were lying the other day when you said you’d never seen it before. By the Night Angels’ balls. *Moron*. And I prove it by

cutting the fucking thing into my chest over and over for fifteen years. No wonder the Friaki villagers wouldn't say what it meant. And you, you're an asshole for telling me."

Gaelan nodded, acknowledging the truth of it. Took a drink. "Then I found this," Gaelan said.

He put a pendant on the table. It was two horseshoe nails, one bent into a circle, the other piercing it most of the way. Ben's lost pendant, the very one that had been taken from him when he was put into the Death Games.

A quick sneer, like *You expect me to believe this? I told you what it looked like!* was replaced by puzzlement. Ben flipped the pendant over, looking at the scores and scratches in the iron, matching them with memories over a decade old. He looked up sharply. His voice was stricken, awed. "How did you possibly find—"

Gaelan lifted the pendant from Ben's limp hand. Suspended from the chain, the weight of nail flipped the symbol upside down: instead of being split from the top down, the circle was split from the bottom up. Gaelan said, "You were a kid. You copied the symbol wrong, Ben. *This* symbol means split-heart: The one who's claimed half of my heart. It means beloved, favorite. It's the kind of thing a gorathi war chief would give only to his firstborn son."

He gave the pendant to the wide-eyed wetboy.

Ben put the pendant on. He threw back his ale, cursed quietly. Then he held the pendant in his palm—holding it like that, picking it up from how it naturally hung, it was inverted. That was how he would have seen it last when he was a boy, when it had been taken from him. That was how he'd gotten it wrong. He chuckled, delighted. "You are something else, Gaelan."

~I'm still surprised you didn't put contact poison on the pendant. Every time I want to give up on you, Acaelus, you do something like this.~

"I memorized that book you gave me," Gaelan said.

"What book? The poisons book? How'd you memorize the whole—how'd you even read the— Oh shit." Ben looked at his empty flagon. "You motherfucker. You took an oath! *Arutayro*—"

"Doesn't apply. The poison I used isn't lethal. It'll just knock you out for a while. In a way, I'm upholding *arutayro*, because now I don't have to kill you."

Ben weaved in his seat. "How? How'd you do it?"

"Paid someone in the kitchen to dose both. The way I mixed it, the

poison's heavier than the ale, so it mixes only in the bottom of the flagon."

"But if I hadn't finished my ale..."

"You always finish your ale, Ben."

Ben blinked, slowly, holding himself up with his elbows. "But if you don't kill me..."

Gaelan left a pile of coins on the table and nodded to the serving man. "I'll have to kill the Shinga. I know."

Ben's head slumped to the table.

* * *

Shirtless, Gaelan Starfire was arming.

On the opposite side of the room, Gwinvere Kirena was dressing.

He held up a light gray tunic mottled with black to his chest. Looked at it in the mirror. Rejected it for a black tunic mottled with gray.

She held up a fiery red dress to her chest. Looked at it in the mirror. Rejected it for a sapphire blue that was lower cut.

He strapped a pair of throwing knives to one muscular thigh.

She pulled a silk stocking up one shapely thigh.

He pulled a weapons harness around his shoulders, knotted it tight.

She took a deep breath as a servant cinched her corset.

He clipped his mask around his neck.

She clipped a jeweled necklace around hers.

He slid a knife into a wrist sheath.

She spritzed perfume on her wrist.

He looked at her in his mirror and found her looking at him in hers. He was an Angel of Death. She was a goddess.

He bowed to the mirror. "Good luck tonight, my lady."

She curtsied, face grave. "Good luck, Master Starfire." She didn't say *my lord*. But then, she wouldn't.

He jumped out the window.

* * *

Gaelan jumped across a narrow alley, landed on the peak of a crumbling inn's roof, ran across the narrow beam like an acrobat, jumped and fell six paces onto a lower, flat roof.

"I am Sa'kagé, a lord of the shadows. I claim the shadows that the Shadow may not."

The clouds broke over the city. A giant crack of thunder. Downpour.

"I am the strong arm of deliverance. I am Shadowstrider. I am the Scales of

Justice. I am He-Who-Guards-Unseen. I am Shadowslayer. I am Nameless.”

He jumped into one of the few standing sections of an ancient aqueduct. Quick footsteps in the rain puddling in that venerable stone waterway. Leapt.

Below, a rich carriage pulled by four horses was rattling through the streets.

“The befouled shall not go unpunished.”

Landed on a mouldering thatch roof, had to scramble on all fours to keep from slipping off as the stuff tore apart.

“My way is hard, but I serve unbroken. In ignobility, nobility. In shame, honor. In darkness, light. I will do justice and love mercy.”

The man in the carriage was one of the Nine, the Cenarian Sa’kagé’s master of coin, Count Rimbold Drake. Brilliant young man, perceptive but not ambitious. He’d stumbled into his position on the Nine by his sheer competence. Gwinvere didn’t believe he cared who was the Shinga. So this was mercy.

Gaelan jumped across the street directly above the carriage. He flipped and whipped a knife downward at incredible speed.

The blade punched through the carriage’s roof. It quivered in the carriage seat between Count Drake’s legs.

Count Drake gaped at the hole in the carriage roof, dribbling rain. The dagger was an inch from his groin. There was a note tied around the dagger’s handle.

The count took the note. The words were written in a tight, angular hand: “Not A Miss.”

* * *

Gaelan watched the men guarding one entrance to the Chamber of Nine. There were at least six entrances he knew, but this one was the most direct. Three of the men were simple bashers—just muscle to stop passersby from entering the wrong alley. Men good in a brawl.

Will you serve me in this?

Gaelan pulled the shadows around himself and crawled, clinging to a thatch roof, keeping a low profile.

~She’s not a good woman. You must know that.~

Three archers squinted against the downpour, doing their best to protect their bowstrings under their cloaks.

No, but she’s the least bad.

Two spotters stood on balconies, one studying the street, the other looking

over the roofs.

~Giving power to the bad to fight the evil. A devil's argument.~

Gaelan reached the edge of the building. Two more bashers were rit underneath him. *I am a devil.*

~It was to you Jorsin Alkestes administered the Oath of Sa'kagé, Acaelus. You could lead the Sa'kagé yourself.~

Leadership is best left to the idealistic and the arrogant.

It would be best if he could get in without killing anyone, but he couldn't do that alone. Not without the ka'kari's help.

~Very well, Acaelus. I shall serve.~

Gaelan felt the ka'kari form in his hand. He squeezed it and it sheathed his entire body. He dropped into the alley.

He wasn't quite invisible. Not in the rain that hit his body and gave a weird distortion to the air. But the alley was narrow. The rain came in gusts and fits as the wind blasted it periodically into the cold, damp space between the rickety buildings.

One blast threw a torrent as he walked between a torch-carrying basher and the wall.

"Herrick, you see something over there?" the basher said to another.

"No. Want to check it out?"

The basher swallowed—but went toward what he'd seen.

Gaelan was already past them. He came to the door. Rubbish was piled high in front of it to disguise what it was, but the door opened in, so the rubbish was no problem. Gaelan wrapped sound-dampening magic on the hinges and looked once more at all the men guarding it.

When no one was looking, he opened the door and slipped inside.

Inside, there was nothing but a short hall, a false wall that lay open, and a stone ladder beyond it. Gaelan got on the ladder and began sliding down.

He was almost all the way down when someone carrying a torch stepped into the stone tube and began climbing. Whoever he was, he was nimble as a monkey, climbing fast for a man with only one hand on the ladder.

Gaelan stuck one foot against the wall, then hopped, stuck the other foot to the other wall. Pushed his hands against opposite walls and flattened himself against the back of the tube. Being invisible wasn't much help if someone actually bumped into you.

The climber paused just below Gaelan, switched which hand was carrying the torch. It brought the flaming brand within inches of Gaelan's face.

But the ka'kari, true to its word, true to its nature, devoured the light, devoured the heat, turning it into its own magic, making Gaelan feel even stronger.

The climber continued on, and Gaelan slid to the bottom of the narrow tube and stepped out, invisible, into the Chamber of Nine.

The Nine's subterranean chamber was a horror and a wonder. A relic of a bygone age. It was circular, but with a ceiling so high it disappeared in darkness, giving the impression that a person inside was at the bottom of an inescapably deep pit. The floors, the walls, even the stone desks and chairs were carved with every kind of loathsome animal: rats and snakes and hydras and spiders and twisted dogs and skeletons. All glittering obsidian, sharp, cutting angles. The numerous entrances were well-hidden. A crescent-shaped dais held the benches for the Nine, and over them, the Shinga's thne. The only illumination came from an oil-filled ridge set in the wall behind the Nine, casting all of them in shadow.

But their hoods were back now. Some had shed their cloaks completely, like Gwinvere. Gwinvere's beauty was sword and armor both.

Scarred Wrable had told Gaelan, "You never get to see the whole drama. When you're a wetboy, you only come in at the end."

"The fact is," a tall, fat man was saying, "I think we need to be ware of this young Gyre lord, Regnus. I don't think we can control him."

A muscular man with lots of scars and a flattened nose—he had to be Pon Dradin, head of the Bashers—said, "I say we continue to support Bran Wesseros. If—"

"He's too martial. The Gunders—"

"Are morons," the tall, fat man said. "Every last one of them."

"Where is Scarred Wrable? I thought he was supposed to report by now," a hawkish little man said.

"Enough," the Shinga announced, standing. "I've decided."

Then his head fell off.

The ka'kari made a very sharp blade.

The Shinga's head hit the table in front of him and rolled off. His body collapsed a moment later.

Nine pairs of eyes widened. For an instant, everyone was speechless. Then the room was plunged into darkness.

Gaelan flipped into the center of the chamber. Some of the men shouted, but the room was warded against eavesdropping. Six recovered enough to

pull alarum ropes—each of which had been cut.

Opening the oil channel full, Gaelan waited until the oil circled the entire chamber, then ignited it with a spark. Light flooded the room, astounding in its suddenness.

He stood in the middle of the chamber, ka’kari coating him in a skin, his arms folded, head down. He opened his eyes, lifted his head, shrugged the cloak off his shoulders.

The Night Angel was a vision of judgment. Big, frowning, narrowed eyes. Blank face. Mouth a slit. Skin slick. Utterly alien. Without compassion. The darkness seemed to ripple about him as if he were afire with dark flames.

The men of the Nine had reacted to their terror and surprise differently. One was hiding beneath his table, barely peering out. Pon Dradin, the Basher, was ready to fight, meaty hands folded into fists. Count Drake was seated, pensive, hands tented.

Gwinvere’s eyes blazed, furious.

“I,” Gaelan said, “am Sa’kagé. It is time for a change in leadership. Any questions?”

Gaelan strode to Gwinvere. She expected him to kill her, become Shinga himself. He could see it in her face, her brave, haughty, furious face. “Gwinvere Kirena,” he said. “Shinga Kirena.” He bowed before her.

A moment later, recovering first, Count Drake bowed low in obeisance before her.

Pon Dradin moved forward, saying, “Over my dead—”

Gaelan crossed the distance between them in a blink, and punched Pon’s fist so hard it shattered all the bones in the big man’s hand.

“No,” Gwinvere said, as the man sank back, holding his ruined fist. She was recovering already, mentally nimble as a cat. “Not over your dead body, Pon Dradin. Your services are required.”

* * *

A pair of stricken bashers carried the old Shinga’s body out of the chamber. A third carried his head. All looked very nervous about the figure standing cloaked in the middle of the room.

They left as quietly as they could, and shut the door behind themselves, leaving the figure alone.

Gwinvere pull back her hood. “Where *the fuck* are you?” she demanded.

Gaelan shimmered back into visibility. It was just the two of them.

“You *asshole*,” she said. “I didn’t need you to hand me the shadow throne!”

In one more day, the last piece of my plan—”

“I didn’t do it for you,” Gaelan said.

“What?” she snarled.

“I needed you to know I’m not a threat to you.”

“So you do it by beheading my predecessor? Pretty fucking clever way to be unthreatening,” Gwinvere said.

Gaelan let the storm rage right past him, cool. “I don’t want to be Shinga. I could have taken it, just now. You know it, and I needed you to know that I know it, too. This work—working for you—suits me. I want to stay, and you’re the greatest danger to me. Now you know I’m a tool for you, but not a threat to you. You don’t have anything I want.”

Her eyes were hard. Then she flashed a sudden smile. “I wouldn’t say that,” she said.

He cocked an eyebrow. Of course he still wanted her body, but it seemed beneath her to mention it now. Too obvious for the subtle Gwinvere Kirena.

“I found him, Gaelan. I found out where the man who killed your family is hiding.”

* * *

“And that’s what took me to Chateau Shayon,” I say.

“Baron Rikku was the man who hanged your wife and daughter?” Yvor Vas asks.

I stare at him. Hard.

Shit, so there were some discrepancies in the story I told him. And usually I’m such a good liar.

“Sorry.” The skinny redhead gulps. I’ve never given an interview like this to anyone in the Society. He can’t squander this opportunity. If things don’t exactly match up, he’ll just have to puzzle them out later. He’s afraid of me, but he’s ambitious, too. And too focused on the wrong things. “Can I...can I see it?”

I stare at him.

He raises his hands in surrender. “I don’t mean touch it or hold it or anything. I just, you know, want to see it.”

I put a platinum ball on the table, polished, lustrous, covered with spidery runes. I roll it around with a fingertip. Tiny blustreams of fire fill every rune, then I snatch it back, make it disappear into me.

His eyes are wide. “Lord Eric Daadrul. The bearer of the Globe of Edges himself. Sir. It’s such an honor to meet you.”

“Mmm.”

“How’d you bond it?” he asks. Like it’s a throwaway question.

“Your own blood, need, and the ka’kari’s element.” Like it’s a throwaway answer.

“Its element? How’s that work with the silver ka’kari?”

“Easy. Got stabbed. Had blood, need, and metal in me all at once.”

He nods, filing it away. Then his voice hardens. “I’m gonna need you to hand over that ka’kari, Lord Daadrul.”

“Why?” I ask. “You’ve already got the red.”

He blinks.

“And no man can bond two ka’kari at the same time,” I say.

Yvor Vas talks. Buying time, maybe. Trying to process. “It’s for my sister. She’s dying. We have—had—the same disease. I bonded the red on accident and I got well. So I know it’ll save her. You have no idea what I’ve had to do to get this far. What it’s cost me. What I’ve done. Now hand it over. You might be impervious to blades, sir, but you’ll burn like any man.”

“So it’s not for Gwinvere?” I say.

A quick grimace. “What do I care about some whore?”

It tells me two things. First, he knows Gwinvere. Second, she really didn’t send him after the ka’kari. To learn that fact is the whole reason I told him my story, most of it true. I figured Gwinvere had to be in the Society of the Second Sun or she never would have found me in the first place, but I didn’t know—and I needed to know—if she’d try to kill me for the ka’kari. Immortality is a tempting prize.

“That’s really noble,” I say. “Murdering someone to save your sister, I mean.”

“I just listened to your story. You’re the last man in the world who ought to preach to me.”

~He does have a point there.~

Yvor stands and squeezes the red ka’kari in his hand. It covers his body with a slick red sheen. It burns away his clothing. He’ll have to work on that.

“Fight me,” he says. “I don’t know how to get the ka’kari if you die while it’s still inside your body.”

I stand, wobble. Kids these days. “You poisoned the ale,” I say. “You poisoned *the ale*?”

“Ironic, huh?”

I fucking hate irony.

He throws a fireball at me.

I bring up the black ka'kari in a shield. With a whoosh, it devours the fireball.

“That’s not the Globe of Edges,” he says.

“And I’m not Eric Daadrul.” With a little sleight of hand, as if they’re coming out of my skin, I produce five little metemptingic balls: blue, green, silver, white, gold. They roll uncertainly around the tabletop.

“You have all of the ka'kari?” he asks, terrified, but greedy too, not yet understanding.

“Counterfeits,” I say. For just such occasions as this. I roll out my fake of the red ka'kari last.

Fear in his eyes, despite the suit of fire on his skin. Confusion. The Society only knows about six ka'kari—and what he’s just seen doesn’t fit any of them.

“You didn’t lure me here to take my ka'kari,” I tell him, sadly. “I lured you here to take yours.”

A conflagration.

I’m hurled through the back wall of my safe house into the marsh surrounding it. I knew fire might be a problem. That’s why I chose this place. No need to burn down the whole Warrens—not that they’re much worth saving. I land calf deep in marsh mud.

The black ka'kari coats my body as Yvor comes out of the burning doorway.

Fireballs burn smoking, hissing trenches in the marsh. I dodge, flip, disappear.

He throws a fan of flames in a full circle.

A splash as I land behind him.

He whips around, throws jets of flame.

They curl around my torso, burning the night on either side of me. What hits me is mostly absorbed. The ka'kari burns blue iridescence at every joint and curve of my body as it devours the fire.

I ram two daggers deep into his chest.

The torrent of fire trails off, trickles down to nothing. His ka'kari drops into the mud, leaving him naked, mostly held up by my daggers. He looks me in the eyes and says, “I should have...”

He dies.

I let him slide off the daggers, drop into the muck. I pick up the red ka'kari

from where it's hissing hot in the marsh mud.

There are no words. There is no light.

* * *

Nigh unto seven hundred years ago, there was a great fire in Trayethell. A light so bright it burned men to pillars of ash many leagues away. That fire was Jorsin Alkestes: mad man, savior, king. The war was lost long before that last battle was fought. But fight he did, teeth bared, laughing, incandescent. A light so bright that the great men and women of an age flocked to him like moths to a flame, and burned.

On the last day, Jorsin Alkestes, murderer and friend, took Curoch and Iures in hand at the same time. A lesser man would fear to touch one. But he, magnificent he, he bent the Blade of Power and the Staff of Law to his will.

As krul, the twisted un-men, swarmed over the last barricades and spilled through the streets, slaughtering women armed with little more than sticks and children throwing rocks, one man fled who had never fled in his life: Acaelus Thorne, unwanted treasure in his hands, left the fight. Under orders. He crept like a coward, outran the krul who chased him, stood among the corpses and filth and cowards at the mouth of the pass into the Fasmeru Mountains, and looked back. The krul were a black blankeheld tight over the face of the burning city.

A light bloomed from the castle's highest balcony. From a hundred points lightning cracked down. Every flying narokghul dropped from the sky, becoming a smoking, bleeding rain. The bleak clouds rolled back in an instant, as if shoved aside by giants' hands, and the light swelled ever brighter. Acaelus staggered up to a group of deserters, leaning against a granite wall at the mouth of the pass, catching their breath, weaponless, bloodied, their eyes dim, the eyes of the shamed and broken. But now those eyes reflected one sharp light. Those who had slumped now stood.

Titans rushed for the castle, smashing through three-story stone houses, stone shrapnel turned into dust motes dancing in the light of a rising sun. The earth heaved upward, just once, sweeping men and krul and titans and a hundred other kinds of monsters off their feet. Even Acaelus fell. Dogs whined. It was as if the earth herself were flinging her power into this enterprise. Into Jorsin Alkestes.

And then, just as they all stood again—obliteration. Light that blinded. Light that burned. Light that boiled the bloody river. Light that purified. Light that roared.

A rushing wind filled the blindness that followed, Acaelus knew only that it felt as if his very body were afire, veins burning inside his skin. Time shattered, scattered, thrown about and blown about. He came to himself, and the first thing he saw was his own blackened skin. Smooth, burnt perfect black, like he'd been dipped in tar.

Acaelus stood, feeling curiously whole, unconscionably strong. There were pillars of ash around him, howling winds already blowing away the remnants of what had been men. Against the granite wall, etched by light, shadows stood. Ghosts of the men who'd been vaporized. One shadow was different. One shadow stood, defiant, one fist raised, edges perfect, outline crisp—Acaelus's shadow. The others were dim, washed out. Bleached by a flood of light that had continued even after the men who had cast them were burned away. But through all the fire, one man had stood.

The black skin retreated into his body, unbidden, leaving him naked. His clothes and even his armor had been burned away.

Acaelus looked at leagues of wasteland. Nothing stirred but what was stirred by the wind. Death had taken the throne from Jorsin. A gleaming black dome huddled where once Trayethell had stood.

~Acaelus. Mourn later. There is work to be done.~

The voice came from inside his own head. The black ka'kari. It had saved him. It had been a secret gift from Jorsin Alkestes, who had told bull-headed Acaelus Thorne to flee, to live.

But Jorsin hadn't said he meant Acaelus to live forever.

I'll come back and take it off your hands, Jorsin had promised with his roguish grin when he'd given Acaelus the treasure. The liar. He was wan, washed out, but his eyes burned with a fevered intensity. He'd been spending every day fighting and every night with archmage Ezra, making...something. Never sleeping. Working on some last-minute salvation that Acaelus only slowly came to understand wasn't coming.

Jorsin Alkestes: emperor, genius, archmage, tyrant. Jorsin Alkestes was a light so bright he left shadows standing centuries hence. The semblances of men, burned onto granite walls. And one shadow was perfect above all others. A walking, breathing shadow. A shadow as flickering as the ghosts thrown by a candle, as mutable as a king's promises. A shadow who devoured light and life.

Light is, but a shadow undefined becomes simply darkness. And light had been too long denied the man who had been Acaelus Thorne. He was thin,

fraying, a bowlful of smoke. He was becoming undifferentiated darkness.

What if the light itself had been a lie?

* * *

Mount Tenji is the tallest mountain in Ceura. When I was a kid, people used to make pilgrimages up the mountain. It's been too cold for that for centuries. It's a volcano, but it hasn't erupted in more than a hundred years. Some smoke from time to time is all.

I reach the crater on the sixth day of climbing. I'm buried deep in many layers of coats. The wind is blowing snow everywhere.

You're good for a lot of things, I think at the black ka'kari, but keeping me warm isn't one of them.

~You left off part of Oath of Sa'kagé the other day.~

Noticed, did you?

~"Until the king returns, I shall not lay my burden down."~

I pause. Jorsin Alkestes is dead. He's not coming back.

~Gather the ka'kari. Bring them all together. It's time.~

Impossible.

~Impossible? For you?~

And if I'm successful? I have a fraction of Jorsin Alkestes' power, and I'm unstoppable. He was my king, but I'm not sure he wasn't mad at the end.

The ka'kari doesn't answer. It knows me well enough to know when I have to muddle through things on my own.

There is only one question: Does what you do, every day, have meaning? Acaelus had thought his actions did, once. For centuries, he'd put his faith in Jorsin Alkestes. A long dead king. A madman who'd sworn he would return. Even from death. A madman who'd left madness everywhere in his wake.

Acaelus had given his all. He was tired of giving. He was tired of believing. It was too much. It was finished.

~He loved you, you know. More than anyone. Do you trust your old friend?

~

I stand on that windblown peak for some time.

"Not to be a god."

I toss the red ka'kari into the crater.

I strap the *schlusses* to my feet, and head down the mountain at great speed. Ordinarily, the speed and danger give me a fierce joy. But now I'm a husk. I'm like the great sequoys of Torra's Bend, leaves still green but the heart rotted out, hollow, waiting, just waiting for the storm to come along that

will end it all. A mummery of life. More alone than I've ever been.

The volcano won't destroy the red, I don't think. But it does put it beyond reach. Either the red will get caught partway down, but not all the way in the magma, and it will be impossible for anyone to live long enough to grab it, or it will make it all the way down, soak up as much power as it can hold—a huge amount—and then release it. Over and over.

I'm halfway down the mountain when the volcano explodes.

Guess it made it to the magma.

I turn my back on the volcano as I've turned my back on my king. Fire pursues me, but emptiness can't be threatened. Emptiness holds nothing dear. Emptiness knows no fear.

* * *

The Nameless is working on his new face in Gwinvere's mirror. It's important that he do this here, so she can see it and have no doubts that the new him is really him still. But body magic hurts like a motherfucker, and he doesn't want to show her the pain. He drinks more. He's drunk, and it takes heroic amounts of alcohol to get him drunk. The black ka'kari negates poisons, for the most part—a fact Yvor Vas probably would have liked to know.

"You're not as pretty as Gaelan was," she says, finally, looking at his blond hair, thin blond beard, and pockmarked cheeks. She isn't pleased with his drunkenness, but at least she doesn't seem afraid of his abilities.

"This was my first face. My real face, you could say, if such a thing had any meaning for me." Acaelus Thorne's face. A whimsical choice, perhaps a dangerous choice, but a shadow should bear some resemblance to the shape that cast it.

"Handsome, before the scars. A bit grim, with them," she says.

He grunts. What looks like pockmarks actually came from the acid blood spray of a monster in the last battle, where Jorsin Alkestes died, when Trayethell fell. The mages at the time hadn't been able to heal them. Now, he doesn't want to erase that last memento of the man who might have been his friend.

From downstairs, he can hear little kids shouting, playing. Street kids, guild rats, the slave-born who have no place to go. Gwinvere takes them in sometimes. They call her Momma K. Right now, the wretches are bickering—not exactly what you hope for when you're showing kindness, but often all you get when you show kindness to those who can't return it.

Gwinvere says, “The captain of the city guard has reported you dead, without reporting your name. Anyone who digs will figure out that Gaelan Starfire was killed in a fire in the Warrens. There will be some rumors that Gaelan ran afoul of the previous Shinga. Since deceased. A literal dead end.”

“Very satisfying,” the nameless emptiness says.

“So what’s your new name?” Gwinvere asks.

“Durzo,” he says into his flagon as he raises it for another drink. “Durzo Flint.” He’d often carried surnames that meant something, and it seems to be a tradition among some of the wetboys as well. Flint: sharp, dangerous, brittle. Fair enough.

“Durzo Blint?” she asks, misunderstanding him.

From Flint to Blint. A portmanteau of *flint* and *blunt*, perhaps. The sharp and the blunt. A paradox smashed together. Or just smashed. A descent from meaning to meaninglessness. It seems appropriate. He suddenly remembers Polus Merit’s prophecy. Polus had said Blint, too, hadn’t he? “That’s right,” he says. “Durzo Blint.” He drinks. *Here’s to you, Polus Merit. You fat pain in the ass.*

“Well, *Durzo*, I’ve got a job for you,” Gwinvere says. “Someone who needs killing.”

Gwinvere Kirena is strength incarnate. Perfection in flesh. Utterly flawless, and somehow thereby utterly sterile, impervious. When he looks at Gwinvere, he doesn’t see a woman who will ever be caught off her guard. She will never be hanged, or strangled, or have her throat cut, or have her brains beaten out. She’s too strong for that, too smart.

Gwinvere doesn’t need him, so he can’t fail her. She is the cold safety of a lean-to in the rain, not the false comfort of a stone castle that will fall on your head and destroy you utterly. She extends a scrap of paper.

Gwinvere likes kids. An odd juxtaposition. A scrap of humanity.

This is what I get. This is what I deserve. Scraps.

He doesn’t look at the paper. He doesn’t take his eyes off of hers, mirroring him. He doesn’t care whose name is on the note. He doesn’t care what they’ve done. “I’ll take it,” he says.

Meet the Author

Brent Weeks was born and raised in Montana. After getting his paper keys from Hillsdale College, Brent started writing on bar napkins, then on lesson plans, then full time. Eventually, someone paid him for it. Brent lives in Oregon with his wife, Kristi. He doesn't own cats or wear a ponytail.



Author Brent Weeks. Photo © Travis Johnson Photography.

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Lightbringer Book One
by Brent Weeks

Chapter 1

Kip crawled toward the battlefield in the darkness, the mist pressing down, blotting out sound, scattering starlight. Though the adults shunned it and the children were forbidden to come here, he'd played on the open field a hundred times—during the day. Tonight, his purpose was grimmer.

Reaching the top of the hill, Kip stood and hiked up his pants. The river behind him was hissing, or maybe that was the warriors beneath its surface, dead these sixteen years. He squared his shoulders, ignoring his imagination. The mists made him seem suspended, outside of time. But even if there was no evidence of it, the sun was coming. By the time it did, he had to get to the far side of the battlefield. Farther than he'd ever gone searching.

Even Ramir wouldn't come out here at night. Everyone knew Sundered Rock was haunted. But Ram didn't have to feed his family; *his* mother didn't smoke her wages.

Gripping his little belt knife tightly, Kip started walking. It wasn't just the unquiet dead that might pull him down to the evernight. A pack of giant javelinas had been seen roaming the night, tusks cruel, hooves sharp. They were good eating if you had a matchlock, iron nerves, and good aim, but since the Prisms' War had wiped out all the town's men, there weren't many people who braved death for a little bacon. Rekton was already a shell of what it had once been. The *alcaldesa* wasn't eager for any of her townspeople to throw their lives away. Besides, Kip didn't have a matchlock.

Nor were javelinas the only creatures that roamed the night. A mountain lion or a golden bear would also probably enjoy a well-marbled Kip.

A low howl cut the mist and the darkness hundreds of paces deeper into the battlefield. Kip froze. Oh, there were wolves too. How'd he forget wolves?

Another wolf answered, farther out. A haunting sound, the very voice of the wilderness. You couldn't help but freeze when you heard it. It was the kind of beauty that made you shit your pants.

Wetting his lips, Kip got moving. He had the distinct sensation of being followed. Stalked. He looked over his shoulder. There was nothing there. Of course. His mother always said he had too much imagination. Just walk, Kip. Places to be. Animals are more scared of you and all that. Besides, that was one of the tricks about a howl, it always sounded much closer than it really was. Those wolves were probably leagues away.

Before the Prisms' War, this had been excellent farmland. Right next to the Umber River, suitable for figs, grapes, pears, dewberries, asparagus—*everything* grew here. And it had been sixteen years since the final battle—a year before Kip was even born. But the plain was still torn and scarred. A few burnt timbers of old homes and barns poked out of the dirt. Deep furrows and craters remained from cannon shells. Filled now with swirling mist, those craters looked like lakes, tunnels, traps. Bottomless. Unfathomable.

Most of the magic used in the battle had dissolved sooner or later in the years of sun exposure, but here and there broken green luxin spears still glittered. Shards of solid yellow underfoot would cut through the toughest shoe leather.

Scavengers had long since taken all the valuable arms, mail, and luxin from the battlefield, but as the seasons passed and rains fell, more mysteries surfaced each year. That was what Kip was hoping for—and what he was seeking was most visible in the first rays of dawn.

The wolves stopped howling. Nothing was worse than hearing that chilling sound, but at least with the sound he knew where they were. Now... Kip swallowed on the hard knot in his throat.

As he walked in the valley of the shadow of two great unnatural hills—the remnant of two of the great funeral pyres where tens of thousands had burned—Kip saw something in the mist. His heart leapt into his throat. The curve of a mail cowl. A glint of eyes searching the darkness.

Then it was swallowed up in the roiling mists.

A ghost. Dear Orholam. Some spirit keeping watch at its grave.

Look on the bright side. Maybe wolves are scared of ghosts.

Kip realized he'd stopped walking, peering into the darkness. Move, fathead.

He moved, keeping low. He might be big, but he prided himself on being light on his feet. He tore his eyes away from the hill—still no sign of the ghost or man or whatever it was. He had that feeling again that he was being stalked. He looked back. Nothing.

A quick click, like someone dropping a small stone. And something at the corner of his eye. Kip shot a look up the hill. A click, a spark, the striking of flint against steel.

The mists illuminated for that briefest moment, Kip saw few details. Not a ghost—a soldier striking a flint, trying to light a slow-match. It caught fire, casting a red glow on the soldier's face, making his eyes seem to glow. He affixed the slow-match to the match-holder of his matchlock and spun, looking for targets in the darkness.

His night vision must have been ruined by staring at the brief flame on his match, now a smoldering red ember, because his eyes passed right over Kip.

The soldier turned again, sharply, paranoid. “The hell am I supposed to see out here, anyway? Swivin’ wolves.”

Very, very carefully, Kip started walking away. He had to get deeper into the mist and darkness before the soldier's night vision recovered, but if he made noise, the man might fire blindly. Kip walked on his toes, silently, his back itching, sure that a lead ball was going to tear through him at any moment.

But he made it. A hundred paces, more, and no one yelled. No shot cracked the night. Farther. Two hundred paces more, and he saw light off to his left, a campfire. It had burned so low it was barely more than coals now. Kip tried not to look directly at it to save his vision. There was no tent, no bedrolls nearby, just the fire.

Kip tried Master Danavis's trick for seeing in darkness. He let his focus relax and tried to view things from the periphery of his vision. Nothing but an irregularity, perhaps. He moved closer.

Two men lay on the cold ground. One was a soldier. Kip had seen his mother unconscious plenty of times; he knew instantly this man wasn't passed out. He was sprawled unnaturally, there were no blankets, and his mouth hung open, slack-jawed, eyes staring unblinking at the night. Next to the dead soldier lay another man, bound in chains but alive. He lay on his side, hands manacled behind his back, a black bag over his head and cinched tight around his neck.

The prisoner was alive, trembling. No, weeping. Kip looked around; there was no one else in sight.

“Why don't you just finish it, damn you?” the prisoner said.

Kip froze. He thought he'd approached silently.

“Coward,” the prisoner said. “Just following your orders, I suppose?”

Orholam will smite you for what you're about to do to that little town."

Kip had no idea what the man was talking about.

Apparently his silence spoke for him.

"You're not one of them." A note of hope entered the prisoner's voice. "Please, help me!"

Kip stepped forward. The man was suffering. Then he stopped. Looked at the dead soldier. The front of the soldier's shirt was soaked with blood. Had this prisoner killed him? How?

"Please, leave me chained if you must. But please, I don't want to die in darkness."

Kip stayed back, though it felt cruel. "You killed him?"

"I'm supposed to be executed at first light. I got away. He chased me down and got the bag over my head before he died. If dawn's close, his replacement is coming anytime now."

Kip still wasn't putting it together. No one in Rekton trusted the soldiers who came through, and the alcaldesa had told the town's young people to give any soldiers a wide berth for a while—apparently the new satrap Garadul had declared himself free of the Chromeria's control. Now he was King Garadul, he said, but he wanted the usual levies from the town's young people. The alcaldesa had told his representative that if he wasn't the satrap anymore, he didn't have the right to raise levies. King or satrap, Garadul couldn't be happy with that, but Rekton was too small to bother with. Still, it would be wise to avoid his soldiers until this all blew over.

On the other hand, just because Rekton wasn't getting along with the satrap right now didn't make this man Kip's friend.

"So you *are* a criminal?" Kip asked.

"Of six shades to Sun Day," the man said. The hope leaked out of his voice. "Look, boy—you are a child, aren't you? You sound like one. I'm going to die today. I can't get away. Truth to tell, I don't want to. I've run enough. This time, I fight."

"I don't understand."

"You will. Take off my hood."

Though some vague doubt nagged Kip, he untied the half-knot around the man's neck and pulled off the hood.

At first, Kip had no idea what the prisoner was talking about. The man sat up, arms still bound behind his back. He was perhaps thirty years old, Tyrean like Kip but with a lighter complexion, his hair wavy rather than kinky, his

limbs thin and muscular. Then Kip saw his eyes.

Men and women who could harness light and make luxin—drafters—always had unusual eyes. A little residue of whatever color they drafted ended up in their eyes. Over the course of their life, it would stain the entire iris red, or blue, or whatever their color was. The prisoner was a green drafter—or had been. Instead of the green being bound in a halo within the iris, it was shattered like crockery smashed to the floor. Little green fragments glowed even in the whites of his eyes. Kip gasped and shrank back.

“Please!” the man said. “Please, the madness isn’t on me. I won’t hurt you.”

“You’re a color wight.”

“And now you know why I ran away from the Chromeria,” the man said.

Kip was on the verge of bolting, but the man wasn’t making any threatening moves. And besides, it was still dark. Even color wights needed light to draft. The mist did seem lighter, though, gray beginning to touch the horizon. It was crazy to talk to a madman, but maybe it wasn’t too crazy. At least until dawn.

The color wight was looking at Kip oddly. “Blue eyes.” He laughed.

Kip scowled. He hated his blue eyes. It was one thing when a foreigner like Master Danavis had blue eyes. They looked fine on him. Kip looked freakish.

“What’s your name?” the color wight asked.

Kip swallowed, thinking he should probably run away.

“Oh, for Orholam’s sake, you think I’m going to hex you with your name? How ignorant is this backwater? That isn’t how chromaturgy works—”

“Kip.”

The color wight grinned. “Kip. Well, Kip, have you ever wondered why you were stuck in such a small life? Have you ever gotten the feeling, Kip, that you’re special?”

Kip said nothing. Yes, and yes.

“Do you know *why* you feel destined for something greater?”

“Why?” Kip asked, quiet, hopeful.

“Because you’re an arrogant little shit.” The color wight laughed.

Kip shouldn’t have been taken off guard. His mother had said worse. Still, it took him a moment. A small failure. “Burn in hell, coward,” he said. “You’re not even good at running away. Caught by ironfoot soldiers.”

The color wight laughed louder. “Oh, they didn’t *catch* me. They recruited

me.”

Who would recruit madmen to join them? “They didn’t know you were a —”

“Oh, they knew.”

Dread like a weight dropped into Kip’s stomach. “You said something about my town. Before. What are they planning to do?”

“You know, Orholam’s got a sense of humor. Never realized that till now. Orphan, aren’t you?”

“No. I’ve got a mother,” Kip said. He instantly regretted giving the color wight even that much.

“Would you believe me if I told you there’s a prophecy about you?”

“It wasn’t funny the first time,” Kip said. “What’s going to happen to my town?” Dawn was coming, and Kip wasn’t going to stick around. Not only would the guard’s replacement come then, but Kip had no idea what the wight would do once he had light.

“You know,” the wight said, “you’re the reason I’m here. Not here here. Not like ‘Why do I exist?’ Not in Tyrea. In chains, I mean.”

“What?” Kip asked.

“There’s power in madness, Kip. Of course...” He trailed off, laughed at a private thought. Recovered. “Look, that soldier has a key in his breast pocket. I couldn’t get it o, not with—” He shook his hands, bound and manacled behind his back.

“And I would help you why?” Kip asked.

“For a few straight answers before dawn.”

Crazy, and cunning. *Perfect*. “Give me one first,” Kip said.

“Shoot.”

“What’s the plan for Rekton?”

“Fire.”

“What?” Kip asked.

“Sorry, you said one answer.”

“That was no answer!”

“They’re going to wipe out your village. Make an example so no one else defies King Garadul. Other villages defied the king too, of course. His rebellion against the Chromeria isn’t popular everywhere. For every town burning to take vengeance on the Prism, there’s another that wants nothing to do with war. Your village was chosen specially. Anyway, I had a little spasm of conscience and objected. Words were exchanged. I punched my superior.

Not totally my fault. They know us greens don't do rules and hierarchy. Especially not once we've broken the halo." The color wight shrugged. "There, straight. I think that deserves the key, don't you?"

It was too much information to soak up at once—broken the halo?—but it *was* a straight answer. Kip walked over to the dead man. His skin was pallid in the rising light. Pull it together, Kip. Ask whatever you need to ask.

Kip could tell that dawn was coming. Eerie shapes were emerging from the night. The great twin looming masses of Sundered Rock itself were visible mostly as a place where stars were blotted out of the sky.

What do I need to ask?

He was hesitating, not wanting to touch the dead man. He knelt. "Why my town?" He poked through the dead man's pocket, careful not to touch skin. It was there, two keys.

"They think you have something that belongs to the king. I don't know what. I only picked up that much by eavesdropping."

"What would Rekton have that the king wants?" Kip asked.

"Not Rekton you. You you."

It took Kip a second. He touched his own chest. "Me? Me personally? I don't even own anything!"

The color wight gave a crazy grin, but Kip thought it was a pretense. "Tragic mistake, then. Their mistake, your tragedy."

"What, you think I'm lying?!" Kip asked. "You think I'd be out here scavenging luxin if I had any other choice?"

"I don't really care one way or the other. You going to bring that key over here, or do I need to ask real nice?"

It was a mistake to bring the keys over. Kip knew it. The color wight wasn't stable. He was dangerous. He'd admitted as much. But he had kept his word. How could Kip do less?

Kip unlocked the man's manacles, and then the padlock on the chains. He backed away carefully, as one would from a wild animal. The color wight pretended not to notice, simply rubbing his arms and stretching back and forth. He moved over to the guard and poked through his pockets again. His hand emerged with a pair of green spectacles with one cracked lens.

"You could come with me," Kip said. "If what you said is true—"

"How close do you think I'd get to your town before someone came running with a musket? Besides, once the sun comes up... I'm ready for it to be done." The color wight took a deep breath, staring at the horizon. "Tell

me, Kip, if you've done bad things your whole life, but you die doing something good, do you think that makes up for all the bad?"

"No," Kip said, honestly, before he could stop himself.

"Me neither."

"But it's better than nothing," Kip said. "Orholam is merciful."

"Wonder if you'll say that after they're done with your village."

There were other questions Kip wanted to ask, but everything had happened in such a rush that he couldn't put his thoughts together.

In the rising light Kip saw what had been hidden in the fog and the darkness. Hundreds of tents were laid out in military precision. Soldiers. Lots of soldiers. And even as Kip stood, not two hundred paces from the nearest tent, the plain began winking. Glimmers sparkled as broken luxin gleamed, like stars scattered on the ground, answering their brethren in the sky.

It was what Kip had come for. Usually when a drafter released luxin, it simply dissolved, no matter what color it was. But in battle, there had been so much chaos, so many drafters, some sealed magic had been buried and protected from the sunlight that would break it down. The recent rain had uncovered more.

But Kip's eyes were pulled from the winking luxin by four soldiers and a man with a stark red cloak and red spectacles walking toward them from the camp.

"My name is Gaspar, by the by. Gaspar Elos." The color wight didn't look at Kip.

"What?"

"I'm not just some drafter. My father loved me. I had plans. A girl. A life."

"I don't—"

"You will." The color wight put the green spectacles on; they fit perfectly, tight to his face, lenses sweeping to either side so that wherever he looked, he would be looking through a green filter. "Now get out of here."

As the sun touched the horizon, Gaspar sighed. It was as if Kip had ceased to exist. It was like watching his mother take that first deep breath of haze. Between the sparkling spars of darker green, the whites of Gaspar's eyes swirled like droplets of green blood hitting water, first dispersing, then staining the whole. The emerald green of luxin ballooned through his eyes, thickened until it was solid, and then spread. Through his cheeks, up to his hairline, then down his neck, standing out starkly when it finally filled his lighter fingernails as if they'd been painted in radiant jade.

Gaspar started laughing. It was a low, unreasoning cackle, unrelenting. Mad. Not a pretense this time.

Kip ran.

He reached the funerary hill where the sentry had been, taking care to stay on the far side from the army. He had to get to Master Danavis. Master Danavis always knew what to do.

There was no sentry on the hill now. Kip turned around in time to see Gaspar change, transform. Green luxin spilled out of his hands onto his body, covering every part of him like a shell, like an enormous suit of armor. Kip couldn't see the soldiers or the red drafter approaching Gaspar, but he did see a fireball the size of his head streak toward the color wight, hit his chest, and burst apart, throwing flames everywhere.

Gaspar rammed through it, flaming red luxin sticking to his green armor. He was magnificent, terrible, powerful. He ran toward the soldiers, screaming defiance, and disappeared from Kip's view.

Kip fled, the vermilion sun setting fire to the mists.

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