



BROKEN  
RING

ADAM LEE

**BROKEN RING**  
*Book Two of the Caliel Cycle*

---

**By**  
**Adam Lee**

© 2014 by Adam Lee  
All rights reserved.

*No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the express written permission of the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.*

*First published March 2014*

*For more information, see:*  
<http://www.adamleebooks.com>  
<http://www.daylightatheism.org/publications>

*Adam Lee*

*Prologue*

## **Shadows**

In an utterly dark room, the silence of the night was broken by the faint rasping of metal on metal and the scraping of a latch. A line of light leaked into the darkness as a door creaked open, throwing a square of brightness onto the floor. A dark silhouette flashed through the bright pool, followed by two more like it. Finally, the door creaked into motion. The pool of brightness thinned to a line, then vanished as the latch clicked shut, and the room was again left in darkness.

All three moons in the sky were new, but the stars provided just enough light to outline the shape of a corridor, open on one side but bounded by a row of pillars, looking out onto a dark courtyard. The progress of the shadows down the colonnade was swift, silent, invisible; the silhouetted forms blended seamlessly with the dark, and there was not so much as a padded footstep on stone tile for anyone to hear. They reached the end of the corridor and made a turn.

Up ahead, a sudden brightness. The three shadowed forms edged towards a corner, pressing themselves against the wall where the dark remained to hide them. The corridor beyond had walls of black-speckled white marble, decorated near the top with a strip of fresco painted in green and gold. On one side of that corridor was a wooden door, and directly across from the door was a torch stand, its flickering yellow and red flame melting away the dark. A young servant in gray robes stood there, holding the smaller torch he had used to light it. Without noticing the intruders, the servant walked off down the corridor, turning the corner where they lay in wait.

One of the black forms lunged out and caught the servant around the neck. Steel glinted briefly, and what had begun as a cry of alarm became a soft, gurgling gasp. The body went limp, but the attacker caught it and dragged it into the shadows. The servant's torch fell to the floor and went out in a wisp of smoke. Another of the shadows leaped out into the illuminated corridor. The torchlight fell on a humanoid form, garbed in black wrappings from head to toe save for the eyes, before the torch stand went out as well, and the corridor was plunged into darkness.

Raspings and scratchings echoed quietly in the dark. By the faint starlight, it was just barely possible to see one of the black-clad intruders, bent over and doing something to the latch, while the other two waited on either side of the door. The latch clicked, the door opened, and the three shadows slipped into the room beyond.

The room within was a small foyer with a floor tiled in a mosaic pattern, empty except for a torch stand in the corner. At the other end lay another door. The three intruders started for the inner door, but before they reached it, the torch stand flared to life. All three of them recoiled from the sudden dazzle, and a woman stood revealed by the light. Tall and dark of

## BROKEN RING

skin and hair, she leaned in the corner with a faintly mocking smile, as if she had been expecting them.

The woman drew out a long, slender metal baton that had been strapped to her forearm. Holding the wand out before her, she spun it deftly in her hand as she murmured a single word under her breath. As it spun, it elongated, and solid red light like flame ignited from nowhere to cling to its length. As the wand lengthened into a staff, one end split and diverged into five long, sharp tines. The rake stopped spinning, and Wyre Tehliari regarded the intruders calmly.

“Tell me what you’re doing here,” she said, “before I kill you.”

They looked at each other, then all reached up and removed their hoods. One was elven, tall and slender and sharp of features, with alert, bright eyes and short fiery hair the color of an autumn forest. The other two were human, one with light bronze skin and darker hair, the other paler, with short blond hair and blue eyes. All three drew weapons: the darker-skinned human, twin broad-bladed knives with spikes on the hilts that protruded between his fingers where he gripped them; the lighter-skinned one, a short-handled hammer with a blunt head; and the elf, a long, straight, sharp sword. All their weapons were made of the same material, a dark, smooth metal with a silvery-blue luster. Wyre’s eyes widened; she edged back against the wall, snarling, holding her rake up like a shield.

“Wyre Tehliari,” the elf said. “Your crimes are too numerous to list. You have betrayed us and everything we stand for. You dishonor the name of Atma Knight. By order of the High Council, we have come to exact the punishment for treason.”

Each of the three Atma Knights whispered a word, and their weapons sprang to life. Twin knives glowed with pulsating, bright green; the war mace burned with coruscating yellowish-orange; the longsword blazed with dark blue flame.

Wyre pushed herself up straight, spinning her rake through her hands. “The High Council can’t do its own bloody work, I see. Doesn’t it make you feel filthy to be used as their hired killers?” She grinned darkly. “Does it unsettle you to know that I once performed this task you now perform? I did it many times. I did it well. They *trained* me as an assassin for that very purpose! And when I decided I’d no longer be the faithful tool they wanted, they cast me aside, and here I stand now. Come, if you dare,” she taunted them. “Come take me, if you can. Only know that one day, it may be *you* on the other end of the assassin’s knife.” She laughed mockingly, then uncoiled like a striking panther and lunged at them.

But even as she struck, the three Atma Knights—who had not so much as blinked at her rant—split apart with perfect precision. Her rake seared past them and sank into the wall, making the stone bubble and run, but she pulled it free and whipped it up to catch the longsword’s descending blade. Red fire met blue, and light flashed in a searing discharge; sparks flurried, and an acrid scent rose from the contact.

With their weapons locked, Wyre snarled into the Atma Knight's face, then flung him aside in a surge of strength and rolled out of the way as a war mace smashed into the floor. Half-melted mosaic tiles sprayed from the impact. Wyre knocked the Knight that wielded it staggering with a vicious sweep-kick to the leg, then rolled back and leaped to her feet to deflect a burning green knife with the shaft of her rake. Sparks flurried as the rake spun in her hands, deflecting another stab, then a slash aimed at her face, and she reversed direction and thrust. The Atma Knight with the knives stepped smoothly backwards to avoid being impaled on the lethal tines of her weapon.

"Fools!" she snapped at them. "You'll kill us all this way!"

The Atma Knights regrouped, circling her, while she tried to keep her eyes on all of them at once.

"The High Council has informed us that that is an acceptable outcome," the elven one said.

Wyre screeched in fury. "Idiots! Do you have no will but the High Council's?"

All three of them rushed her at once, but Wyre moved with stunning speed. She leaped into the air and one foot shot out, catching the Atma Knight with the mace just below the chin in a vicious kick. His head snapped back and he staggered, and as Wyre landed, her rake flashed in a burning red arc. It deflected the two knives in twin showers of sparks, then whirled. She dodged out of the way as the longsword slashed past her head, and her rake stabbed out and plunged into the chest of the Atma Knight who wielded it.

Without even waiting to see him fall, Wyre pulled her weapon loose and turned to confront the other two, but she was too late. The Atma Knight with the knives swept his hand out in a blow that slashed the spiked hilt of one knife across Wyre's face, gashing her on the cheek, and the other swung his mace. It crashed into Wyre's hand, flesh sizzled, and she howled with pain. Her rake dropped from her hands, shrinking, its fire diminishing as it rang on the floor. It dwindled to an ordinary metal wand before it stopped rolling. The Atma Knight with the mace swept Wyre's legs from under her, and she fell hard. The other pounced on her, pinning her down, and raised his knives to plunge into her heart.

White fire bright as the sun flared through the room. A solid pillar of searing light lanced from the inner doorway, striking the Atma Knight like a battering ram. He was hurled away from Wyre and crashed into the wall with bone-shattering force. His knives' fire died before he hit the tiles, their magic extinguished along with the life of their wielder.

The other Atma Knight lunged at Wyre in a last, desperate attempt, but before his hammer could fall another column of white fire slammed into him, knocking him away in mid-leap. His mace's fire died as it clashed to the tiles, still gripped in a lifeless hand.

Painfully, Wyre arose. Cradling her burned hand, she retrieved

## BROKEN RING

her weapon from where it had fallen and, wincing, slid it back into its straps.

“You took too much time,” she accused her rescuer. “There were three of them. I can’t fight that many by myself.”

A man clad in a loose white robe walked into the foyer. The torch flared up brightly as he entered, providing enough light for him to dispassionately examine the body of the one Wyre had struck down. The Atma Knight’s longsword, its fires dead, had spilled from his limp hands. Five smoldering holes pierced his chest.

“You did well enough by this one,” the newcomer said with a hint of mockery, then more angrily, “How did they get in here? I’ll have the guards flogged.”

Despite her wounds, Wyre’s voice was sultry as she approached him. “They were Atma Knights, dearest. No ordinary guards could have stopped them.” She did not ask for them to be spared the flogging, though. “We can deal with it tomorrow. Let us return to bed.”

“If you wish it,” the man said suggestively as she curled herself around him.

Wyre looked up into his bright blue, half-mad eyes. “I do,” she purred. “We need our... sleep, dearest. Great things await in the morning.”

“You’re right, of course,” Kyrian Daimon agreed, grinning at her. They retreated into the bedroom, the torch went out as the door shut behind them, and the sprawled bodies of the three Atma Knights were left alone, still and silent in the dark.

Adam Lee

Chapter I  
**Homecoming**

A winter night lay over the city of Ral Ardenite. Though the first snows of the year had yet to fall, a bitter, bracing cold pervaded the streets, and the few who were outdoors went well-muffled in heavy coats and cloaks. However, the great Vraxen Cathedral that towered into the starry sky was bright and alive. Yellow light glowed through its stained-glass windows, illuminating the demon knights enshrined there, and the red flame that burned at the top of its spire meant that an event of importance was to take place that night. Despite the merciless chill, a small crowd huddled before the main doors, waiting for a priest to emerge and announce what the night's ceremony would be.

Rumors swirled through Ral Ardenite like drifts of smoke, rumors that said the long-lost holy relic known as the Dark Heart had been recovered, that the warlord Tenche Sharaal was missing and presumed to be dead, that the commander Warde Kahliana had recently returned at the head of an army that had cut a swath through foreign lands such as had never before been seen in the history of Vraxor's people. As they always did, the rumors varied widely—even those that agreed the Dark Heart had been recovered rarely agreed exactly who had accomplished this monumental task—but a mood of excitement gripped the people. Despite the rapidly approaching snowfalls of winter, the city was jubilant.

In an upstairs room of the great cathedral, Myrren Kahliana stood before a wall-mounted mirror, examining her reflection in the silver-framed glass. She was a girl seventeen years of age, though something indefinable about her slim, pretty face made her appear much older, as if she had been through a lifetime already. Her raven-black hair came down to her shoulders, dark and lustrous in the light of the room, in sharp contrast to the dress she wore. Made of many layers of gossamer white, it flowed around her with each movement and fell in gracefully draped folds to her feet. However, even the dress was not her most stunning attribute; that distinction belonged to her eyes. Their irises were brilliant, deep violet, giving her a secretive yet penetrating appearance that often made those who did not know her feel uncomfortable under the scrutiny of her gaze.

Those violet eyes were frowning now. "Mother, I look like a fool in this."

"Hush, daughter," said the woman who was lacing up the back of the dress. "You are beautiful."

Myrren studied her reflection more carefully. She did not *feel* beautiful, but she was used to her normal traveling clothes, high black boots and soft shirt and breeches of gray and brown. Compared to them, the dress was restrictive and awkward. "Are you sure?"

"Of course, dear," the woman murmured in a soft tone that

## BROKEN RING

sounded seductive even when she did not try to make it so. “Raine will melt before you, trust me. Now turn around and let me see you from the front.”

The woman Myrren turned to face was stunningly beautiful, and more than a little of Myrren’s features could be seen in her high cheekbones and graceful profile. However, the woman’s skin was almost white, paler than any human tone, while her lips and hair were dark black. Her simple black robes did not conceal the well-sculpted curves of her body, but her shape was not her most breathtaking feature. That title belonged to her eyes, which, just like Myrren’s, were deep, knowing purple. Tresse Tarren, Myrren’s mother, was not human as her father Warde was, but Myrren had come to terms with her mixed parentage some time back.

“Perfect,” Tresse decided. “Almost perfect.” She handed Myrren a pair of black leather gloves, then reached into the neck of her robe and withdrew a golden pendant. It was a trident, the symbol of Vraxor, superimposed on a pair of crossed swords—the personal sigil of House Kahliana, Myrren’s family. “Your father gave this to me when we first met,” Tresse said to her daughter as she pulled on the gloves. “It is right that you should have it.”

The door creaked open and a newcomer entered. Tall and gaunt, he was wrapped in a black cloak and the garb of a nobleman; yet his slender, almost skeletal thinness did not seem at all unnatural on him. His skin was as white as Tresse’s, but where her eyes were enigmatic violet, his were dark, glittering black, iris indistinguishable from pupil, like two stones of polished onyx. Those eyes, in addition to the short, sharp fangs that showed in flashes whenever he spoke, marked him as being of the Morin race where Tresse was a succubus.

“Are you ready, Myrren?” Arvis asked. His voice was low and husky, as penetrating as Tresse’s eyes. “Raine awaits.”

Tresse shook her head, looking over at the window. “Daughter, you have chosen an ill time to be married. I wish you would reconsider.”

“Oh, mother, don’t be silly,” Myrren scoffed. She came and stood beside Tresse, gazing into the sky. “Raine and I don’t want to wait any longer. We’ve waited long enough already.”

Set like jewels in the velvet backdrop of the night, countless stars twinkled over the land. Near the zenith of the black sky, they clumped together, forming a hazy but recognizable shape: a great ring that hung in the heavens, standing out clearly against the firmament. But the ring was not whole. One of the brightest stars of the constellation, one that for nine years out of every ten glimmered in the night sky, was mysteriously absent. The result was that the great ring was incomplete, broken, marred by a gap of empty blackness.

Tresse sighed. “A wait of another month will hurt no one.”

“Really, mother,” Myrren said. “Why should we put our wedding

off because of some silly superstition?"

Myrren's mother shook her head. "Daughter, the Broken Ring is not superstition. Its power is real. You would do well to be wary of it."

"I don't believe in it," Myrren declared. "You don't either, do you, Arvis?"

The Morin grinned, exposing an impressive set of teeth. "Far be it from me to be caught between two beautiful women." Then his expression grew solemn. "But your mother is correct, Myrren. The power of the Broken Ring is well known. It dates back to the time of the ancient gods."

"You two are being ridiculous," she said firmly.

"There are entire nations," Tresse said, "whose legislatures are closed during this month, knowing what would happen if they made any laws."

"I don't believe you're saying this!" Myrren said hotly. "It's foolish superstition, nothing more. And I'm not going to let it stop us!" She tore her gaze away from the window and took a step towards the door, but as she did so, she stumbled on the folds of the dress and almost fell. Hastily recovering herself, she glared at them. "I'm getting married tonight and I don't want to hear any more silly stories about the stars!" With that, she stalked out of the room and slammed the door behind her.

Arvis and Tresse looked at each other. "Willful, is she not?" Tresse mused.

"She always has been," Arvis said with a sly grin. "I believe she gets it from you."

Tresse looked at the Morin with a sharp, dangerous violet gaze, but failed to repress a smile. "Arvis, you are as charming as you always were."

"I will take that as a compliment," Arvis said gravely, and Tresse laughed. "You might as well. Come, demon, we have a wedding to attend."

The nave of the cathedral was illuminated brightly. The flames of the sacrificial pits had been temporarily doused, but the giant statue of Vraxor stood unmoved behind the altar, its huge face surveying the pews from high above. Great chandeliers hung on golden chains from the ceiling, and candles lined the aisles and stood on the sills below the stained-glass windows. The candlelight that sparkled and reflected from the obsidian flagstones made it seem almost as if the night sky was mirrored beneath the pews. However, the vaulted ceiling high overhead remained lost in darkness, as always.

The stairway from the dressing room led to a side door concealed behind a drape of black curtain. Myrren emerged from the doorway and looked out over the vast space. The pews were far from full, but there were more guests than she had expected. While living in Ral Ardente for the first seventeen years of her life, she had had few friends other than Arvis.

## BROKEN RING

She approached the altar, taking pains not to stumble over her gown. The sacrificial pits, which dropped away into darkness, swept around the altar from both sides. A narrow bridge that continued the path between the rows of pews was the only way to cross over onto the altar proper. Myrren smirked to herself as she walked over the bridge—the last time she had done this, it had scared her half to death. *Was I really once so weak and frightened? I was a different person then. But that doesn't matter now. I don't need to be afraid any longer.*

Myrren took her place on the altar, standing before the table where sacrifices were conducted; it also served as a podium for sermons and events like these. Only a few paces ahead, there was an area of shadow, stretched beneath the great statue's feet like a curtain, where no light penetrated. With anticipation growing thick in her blood, Myrren waited.

Arvis and Tresse emerged from the side doorway, accompanied by her father. Warde Kahliana was a tall, robust man, though his hair showed the graying of age. He wore a ceremonial tunic, made of sheets of stiff black cloth sewn together to resemble plate-mail armor. Myrren smiled at her father as he, Tresse and Arvis took their places, and he returned her smile, though his was prouder and touched with fatherly affection.

Several minutes passed. Then, suddenly, the chandeliers were snuffed out. Darkness descended on the cathedral, a darkness broken only by the scintillating glow of the candles everywhere. Myrren knew what to expect, and looked off to the other side of the chapel as three forms robed all in black emerged from another doorway and crossed the bridge to stand beside her. Two of them stood off to the side, opposite from Arvis and her parents: her friend, the elven ranger Shial Al'enn, and the Atma Knight Rahze el'Dax.

The third robed form took its place beside Myrren and threw back its hood. It was her groom, Raine Destin, a young nobleman of nineteen years, two older than she was. He still had the adventurous, brash look of their first meeting, though it had been softened and tempered by time. He was smiling at her, and she barely had time to return the smile before something moved at the statue's feet.

The veil of shadow was brushed back like a curtain, and a robed shape glided out and approached them. The cowed head swung from Raine to her, examining them both, and then the priest of Vraxor spoke. Its voice rasped in Myrren's head, seeming to emanate from just behind her eyes.

—Who are you, and why do you come to stand before the altar of Lord Vraxor— it asked, offering a ritual greeting.

Myrren bowed as deeply as she could in the dress. “I am Myrren Kahliana, *sen'vrax*, daughter of Warde Kahliana and Tresse Tarren. I declare my love and devotion to this man, Raine Destin, and I wish to be

married to him on the altar of Lord Vraxor.”

Raine’s voice was a bit faint at first, but it picked up strength as he went on. “I am Raine Destin, *sen’vrax*, son of Lian and Mara Destin. I declare my love and devotion to this woman, Myrren Kahliana, and I wish to be married to her on the altar of Lord Vraxor.”

—Do you wish to take the oaths—

“We do,” they responded in unison.

The priest nodded. —Very well. First, know that Lord Vraxor will bless your union only if you will help to spread his holy word. Do you pledge to be fruitful and populate the land with your descendants—

“We do,” they both said. Myrren blushed; glancing off to the side, she saw Arvis grinning.

—Second— the priest continued. —Know that Lord Vraxor shall only grant his blessing to a union of true love and devotion, not one of impulse, intimidation or necessity. Do you pledge to be true and faithful to one another—

“We do,” they answered, Myrren more firmly this time.

—And third. Know that Lord Vraxor shall watch over, guide and protect your union, but only if you obey his teachings and offer him the proper worship. Do you pledge to be faithful servants of the one true god—

“We do,” they said in unison. Myrren did not look in Shial’s direction, but had a feeling her friend was not thrilled by that wording. Shial worshipped Shayna, the goddess of nature, and while Myrren’s faith lay with Vraxor as it always had, she recognized that other deities existed. The priests of Vraxor often acted as if there were no others, though.

—Then— the priest concluded, —in Lord Vraxor’s holy name and before his sacred altar, I pronounce you husband and wife. May the eye of the one true god watch over you always, and may his great hand shelter you—

The red-clad form put its sleeves together. Myrren felt a familiar sensation: the spreading hot surge of magical energy, but focused in an intricate complex way that was very unlike her own somewhat chaotic elemental magic. Blood-red light poured out of the priest’s sleeves, and when it drew its arms apart, something remained, floating there: a bracelet of pure gold that glowed with scarlet light.

The priest took the bracelet in both sleeves, and it split apart soundlessly into two identical rings of the same size. Myrren lifted her arm and Raine his, and the robed arms pushed the rings at their wrists as if to push the gold into their skin. Myrren felt a strange flowing sensation as the bracelet parted without breaking and closed seamlessly around her wrist, as the other one closed around Raine’s. Both circlets immediately began to glow with gentle warmth.

—It is done, with Lord Vraxor’s blessing— the priest pronounced. —By these rings shall you know each other. May you find

## BROKEN RING

happiness—

The audience burst into cheering and applause. Few of them knew Myrren or Raine, but the sentiment was clear. Raine swept an arm around Myrren, and she gladly returned his embrace and the happy kiss that followed it. As they drew apart, Myrren said something to her new husband, too softly for anyone else to hear. “Do you believe in the Broken Ring, Raine?”

“Of course not, Myrren,” he said. “That’s just a silly legend. Why?”

“Never mind,” she said with a relieved sigh. “I’m just glad I’m not the only one who feels that way.” And she kissed him again.

As the crowd dispersed to the banquet the acolytes were serving, Arvis approached the priest. He spoke in a murmur, but it was loud enough for Myrren to hear; not by accident, she was sure. “Is it not a pity, *sen’vrax*? Such a happy couple, and yet...” He gestured vaguely in the direction of the ceiling.

—Indeed— the priest agreed. —But it is their decision. Let them learn— The robed head swiveled to Myrren. —It is not mere superstition, Lady Kahliana. The stars have power. Was not the constellation of the Void created by Lord Vraxor’s final defeat of the old gods—

Myrren lowered her gaze, blushing. She kept forgetting that the priest could see her thoughts if she thought them strongly enough. She could do the same, sometimes. “It was, *sen’vrax*.”

The priest’s voice echoed inside her head like a mental snort. —You still do not believe. But you have the true faith in your heart, so I shall overlook it. Finish the celebration. Arvis, I must speak with you—

Arvis looked slightly surprised, but followed the priest as it turned and glided off. As the red-robed form and the Morin entered the curtain of darkness that draped the region behind the altar, they vanished as if swallowed up.

Shial approached them, shaking her head. She was of elvenkind, tall and slender, with the catlike grace and keen, angular profile typical of her people. She was with child, though it was not yet showing. A stray wisp of her silky hair, the color of leaves in autumn, tickled her freckled cheeks, and she brushed it away. “I don’t know how you stand it, Myrren. That thing frightened me even when it wasn’t talking.”

“I wasn’t frightened,” Myrren insisted. “True believers of Lord Vraxor have nothing to fear from them.”

“That’s all well and good for you,” Shial muttered, “but I was on their altar once.” She looked around. “Let’s go to the banquet. No insult to you, Myrren, but I don’t like this place.”

Myrren refused to let either Shial’s bad mood or any foolish superstition put a damper on her happiness. *I’m married now! I’m going to enjoy it!* “All right,” she said lightly. “Let’s see the banquet. Come on, Raine!” Laughing, she leaped into his arms and put an arm around his

neck, and he returned her grin as he carried her down the altar steps.

Shial looked after them, then shrugged. “Warde? Tresse? Are you coming?”

The two of them were in each other’s arms and looked every bit as infatuated as Myrren and Raine. “Go ahead, Shial,” Warde said distractedly. “We’ll be along.”

She looked up at the ever-shadowed ceiling of the cathedral. *Love under a dark god*, she thought disbelievingly, then headed after Myrren.

Arvis and the priest walked between the giant statue’s feet. The cloak of shadow that draped the area, like a one-way glass, was only impenetrable from the outside. From within, it made vision even more acute. Arvis calmly followed the robed figure through a small doorway into a corridor, built of black stone and lined on both sides with wooden doors carved into ornate patterns of scrollwork. About halfway down the hall, the priest stopped and turned. Arvis stood with his head bowed respectfully, waiting.

The priest spoke. It sounded weary. —Arvis—

The Morin did not answer. After a moment, the priest shook his robed head and began again.

—You and your companions have returned the Dark Heart to us, Arvis, and for that service you shall be exalted; yet you have caused us so much trouble I almost wonder if it was worth it—

For Arvis—for anyone other than a priest of Vraxor—to suggest the return of the Dark Heart was not worth it would have been blasphemy of the foulest kind. “I would not say we have been exalted, *sen’vrax*. There was not even a ceremony when we left the Dark Heart with the priests in Ral Vraxan.”

—You have been exalted more than you know. For us to allow one of our acolytes to leave Ral Vraxan, however briefly; for us to allow heretics to attend a wedding of worshippers of the true god; most especially for us to honor the request of Warde Kahlana, our most noted commander, to resign his commission; these things are unheard of—

“Nevertheless,” Arvis said. “Had it been Tenche who returned with the Dark Heart, he would have been offered riches beyond counting, triumphal parades in every city, his pick of women from across the land...”

—There is truth in what you say— the priest agreed. —But that is one of the things that troubles us. Tenche Sharaal was one of our most renowned warlords, and yet he, with a full army and one of us to back him, lost his life in the assault on Corondor while you came out virtually unharmed—

“The city was chaos,” Arvis said smoothly, “and Tenche could never resist taking part in battles himself. I do not know his fate, but whatever happened to him, I am sure it was Lord Vraxor’s will.”

The robed head lifted. —You lie, Arvis— Then it relented. —Or

## BROKEN RING

perhaps not. It is difficult to tell with Morin; but that changes nothing— The priest made a sound like a sigh. —Perhaps you speak the truth. Perhaps it was Lord Vraxor’s will that Tenche not survive. But three of our own have met death at the hands of you and your companions. That is indisputable—

“They betrayed Lord Vraxor,” Arvis said. “They served the interests of House Arlavan above his.”

The priest’s voice grew grimmer, a rasp sliding across slate. — They were still among the chosen servants of Lord Vraxor. Had you not returned with the Dark Heart in your possession, you and all your companions would have been sent to the altar immediately. But, perhaps, what you say is true. And that is what troubles us the most. You may think you are privy to the goings-on within the priesthood, Arvis, but you are not; you know nothing; and you cannot imagine the debates raging among us even now over this—

“Debates, *sen’vrax*?” Arvis asked, a bit surprised himself.

The robed head nodded grimly. —The thought of betrayers among us has thrown the entire priesthood into turmoil. There are some who do not believe it is possible for the chosen servants of Lord Vraxor to do such a thing. Others wish to conduct an inquisition in search of other traitors to Lord Vraxor’s holy word within the priesthood. Even without meaning to, Arvis, you have wreaked havoc on us—

“That was never my wish,” Arvis said with more calm than he felt. *An inquisition within the priesthood? Vraxor preserve me, what have we done?* “The three we destroyed *were* betrayers, *sen’vrax*. One of them admitted it.”

—A confession obtained under torture— the priest said darkly. —Yet another crime that would have been inexcusable had you not recovered the Dark Heart, regardless of whether that one was a traitor to Lord Vraxor or not— Again it made the noise like a sigh. —You are a true believer at heart, Arvis; you rendered us a great service, and you did what you thought was right. But you must know that for what you have done, you can never become one of us now—

Arvis had not been expecting that, but he was not too surprised. “I understand that. If I may be honest, I believe it is for the best.”

—Perhaps— the priest mused. —But you had much potential—

“If things are as you say,” Arvis said, “then my presence within the priesthood might be a further divisive factor when it is already badly strained.”

—I suppose you are correct— the priest agreed. —Do you see now why we cannot exalt you as you feel you deserve—

The Morin nodded.

—If we did, and word ever got out of what you had done, it would be seen as a reward for unforgivable behavior. We would be displaying hypocrisy and blasphemy of the worst kind. The repercussions

could be incalculable. As it is, we shall honor Warde Kahliana's request to resign, and we shall not send you or any of your companions to the altar, in recognition of what you have done. But the identity of those who retrieved the Dark Heart, as well as the fate of Tenche and the three priests, shall remain closely guarded secrets. Be warned, Arvis, that if news of your crime ever gets out, or worse, the nature of this conversation ever becomes public knowledge, we shall not be so lenient—

"I understand," Arvis said. "I will go to Myrren and Raine and tell them what you have told me."

—Do so— the priest agreed. —But tell no one of the divisions within the priesthood. That, too, shall remain a matter for us and us alone to deal with—

"It will be as you say, *sen'vrax*," Arvis said. He swept a brief bow, then turned and walked off down the corridor. The priest remained where it was, head bowed and arms folded in its red robe, watching him.

The rear section of the cathedral had been converted into a banquet hall. The pews had been moved to make space for long tables to hold the food and drink that the acolytes were carrying out. Myrren and Raine sat together at the head of the largest table, with Shial nearby. "Your mother and father haven't seen each other in some time?" Shial asked. "They certainly looked happy to be together."

"They see each other even less than I see them," Myrren explained. "My father was away leading the Wars of the West all my life, and my mother..."

Shial put a hand on one of Myrren's. "I'm sorry for what I said before, Myrren. I just don't have many fond memories of Vraxor's land. I would be glad to have you and Raine at my wedding, if you'd like to attend."

"I'd love to," Myrren assured her—then something caught her eye. Off to the side of the cathedral, where the nave intersected one of the transepts, she glimpsed a man in a long coat and a tattered gray hat. She did not see his face, but he seemed to smile at her in the instant before he turned and faded into the darkness of the transept. Myrren scrambled to her feet. "Raine, I just saw Ander!"

"What?" Raine said but rather than waste time explaining Myrren hurried off after the man she had seen. He got up and chased after her. "Myrren, wait! Where are you going?"

Myrren turned the corner into the transept. Lit only by a few candles, this section of the cathedral was darkened; shadow played around its edges, shrouding the images depicted in the great stained-glass windows. Other than a row of risers for the chorus, the transept was empty.

"Ander?" Myrren called. "Are you here?"

Only silence answered her. But then there was movement at the far end. Something emerged from the shadows, a human-shaped silhouette

## BROKEN RING

so dark it was like the night itself taken form. It uttered no reply, made no sound at all, but Myrren could tell it was focused on her. The figure seemed to emanate menace, terrible danger; she felt her breath catch in her throat as it began to move towards her—

She started as Raine came up behind her, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Myrren! Are you all right? What happened?”

“I... I thought I saw Ander,” she said lamely. “I could have sworn it was him.”

Raine sighed. “I wish he were still alive too, Myrren, but we can’t change that. Come on. Let’s get back to the party.”

“But there’s *someone* here,” Myrren insisted. “I saw—” She faltered as she looked back. The dark figure was gone as if it had never been.

“All right,” she said. “I must have been mistaken. Let’s go back.” But as she let Raine lead her off, she glanced back over her shoulder one last time. The transept was empty.

Adam Lee

Chapter II  
**Rift**

Dawn in Ral Ardenite brought the first snowfall of the year. In the early hours of the morning, while it was still dark, the clouds broke open. By the time the sun began to rise, its grey light fell on a fresh coat of white laid over the streets and buildings, and more feathery flakes continued to fall in whirling flurries to further blanket the city. It was this tableau that found Shial and Rahze in front of Myrren and Raine's building, wrapped in gloves, boots and heavy traveling cloaks, with supplies packed in a small horse-drawn cart for the long journey back to Shael. Myrren, Raine and Arvis stood on the steps to see them off.

"We'll be off as soon as Kail arrives," Shial said. "Thank you for inviting me to your wedding, Myrren. It was beautiful in its own way."

Myrren smiled softly. The wind nipped at her, and she snuggled closer to Raine; beneath her cloak, she could feel her wedding band glowing with living warmth. It would always be so as long as she remained close to her husband, but its glow would fade with distance. "It was my pleasure, Shial," she assured her friend, feeling choked up. "It really is a shame you couldn't stay longer."

"I have a wedding of my own," Shial said apologetically. "And I've been away for long enough. I want to see my family again. Especially before my baby comes." She brightened a bit. "Myrren, Raine, why don't you come with me to Shael? You'd be honored guests at my wedding, and I would love for you to see my home."

"That's a great idea!" Myrren exclaimed. She remembered belatedly that Shial had mentioned it at the wedding banquet, but she had been distracted by the enigmatic visitor. "Why don't we, Raine?"

"I can't," Raine said reluctantly. "I'm sorry, Shial."

"Can't?" Myrren asked in surprise. "Why not?"

Arvis, a tall, lean shadow in his black cloak, suddenly spoke. "Have you forgotten the Choosing, Myrren?"

"The Choosing?" she said. "Ah, no! I'd forgotten all about it!"

"It is soon," Arvis said. "Before the end of the month. Raine must be in Ral Vraxan when it occurs. His parents are awaiting him there."

"But..." Myrren said weakly. She looked up at the sky, which was an even sheet of slate-gray save for a lone spot of platinum brightness where the sun strove to break through the clouds. *No! It won't be this way! I'm not going to let the stars control my life!* "It's Shial's wedding, Raine! How can we miss it? She's done so much for us!"

"I know," Raine said unhappily, "but I can't miss this." He did not sound enthusiastic about going.

"You... you can't stay here until after it happens?" Myrren asked Shial.

The elf shook her head. "Myrren, I'm sorry. Kail wants to be

## BROKEN RING

gone from here, and I don't blame him. I know you've lived here all your life, but I miss my home. I want to see the woods again, and I want to be married under the trees. The sooner the better, for my child's sake."

"I don't want to miss your wedding, Shial! There has to be some other way."

"There is," Shial said slowly, "but..."

"But what?" Myrren asked. "What is it?"

Shial shook her head. "Forgive me. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"I want to hear it too!" Raine said. "I know how important this is to Myrren. I don't want her to miss it; I want us all to be happy. What's your solution, Shial?"

Shial lowered her gaze. "Myrren could come with us and you... you could stay here and go to your Choosing, Raine. Forgive me. It was a bad idea."

Raine gaped, then turned to Myrren... and saw the expression on her face. Leaning in close to her, he whispered, "Don't tell me you're actually *considering* that?"

Myrren opened her mouth to answer, and was surprised when what emerged was, "Why not?"

"You must be mad!" Raine whispered harshly. "We were just married last night! You want to run off on your own already?"

"It would only be a few months," she pointed out as reasonably as she could. "We'd be together again when I got back."

"But why do you want to be apart so soon, Myrren? For Vraxor's sake, your birthday would come before you could get back! Don't you want to spend it with me?"

"I do," she said unwillingly, "but, Raine, Shial is only going to be married once, and we have our whole lives ahead of us." *It's not the Broken Ring! It's not! There's no other way.*

"I can't believe you're doing this," he said. "I thought you loved me!"

"I do, Raine!" she said. "More than anything! But I..."

He let his breath out in an angry huff that clouded in the snowy air. "Fine then! Go with her! I'll be waiting whenever you decide to come back!" He drew away from her, pushed past Arvis, and stalked up the steps into the building, closing the door forcefully.

Myrren shivered; it suddenly felt a little colder. She realized the warm glow of her wedding band had dimmed.

Shial looked away in shame. "Myrren, I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," she assured her friend. "It was my choice. I wouldn't miss your wedding for the world, Shial." After a moment's pause she added, "I have to talk to him, though. I'll be back."

Shial nodded sadly as Myrren started for the door. Suddenly, Arvis spoke up again. "Do not feel bad, Shial. There was nothing you

could have done.”

Shial blinked, looking at the Morin. “Since when do you care how I feel?”

Arvis shrugged. “It was fated to happen.”

Myrren let her own breath out in a huff as she slammed the door behind her.

She found him in the bedroom of the apartment they now shared, bigger than Myrren’s old one. The sheets of the bed were ruffled, and an endtable had been overturned, spilling a pile of books onto the floor. Raine stood at the window, watching the snow fall silently.

“Raine?” Myrren ventured.

“I have nothing to say to you,” he said stiffly.

“Don’t be like this,” she implored him. “We haven’t been married for one day yet. Why do we have to fight so soon?”

“What I don’t understand,” he shot back, turning to face her, “is why you have to *leave* so soon.”

“You know why, Raine!”

“No, I don’t!” he snapped. “It seems to me like you’re more interested in their marriage than our own.”

“You know it isn’t like that.”

“It’s all I’ve seen!” he said hotly. “Can’t we spend at least a little time together?”

“We were together all the way back from Corondor,” she pointed out.

“Not as husband and wife! We were on the road all day. And now that we finally have some time to relax, to spend together, you’re running off again!”

“To relax?” Myrren said, getting angry herself. “You’re leaving for Ral Vraxan in a day or two anyway! And don’t call it ‘running off!’ I’m a grown woman! I can go wherever I want!”

“Maybe you can,” Raine said, glaring at her, “but don’t expect me to follow you everywhere.”

“I wasn’t expecting it!” she snapped at him. “But I’ll go where I want and I won’t have you try to stop me.”

“You think I’ll still be here when you get back from Shael?” he challenged her.

Despite her own anger, Myrren was disconcerted by that. “I... Well... Oh, do what you want!” she finally settled on, and stalked from the room. As she left, she shot over her shoulder, “Maybe I won’t bother coming back at all!”

His back turned again, Raine looked out the window and did not reply.

Arvis was gone when Myrren returned to Shial and Rahze. “How

## BROKEN RING

did it go?" Shial asked quietly.

"Never mind," Myrren snapped, then forced herself to moderate her tone. "I'm sorry. Don't worry about it. I'm going to pack some supplies and we can go."

"You don't have to go if you don't want to," Shial said. "It's not that important."

"It is to me," Myrren assured her. "Is Kail ready? The sooner we can set out, the better."

Shial frowned. "He hasn't arrived yet."

"He is waiting for us," Rahze said, startling Myrren. The Atma Knight had hardly spoken since arriving in the city. "He knows we are to leave today. Do not worry."

Footsteps crunched in the snow behind them. Myrren turned to see Arvis, Warde and Tresse, the latter two holding hands. "I informed your parents of your plans," Arvis said gently. "I had assumed you would not want to leave without bidding them goodbye."

The thought had not even occurred to her. "Thank you, Arvis," she said lamely.

"I have always wanted to see Shael," Warde said dreamily.

"Come back with stories for us. Have a safe trip, daughter. May Lord Vraxor watch over you."

Tresse's eyes flickered to the building where Myrren's apartment was. "Is Raine not going?"

"Mother..." she began.

"Raine has another engagement," Arvis explained.

"I see," Tresse said, nodding to herself. "Safe trip, daughter. He will be awaiting you when you return. Just think—to be the wife of the Sovereign!"

Something about her mother's manner made Myrren suspicious. "Whatever happened to all that superstition about the Broken Ring, mother?"

The succubus shrugged. "The legends only say the oaths must be broken. They do not specify when."

Myrren tried not to grind her teeth. Instead, she forced herself to embrace her parents and Arvis in turn. "Thank you all for everything. I'll be back."

"Of course you will, daughter," Tresse assured her. "Fare you well."

"Fare you well," Warde and then Arvis agreed, echoing her. The Morin's manner seemed unusually solemn, somber even for him, but she did not ask about it.

Just before they left, Myrren looked up at the sky. *It's just a legend. That's all there is to it. It's a silly superstition.*

Nevertheless, as the cart pulled away, she glanced up at their window in the vain hope of seeing Raine's face. She wished she did not

feel as if she would never return.

That morning, Myrren, Rahze and Shial departed the city of Ral Ardente, riding on horses in front of their cart, both people and mounts well-muffled against the chill. As they passed through the gates, Myrren noticed a plume of smoke from a small campfire just outside the city walls. Moments later, a fourth rider emerged onto the road to join them. He rode with head bowed, wrapped in his hooded blue traveling cloak, but she still recognized the Atma Knight Kail Adlyn, the man Shial was returning home to marry. Even with his head bowed against the wind and snow, his piercing blue eyes were still visible. He rode up beside them without a word, merely took Shial's hand and edged his mount close enough to hers to kiss her before they continued on their way. If he was surprised by Myrren's presence, he did not show it.

"I'm glad you're coming with us, Myrren," Shial said as Kail joined them. "My homeland is truly beautiful. You'll love it there." She sighed wistfully. "It's almost five years I've been away. I miss it."

"What of the war?" Rahze asked. "Are you interested in seeing how Shael has endured?"

Shial sounded a bit unsteady. "Of... of course. I'm sure it's fine, though."

"War?" Myrren asked.

"It's nothing," Shial said quickly.

They rode down the well-traveled road that led away from Ral Ardente, which was cradled in a bend of the river, and toward the banks of the Merillon. Wooden piers extended into the water both upriver and downriver, but the road they had taken led up to the great arc of the Merillon bridge. Made of black iron, it spanned the river in a network of beams and girders that supported an iron highway wide enough for ten men. Though it was ancient, it was unmarred by rust or corrosion.

The four of them, trailed by the horse pulling their cart of supplies, started up onto the bridge. Their horses' hooves clanked on its riveted metal surface. "I'd always wondered how they built this," Shial said as the snow fluttered down around them.

"The founders of this city built it a few years after the Godswar," Myrren explained; another of the lessons she had been forced to memorize from her tutor's monotonous books, "using ancient metalworking knowledge."

Shial looked down at the black iron. "It reminds me of Ral Axen."

"Many of the same techniques," Myrren agreed. "You've been there?"

"Only for a short time, Shayna be praised," Shial muttered. "A city of furnaces and iron, where the air is always heavy with smoke..."

Myrren grinned. "So you have seen it. You know, Shial, across the continent, there's another city... a ruin left over from the Godswar. It's

## BROKEN RING

called Tolamor.” She noticed Rahze frowning. “You’ve heard of it?”

“You have not been there?” the Atma Knight asked.

“Only read about it. Before this summer, I’d hardly left Ral Ardenite in my life.”

“That city is an accursed place,” Rahze said darkly. “A haunted ruin of black iron and stone. It is not enough that your people avoid it; it should have been burned down ages ago.”

“Haunted?” Myrren laughed. “More superstition. It’s just a wreck. I might like to go there someday, to see what the buildings from that long ago looked like.”

“It is not superstition,” Rahze said stiffly. “There are things that live there. Monsters built during the Godswar to be used as creatures of destruction. The sentinels of that place do not die with time. They are still there.”

Myrren could not entirely contain a chuckle. *And now the Atma Knights too! Am I the only one who doesn’t believe in these silly superstitions?* Aloud she asked, “Rahze, do you believe the legend of the Broken Ring?”

“Of course,” he said calmly. “It is true.”

“How about you, Shial?” she asked.

Her friend visibly faltered. *Probably remembering the fight between me and Raine*, Myrren thought.

“I don’t know,” Shial said at last. “Many of my people do. But we won’t arrive in Shael before the constellations change, so I’m not worried.”

Myrren’s chuckle became slight irritation. *She believes, she just doesn’t want to say so. By Vraxor, why do so many people accept this foolishness?*

They crossed the span and rode down onto the other side of the Merillinon. The land on this bank of the black river was wild country. Off to the west rose tall, rounded hills, sprinkled with the gray skeletons of trees and blanketed in a layer of snow. Further west, beyond the hills, granite-black mountain peaks rose into the sky.

They rode south along the road until late midday. Though wide, the path was not often traveled, and the bare branches of trees encroached on one edge. On the other, the river slowly ate away at the land, so that the road trailed off into a muddy, snowy morass of half-frozen reeds and cattails. Only a few hours after they left Ral Ardenite, the snow ceased to fall. By afternoon, the sun had broken through the clouds, sparkling off the fresh-fallen snow in a blinding dazzle. They swept the snow off rocks to sit and rest for lunch.

“There is something I must tell you, lad,” Rahze said while they ate.

Kail looked up at the elder Atma Knight. “Master?”

“You have traveled with me long enough,” Rahze said, “and I

think you need no further proving. If it would be all right with you, Shial, I would like to make a stopover in Cyrene. There, lad, you may take the final tests and become truly an Atma Knight.”

Kail managed only a quiet, “Thank you, master,” but his face glowed. Shial, for her part, exclaimed, “Kail, that’s great!” and wrapped her arms around him, kissing him on the cheek. He turned his face to meet hers and returned the kiss with enthusiasm.

Myrren knew the name Cyrene—the capitol city of the Atma Knights—but had never been there herself. And yet the instant Rahze said it, an image popped into her mind: a great marble citadel rising to an alabaster dome, staked out at each corner by tall turrets encircled by spiraling walkways. A long, placid reflecting pool laid out before the citadel mirrored images of birds wheeling above in a cloudlessly blue sky. It was Kail’s memory. That much she was sure of, but the young Atma Knight’s image was so vivid and powerful she could see it as clearly as if she had been there herself.

“It looks like a beautiful place,” she said unthinkingly.

Kail started, drawing away from Shial to stare at her. “What did you say?”

Myrren belatedly realized what she had done. “Oh! I’m sorry,” she said, trying not to meet Kail’s gaze. “I’ve heard of it before. It sounds like a beautiful place.”

“That isn’t what you said,” Kail began, but she noticed a glance flicker between him and Rahze, and the young Atma Knight fell silent.

Myrren averted her eyes again, blushing. Things like that hardly ever happened to her, but when they did—usually around someone who had very vivid memories or strong feelings about something—it seemed so natural she kept forgetting not everyone could do it. *More of Mother in my blood*, she thought with a grimace.

The snow fell on and off throughout the day as they rode south along the river. The sun sank into the west early, and darkness descended over the land. They found a spot by the riverside to cook dinner and wash up, but as night grew absolute, Myrren wondered with a tinge of alarm if they would have to sleep outside in the cold.

Her worries were allayed, however, when Rahze produced a large, folded square of canvas from their cart. Bading them step aside, he laid it down on the snowy ground and said a few words under his breath. Immediately it began to unfurl, as if inflating, until it assumed the peaked shape of a tent. “It is enchanted,” the Atma Knight said, “to keep the cold out. It may be more crowded than I anticipated, but there is room for us all.”

As she got into the tent and spread her sleeping roll on the canvas—she could not feel the cold through the thin layer, just as Rahze had promised—Myrren decided she liked the Atma Knight after all, for all

## BROKEN RING

his taciturn manner. However, just as he turned out the lamp for the night, she glimpsed Kail watching her with a hooded look in his eyes, and she felt a wispy trace of the emotions emanating from him: wariness and suspicion.

Myrren's sleep was light, restless. It had been that way ever since Corondor, as if her body had decided it needed less sleep to sustain itself. She woke not long after dawn, lying in her warm bedroll while she watched the pale gray light of the sun seep through the canvas. Finally she stirred from her dreamy lethargy and glanced around the tent. Rahze and Shial lay on either side of her, both sleeping. Shial's arm was extended as if she been holding something that was no longer there. Kail was gone.

Calmly digesting this, she rose from her sleeping roll and dressed as quietly as she could within the cramped confines of the tent. She feared to wake Shial and Rahze, but neither of them stirred. When she was dressed, she unfastened the flap and slipped outside.

It was a cold, still morning. They had set up camp in a wooded clearing next to the river bank, where black waters lapped peacefully at the earth. A few of the trees were evergreens, dark green dusted with white; far more were brown skeletons with a scattering of yellowed leaves. Their horses stood tethered at one end of the camp, their breath steaming in the frigid air. Myrren was not concerned for them, though; Ral Ardente was a northern city, and its horses were bred to tolerate cold. It was just past dawn, and the sun was a gray light low in the east.

Kail crouched at the river bank, filling a canteen from the icy cold water of the Merillinon. Myrren's footsteps crunched on the snowy ground as she approached him. He turned and regarded her.

"You're awake early," he said.

"So are you."

"I always wake up early." For an instant, she could almost taste the subdued bitterness in his voice. "It's been many years since sleep brought me much rest."

"Shial told me."

Kail set his canteen aside. His blue eyes were wary. "How much did she tell you?"

"That you've experienced a lot of pain because of the priests, before you became an Atma Knight. No more. She said the rest was up to you to tell."

"Good," Kail said shortly. He picked up the canteen and walked past her.

"Well?" Myrren asked when he was a pace away from her.

He stopped, his back still turned to her. "Well what?"

"Aren't you going to tell me?"

"No," Kail said flatly without turning.

"How am I involved?" she pressed him.

He flinched slightly. "What makes you think that?"

"I can see it in your eyes..." Myrren began and hastily trailed off rather than add, *And I can feel that you think I am when you give me that hooded look.*

"You must be mistaken," Kail said. He walked away, busying himself with the horses, while Myrren stood watching him and thinking. For once she wished she could tell what was on his mind, but all she could feel from him was a blank silence.

"Wake up, Raine."

Sprawled on his bed, Raine did his best to burrow under the sheets. "Go away," he mumbled into the pillow.

"I said, awake," Arvis' voice said with more annoyance.

"I'm awake," he muttered. "Leave me alone."

The bed jolted as if an invisible hand had lifted and rocked it, dumping Raine to the floorboards in a tangle of sheets. Angry now, but fully awake, he staggered up to his hands and knees and then to his feet. "What was that for?" he demanded.

"It is not wise to ignore me," Arvis said, leaning against the doorframe. His voice was stern, but had a hint of a grin to it.

"How did you get in here? I locked the door when I went to bed."

Arvis looked at the door—swinging wide open—indifferently. "Locks do not concern me."

"Does privacy, then?" Raine said angrily. "I told you I didn't want to be disturbed!"

The Morin sniffed disdainfully and looked around the room. It was a mess; endtables and books lay scattered across the floor, wrinkled clothes were spilling out of the closet and the open drawers of the armoire, and the rumpled sheets lay at the foot of the bed. "You are wallowing in self-pity, Raine."

"So what?" he snapped, adding more disconsolately, "I miss her."

"Myrren has been gone only a day," Arvis said in exasperation.

"It's not that," Raine mumbled. "It's the *way* she left." His wedding band was cool and lifeless against his wrist.

"It is nothing to blame yourself for," the Morin said. "No two people will always agree. All relationships experience conflict. It is the price we pay for being unique."

"You sound like a philosopher," he muttered. "Anyway, it was more serious than that." Raine looked at the Morin almost desperately. "Arvis, do you believe in the Broken Ring?"

"Of course. Its power is real."

"It's just a few stars!" Raine protested. "Those tiny little lights... How could they possibly affect me?"

Arvis shrugged. "There are many forces in this world we do not understand. That does not make them less real." He hesitated briefly before adding, "If it helps, the legends of the Broken Ring only say your oaths

## BROKEN RING

will be broken. They do not specify what happens afterward. You may always be remarried.”

“Some reassurance,” Raine muttered. He heard a rustling and looked up to see Arvis going through his closet, tossing silk shirts out onto a pile on the floor. “What are you doing?”

“Picking something more suitable for you to wear,” the Morin said as if it were obvious. “We leave for Ral Vraxan today. You cannot go out in public in those clothes; you have slept in them.”

Raine glanced down at his wrinkled garb. “I don’t see what... Wait! Going? What are you talking about?”

Another shirt joined the pile. “Do not pretend you do not know.”

*Oh, no...* Raine thought. “Not the Choosing! It’s not time yet!”

“It is past time,” Arvis said in annoyance. “You must be in Ral Vraxan before the end of the week.”

“I don’t even *want* to go!” he protested.

“That is not what you said yesterday when you were trying to convince Myrren to stay,” Arvis said in annoyance. Two more shirts were tossed out onto the floor. “You have a duty, Raine. You cannot forsake it.”

“I wouldn’t even have been a candidate if Arlavan hadn’t had so many of my relatives killed!” he added savagely. “I remember when they got my uncle Ula...”

“Regardless, the burden is now yours,” Arvis said curtly. “And House Arlavan has misjudged. You are a more likely choice than any of your relatives. The best revenge you could take on them would be to spite all their efforts by winning.”

“And spite myself in the bargain!” he said. “I don’t want to win!”

Arvis sounded more angry now than annoyed. “Do you not wish to serve Lord Vraxor?”

“I’m not old enough!” he objected, though he knew it was futile. “I’m not ready for this; it’s too much for me. I have no experience...”

All he saw of Arvis was a black blur. The Morin was across the room in the blink of an eye. An arm like a steel bar seized him by his shirt collar, driving him back until he sprawled against the bed. A pair of glittering onyx eyes stared into his own.

“Listen to me, boy,” the Morin hissed. “You have been handed this burden, and now you must carry it. I will defend you against those who would kill you like they killed your relatives, but I will not put up with your whining. Take some responsibility and act like the man you claim to be.” Arvis jerked Raine to his feet and thrust a black silk shirt into his hands. “Put that on.”

He looked down at the garment. Made of soft black silk, it was embroidered with forked red lightning bolts that wound up the sleeves. He recognized it; it was the shirt he had been wearing the day he met Myrren for the first time.

Arvis looked down at the shirt, then up at Raine, and seemed to

recognize it as well. “When you last wore that,” he said, a bit less angrily, “you were far more enthusiastic about winning the Choosing than you are now.”

“I was a foolish boy back then,” he said sadly. “I had no idea what I was getting myself into.”

The Morin laughed, a low, silky chuckle. “And the few months that have passed have changed you completely?” He strode across the room, reached into the closet and pulled out a pair of tall black riding boots, which he dumped at Raine’s feet. “Dress. We have a long day ahead.”

Raine hesitated, but finally decided he had no choice and resigned himself to dressing. When he emerged from the building, it was a cold, clear morning. Patches of blue sky showed through the heavy gray clouds, and icicles dripped from the eaves. Snow, trampled to slush by the passing of many feet, covered the ground in a thin, dirty layer. He was surprised to see a large carriage before the building, carried behind four sturdy horses wearing the sigil of House Kahliana, two crossed swords, on their livery; but what surprised him more was that the carriage’s doors bore the sigil of his own house, Destin—a hawk in flight, clutching a bundle of jagged lightning bolts in its claws, all inscribed in gold. Arvis, Warde and Tresse, along with a red-robed priest of Vraxor, stood before the doors.

As he walked down the steps, they all looked up. “Ah, Raine,” Warde said. “You are just in time. We were about to leave without you.” The big man chuckled, a low, rumbling laugh.

Raine gaped. “What is this?”

“You are a nobleman, Lord Raine,” Tresse said in her softly melodious voice. Despite himself, Raine was struck by how beautiful she was. *Warde is a lucky man.* “Arvis thought it time you started acting the part.”

“I can’t afford this,” he said weakly.

“It is paid for,” Arvis said dismissively. “Come. Your ship awaits.”

Numbed, Raine approached the carriage. As he did, the priest’s robed head swiveled in his direction. —We know of the honor you seek, Lord Raine. May Lord Vraxor watch over you on your journey and grant you the best of fortune—

Raine was surprised. The last priest he had encountered had been trying to kill him, and he had wondered if they all were. Before he could say anything, though, Arvis gave him a sharp look, and he managed only a fumbling, “Thank you, *sen’vrax.*”

The priest turned to the Morin. —Arvis, there is a man looking for you. The tutor, Tellern Babas. He wishes to know when Lady Kahliana shall return—

Arvis laughed softly. “*Sen’vrax*, I fear Myrren shall not return to Ral Ardenite before she is eighteen years of age.”

## BROKEN RING

—We had thought as much— the priest agreed. —He shall not be happy—

“If half the things my daughter told me about that man are true,” Warde broke in, “that was probably one of the reasons she left.”

Remembering himself, he hastily added, “No disrespect to you, *sen'vrax*.”

—None taken— the priest agreed. —We shall inform the tutor. Now go. The Choosing comes soon—

“We go,” Arvis said, opening the door to the stagecoach. Raine climbed in, despondent again over the mention of Myrren, and dropped into one of the velvet-lined seats. He had ridden in a carriage like this only a few times in his life, but he was in no mood to appreciate it.

Warde and Tresse got in after him, followed by Arvis, who took the seat adjacent to Raine. “Set off!” he ordered the driver. The carriage jolted into motion, rocking as it moved down the streets of Ral Ardente. Slumped with his chin on his hands, Raine looked out the window and watched the buildings pass by. He felt as if he were being taken to his execution.

Adam Lee

Chapter III

**Tales of the Broken Ring**

“You are too loose with your tongue, Raine,” Arvis rebuked him. “You were about to ask that priest about the others. He would have sent you to the altar on the spot.”

“It’s that serious?” Raine blurted out, as Tresse asked, “Others?”

Warde hushed his wife. “It is dangerous to know, beloved. You do not have to concern yourself with it.”

“Do not worry, Warde,” Arvis said. “It will do no harm for her to know. With her duties in Ral Vraxan, it may even help. Tresse, there were priests who were out to kill Raine, three of them. They were working for House Arlavan.”

“What?” the succubus exclaimed. “Arvis, that is impossible!”

“The priest I spoke to said much the same,” the Morin chuckled. “Apparently, there is a violent debate going on in the priesthood over whether it is true, and, if so, what to do about it.”

Something else seemed to occur to Tresse. “You said ‘were’...”

“They are dead,” Arvis said matter-of-factly.

“But... a servant of Lord Vraxor!” Tresse said desperately. “Who could have...”

“I did,” Arvis said with a shrug. “One of them, at least. The Atma Knight Rahze el’Dax killed another, and...” He abruptly trailed off.

“You did?” Tresse said icily. She leaned forward, her violet eyes glittering dangerously. “Who else dared?”

If Arvis felt menaced, he gave no sign of it. Raine recalled Myrren slinging bolts of darkfire and balls of flame and remembered her saying her power came from her mother’s blood. *And she was only half succubus. How powerful is a full one?*

“I fear I cannot tell you that,” the Morin said, almost as if embarrassed.

“Why not?” Tresse demanded. “Who are you trying to protect?” Then her gaze whipped around to Warde, who was avoiding her eyes. “You!”

He nodded reluctantly. “I had no choice.”

“No choice?” she snarled.

“The priest would have killed me,” Arvis interrupted her gently.

Tresse stared at him. “Arvis, you are no criminal.”

Warde laid a hand on Tresse’s. “Wife, that is what he is saying. Those priests...” He hesitated. “...violated Lord Vraxor’s law,” he finally concluded, forcing himself to say it.

She pulled her hand away. “Do not speak to me so,” she said coldly. “The servants of Lord Vraxor could never betray his holy laws. I refuse to believe it.”

“Warde was like you once,” Arvis murmured. Tresse turned her

## BROKEN RING

gaze to the window, studiously ignoring both of them.

Arvis glanced at Warde, who looked miserable, and shrugged. Then he said to Raine, “You must be prepared. The danger to you is greatest now, with the Choosing so soon and the others becoming desperate.”

“Others?” Raine asked. “But we killed all of House Arlavan’s assassins! Myrren destroyed the Hunter, and...”

“Do not be a fool,” Arvis warned him. “They will be all the more desperate for their other attempts having failed. And Arlavan is not your only rival. There are several other houses competing, though all of lesser standing. This year, I believe Destin and Arlavan are the only houses that have a chance at success.”

“How many are there?” Raine said, thinking to himself, *How many people are out to kill me?*

“Half a dozen, perhaps less,” the Morin said dismissively. “It is no matter. Most of the lesser houses are so poor they cannot even afford to hire decent assassins.”

“Vraxor save me,” he muttered, “I don’t want to die competing for a throne I don’t even want.”

Arvis looked at him sharply. “You are not going to die. Your family asked me to protect you, and I will keep my end of that arrangement. Besides, your parents are already in Ral Vraxan, awaiting you. They have seen to it that you will have bodyguards at all times.”

*Everything is planned out for me*, he thought miserably. “What about after the Choosing? Am I going to need bodyguards for the rest of my life?”

“Of course not,” Arvis said. “After it is over, you will have no more need of them one way or another.”

“What’s the *point* of it all? I know I’m not going to have any real power! I know the ruling council of priests is going to make all the decisions!”

“Even though the position is ceremonial, you will have considerable power. More than you think. And the prestige it brings is invaluable.”

“What do I care about prestige?” he said bitterly. “For *that* I’m split up with my new wife? For that I had a Hunter and three priests of Lord Vraxor chase me halfway across Caliel?”

The Morin sounded annoyed. “To put it succinctly, yes. Now stop whining. You are irritating me, and you do not begin to comprehend the things you are involved in.”

Raine lapsed into humiliated silence, glaring at Arvis as his face burned. He half-considered trying to pull open the carriage’s door and escape. He might have tried, he thought almost seriously, if he had not known how fast Arvis was.

“Who am I competing against?” he asked finally.

Arvis looked up from whatever he had been thinking about. “Competing against...? Ah. I do not know. Arlavan’s original candidate was Lord Vandalus, but he was killed some months back by an assassin. But whoever it is now, you may rest assured that...”

“I thought you said the other noble houses competing couldn’t afford to hire assassins,” Raine interrupted him.

“They cannot.”

Raine frowned. “Then who...?”

Arvis laughed darkly. “Who else?”

It took a moment for the realization to sink in. “You can’t be serious!”

The Morin’s grin widened, showing a few sharp teeth. “I am perfectly serious. Ask them yourself when you get there.”

Raine’s head spun. *Did my parents really hire assassins to kill people competing with me? They couldn’t have. They wouldn’t!*

Arvis leaned forward as if he knew what Raine was thinking. “Do you really think your parents would sit idly by while their rivals attempted to have you killed?” he said, grinning. “They managed to eliminate several key members of House Arlavan. You should be pleased; not only does it increase your chances of victory, it is compensation for what you have had to go through to evade their own agents.”

*That makes me feel so much better,* Raine thought bleakly.

The carriage traveled through the wharf district and to the city’s gates with little fanfare, though as Raine looked out the window he noticed many curious looks from the residents of the rougher parts of Ral Ardenite. Beggars squatting in the streets and swarthy sailors paused to watch the ornate stagecoach pass by. They traveled uneventfully through the city gates and to the docks, and the carriage came to a stop on one of the city’s piers. Arvis was out first, glancing around as if he expected some danger. Tresse followed second, immediately stalking off and ignoring Warde’s attempts to catch her gaze, while Raine got out last, unwillingly.

At the end of the pier was docked a large vessel, one main mast and two smaller ones, with a tapered iron prow that made Raine think it had been a warship. However, what he noticed more was the largest sail, where the symbol of his house, a swooping hawk clutching a bundle of forked lightning bolts, was blazoned hugely in red on the black sailcloth. “What is this?”

“The ship that will take you to Ral Vraxan, of course,” Arvis said. “We must arrive in style.”

Raine could only stare at the huge ship. He could not get adjusted to the idea that it was all for him. “I don’t feel worthy of all this...”

“You are going to be the Sovereign,” Arvis said. “You are going to rule over all of Lord Vraxor’s lands. Keep that in mind.”

As soon as they boarded the ship, someone hurried to greet them, a tall, lean man dressed in a long gray robe with Destin’s symbol on the

## BROKEN RING

breast. “Master Raine!” he exclaimed, bowing low before them. “It’s been so long!”

“Rise, Daivan,” Raine said. “You know you don’t have to do that around me.”

“Forgiveness, Master Raine,” his childhood servant said, rising. “It is just that I have not seen you in so long. Such a handsome young man you have grown into!”

Despite himself, Raine felt his bad mood lightened a bit. “Thank you, Daivan. Why have you come here?”

“Your parents asked me to, young master. I was more than happy to meet you here, to accompany you to Ral Vraxan where—”

“That’s enough,” he interrupted gently. He had had enough talk of the Choosing for one day. “I get it.”

“As you wish, young master,” Daivan agreed. He glanced at the wedding band on Raine’s wrist. “You are married? Such a happy occasion! Where is your bride?”

Raine’s improved mood soured a bit. “She’s not here. It’s a long story,” he added. “I’ll tell you all about it later. Just show me to my cabin for now.”

“Of course, young master,” his servant said. “If you will follow me?” He turned and hurried off. Raine followed, vowing to himself he would lock himself in once he got there. He did not want to see Arvis or anyone else before they got to Ral Vraxan.

Their ship set off that day, sliding down the Merillinon River. Raine did his best to seclude himself in his cabin, an arrangement which Arvis seemed perfectly content with, and Warde and Tresse were off separately by themselves. However, Daivan would not leave Raine alone; his servant kept pestering him until he admitted he had married the daughter of Warde Kahliana. The news nearly sent Daivan into a frenzy of joy; Raine had to yell at his servant to convince him he did not want a shipwide celebration of the marriage.

On the morning of the fifth day after they left Ral Ardente, the ship emerged from the river mouth onto the Esshen Sea. Raine stood at the bow while the sun rose, looking out to the south. The vast sea was deep blue with the last traces of night, but shot through with streaks of gold in the east where the sun was just beginning to peek above the horizon. In the west, the sky was still night-dark and speckled with fading stars. Raine steadfastly ignored the half of the Broken Ring that was visible—the rest, past the boundary where night sky became day, had vanished. Instead, he looked out over the waters. A mountain peak was barely visible, rising over the horizon in the distant south.

No matter how he tried to ignore the Broken Ring, though, he could not get the constellation out of his mind. It seemed to be mocking him, he thought bitterly; even though he had spent every night in his cabin,

the stars had penetrated its roof to pervade his dreams. Clenching his teeth, he forced himself to focus on the mountain slowly rising over the waters to the south. It did not help. Sharax, where the city of Ral Vraxan was, seemed to him to be every bit as much of an omen of doom as the stars.

By early morning, Sharax was somewhat bigger, a grayish-black shadow of a peak thrusting above the waters. Fixated on the mountain as if it challenged him, he did not notice Daivan until his servant stood next to him.

“A majestic sight, is it not, young master?” he asked.

The ship jolted slightly as its keel plowed through a wave, sending up a brief burst of spray. “I can’t stand it,” he muttered.

Daivan looked confused. “But why?”

Raine gestured bitterly at the island mountain. “Everything I’ve had to go through these past few months is leading up to this. Everything I...” He trailed off, unsure how to proceed. “If you knew what I’ve gone through, you’d feel the same,” he said finally.

“I see, young master,” Daivan said, though it was clear he did not. “But think of all you will be gaining!”

“That’s if I win,” Raine said grimly.

Around midday, their ship arrived at Ral Vraxan. They docked at a small port at the island mountain’s base and lowered anchor. As Raine disembarked, he looked up at the mountain.

Sharax was an enormous, shallowly sloping peak with a flat top. The ruling city sprawled across that flat shelf, a cluster of buildings and towers. On one side, a second, smaller peak rose above the city skyline, and built into the side of that was a dark structure that looked out over the land. It was the palace of the Sovereign and the ruling council of the priests, and it was where Raine would have to go. He regarded the city with dread.

“Look,” Arvis abruptly said. Surprised, Raine looked in the direction the Morin had indicated. Out over the waters, a huge ship was approaching from the south. Its main sail bore an image of a black flower in bloom twining around the blade of a dagger. It was the sigil of House Arlavan.

“We must go,” the Morin said, pushing Raine forward. “They will arrive soon. I want us to present ourselves to the council of priests first.”

“But we’re not done unpacking yet!” Raine protested. Servants were unloading crates and chests from the ship; he had not even known he was bringing so much. Arvis had handled the packing. “I wanted to see my parents first.”

“There will be time for that later,” Arvis growled. “This is important. We must leave now.”

Minutes later, despite Raine’s protestations, the carriage had been brought up from belowdecks and the horses were pulling it up the

## BROKEN RING

mountainside, with Raine, Arvis, Warde and Tresse inside. Daivan had been left behind to supervise the unpacking.

They were not very far ahead of Arlavan's ship. It docked before they had gotten more than a short distance up the mountain, allowing Raine to see it unloading a carriage like his. The rival ship was definitely bigger than the one he had arrived in; it had docked next to it, as if to overwhelm the smaller vessel. "Do you really believe I can win this, Arvis?" he asked despairingly, watching antlike figures scurry about on the docks.

"Of course," Arvis said. "And they must as well. If they did not, they would not have gone to the considerable expense of sending a *vailin* after you."

The words were little comfort. As their carriage made its way up the mountainside, Raine looked down again and watched House Arlavan's own procession head out after them. He wished Myrren were there.

The days passed slowly as Myrren, Shial and the Atma Knights rode south. They saw few other travelers, only the rolling wild country. Leafless trees glistened with meltwater, smaller streams that fed into the river trickled and gurgled beneath sheets of ice, and large gray-bellied clouds dominated an otherwise clear blue sky. However, the nights were cold, and most days they rose to find the tracks they had made the previous day erased by nightly flurries. They rode throughout the day and stayed up late into the night, talking around the fire. For Myrren, it was almost ideal; only two things kept it from being perfect.

The first was Kail. Though not unfriendly, the young Atma Knight was obviously wary about her presence. He rarely spoke to her or participated in her conversations with Shial, merely sat off to the side and watched her with his hooded look. She knew of his relationship with Shial and tried not to interfere, but could not help feeling like she was keeping them apart every time she was with her friend.

Second was Raine. Despite the fight they had had, she missed him greatly, and several times caught herself wishing to return to Ral Ardenite and see him again. She did watch the Merillinon often as they rode downriver, hoping to see his ship pass by on the way to Ral Vraxan, but only a few vessels sailed past them and none looked like one he might have taken. During the day, she was happy, but each night before she fell asleep, there was always the pain of longing.

The evening of the fourth day after their departure from Ral Ardenite found them on the southern reaches of the river bank, near where the Merillinon joined the Esshen Sea. The four of them were sitting around a fire whose light pushed back the wintry darkness all around them. Shial and Myrren were talking, and Rahze had even joined the conversation, but as usual Kail sat next to Shial almost protectively, watching but not speaking.

“Shamino hadn’t been practicing for weeks. He hated it,” Shial explained. “The judges didn’t even think he’d hit the target. Needless to say,” she said, laughing, “when he hit the bull’s-eye, they were impressed.”

“Did you hit it when it was your turn?” Myrren asked eagerly.

Shial grinned. “I hate to brag, but my arrow split his.” Myrren laughed at that. “But,” she went on, “I think that was the night he first discovered the lute. I remember feeling bad for him after the contest, so I went to find him... and there he was, sitting next to the fire with it in his hands, and a circle of children around him. I don’t think he’d ever played before—it was the first time I ever saw him play, anyway—but they were all staring at him. And no wonder. He was making some of the most beautiful music I’d ever heard. He always had a talent for it.”

“Did he ever become a ranger?” Myrren asked.

“Oh, he did,” Shial said. “It took some time, but he did. He was never really too eager, though. Music was always his first love.”

Suddenly, Myrren felt an electric tingling up her spine, the sensation of magic nearby. Something small and bright plummeted down out of the sky, through the trees’ bare branches, jerked to a stop a few paces off the ground, and vibrated up and down several times before it finally came to rest. Myrren started at the apparition—all of them did, except Rahze—but the little glowing ball hung there in the air, unmoving.

As calmly as if he had been expecting it, the elder Atma Knight reached forward and touched the ball of light with a gloved finger. It shimmered, then words sounded out of nowhere. The speaker’s voice was powerful, commanding, yet serene, rich with wisdom. “This is Elabrian Codaine,” it said. “By order of the High Council, all Atma Knights are to return to Cyrene immediately. This takes precedence over any current assignments. Be swift; the balance of the world depends on—” In mid-sentence, the words cut off. The light ball blinked out of existence.

Rahze and Kail both looked as stunned as Myrren could ever remember seeing them. Hesitantly, Kail spoke. “What reason could they possibly have for that?”

“I do not know,” Rahze said, “but let us find out.” He gestured with one finger, moving it through the air over the fire in a precise pattern, and murmured a spell under his breath. Light from the fire swirled upward, gathered and collected into a little glowing ball that looked exactly like the one that had just delivered the mysterious message.

“This is Rahze el’Dax,” he said to the creation. “I received the message from the High Council. I need all further information that can be provided. Kail and I are on the way to Cyrene.” He touched the ball with a finger, and it zipped off into the sky and was gone. “We can only wait for further news now. But we must not delay. That is as urgent a message as I have ever heard from them.”

“Why do you suppose it cut off like that?” Shial asked.

## BROKEN RING

Rahze looked grim. "I do not know."

Myrren noticed Kail was fingering the hilt of his sword. "Will this interfere with my initiation, master? Or our marriage?"

"Do not worry, lad," Rahze said. He was the picture of cool serenity again. "This cannot be as serious as it might seem. What force could possibly harm the Atma Knights at the heart of their power?"

"I suppose you're right," Kail said. He did not sound convinced.

"Let us sleep now," Rahze said. "This is a night to unsettle the imagination. We will all feel better with some rest." Allowing them little time to argue, he stood and began to scuff snow over the fire. Myrren would have preferred to stay up, but Kail submitted without arguing and Shial went along with him.

Once the fire was out and they were all in their sleeping rolls, however, she lay awake for a time, looking up at the sky. The Broken Ring hung in the heavens, a hazy, glittering circle of stars that stood out so sharply against the rest of the celestial lights that it was impossible to miss or mistake it for something else. For a long time she gazed off into the constellation, into the place where the ring was broken, as if the solution to a mystery lay within the black gap. Rolling over onto her side, she glanced over at Kail and Shial—two shadows nestled against each other as they slept—and sighed.

Then she froze. Was that a black silhouette among the trees? The darkness made it impossible to be certain, but the more she squinted, the more she was sure she saw a humanoid shape standing at the edge of their camp. She did her best to see it more clearly, but the shape remained formless and indistinct. Then it seemed to move, a trick of the shadow, like a branch swaying, advancing towards her. In an instant of sheer panic, she closed her eyes as if she could banish it that way.

For a moment she lay in silence, eyes tightly shut, not even daring to breathe. Finally she forced herself to open her eyes, letting her breath out with a soft gasp.

The menacing dark shape was gone without a trace. Where she thought she had seen it, now there were only shadowed tree branches swaying softly in the breeze. Their shapes were darkened and indistinct, but there was nothing there that did not seem to belong. *Maybe I only imagined it*, she thought weakly, but it did nothing to ward off the suffocating grip of fear. Shivering, she huddled into her bedroll as deeply as she could. It was a long time before sleep came.

It was night, but a night blacker than black; a dark forest where everything was visible only as barely distinguishable shadows, and the darkness pressed down as if it had weight. Myrren ran through this forest, stumbling at every step, struggling as if sunk in mud. "Raine?" she called, for she knew Raine was lost in this forest, and she had to find him. "Where are you?"

"Myrren?" he called back, his voice floating through the

suffocating blackness. “Myrren, help me!”

“Raine, where are you?” she cried, just as she bumped into someone. “I’m sorry—” she instinctively began, looking up—and then she saw who it was.

A dark silhouette stood before her, a human form shaped out of shadow, almost invisible against the pitch-black forest. Myrren staggered back, her breath catching in her throat. Before she could scream, though, the silhouetted thing shifted and reshaped itself. It grew taller, wider; broad wings erupted from its shoulders, its hands writhed and became claws. Its face turned to Myrren, and two burning red eyes sprang alight. She did scream then, and the Hunter reached out for her...

With a gasp, Myrren sat bolt upright. Almost frantically, she clawed her tangled, sweaty bedroll away, and sat there, breath steaming in the chill air, as she tried to fight down the remnants of the nightmare panic. Trying to convince herself it was not real, she looked around.

They were still in the clearing where they had set up camp last night. To the west, the dirt road melted away into a dense stand of leafless white birch trees and older oaks, while to the east, it softened into a cattail and reed-choked mire before the black waters of the Merillionon swallowed it completely. Their sleeping rolls were set up in a circle around the ashes of last night’s fire. Rahze, Kail and Shial were all asleep. The sun was barely over the horizon.

The previous night had been warm, so Rahze had not set up their tent, but now there was an unfriendly chill in the air that bit into Myrren. She shivered, but did not get up to get her cloak. The few paces to where it hung on a tree limb seemed like miles. The nightmare fear was still upon her, and she did not dare move. Instead, she huddled into her bedroll as the cold cut deep into her.

Shial awakened slowly, stirring languorously in the delicious warmth of Kail’s arms. She rolled over and looked around their camp—and saw Myrren sitting upright in her sleeping roll. Her friend was only wearing her underclothes, and the icy air had reddened her face and hands, but she sat there as if she did not even notice.

“Myrren!” she exclaimed, slipping out of Kail’s arms. “What are you doing?”

Myrren’s violet eyes looked haunted. “Just thinking.”

Shial stood up, slid her boots on and hurried to the tree where Myrren’s cloak hung. Taking the garment down, she returned to Myrren’s side and wrapped the cloak around her friend, tucking in its edges to keep the cold out. “Are you all right?”

“A little numb, maybe,” she said distantly.

Shial sat down on her sleeping roll. “Why didn’t you put your cloak on?”

Myrren did not appear to have heard. “It’s hunting us, Shial.”

## BROKEN RING

“What?” she asked. “What is?”

“I don’t know. But I can feel it...”

Kail stirred and sat up. “Mmm... Shial? What’s going on? Is something wrong?”

“She says something’s hunting us,” Shial said. Myrren looked away.

“Is that so?” Kail asked, looking in her direction warily. “I sense nothing.” Myrren did not reply.

At that moment, Rahze awoke. He immediately noticed them all sitting around the cold firepit. “Something the matter?” he inquired.

“Myrren thinks something is hunting us, master,” Kail said, giving a slight but noticeable emphasis to the second word.

“Does she?” he asked neutrally. The Atma Knight tilted his head slightly as if listening to a distant sound, then relaxed. “You may put your nerves at ease, Myrren. There is nothing. Most likely it was just a nightmare.”

“How can you tell?” she said quietly. Shial wanted to reach out to her friend—whether what Myrren said was true or not, she was obviously distressed—but she did not want to turn her back on Kail.

“The Atma Knights can sense the balance of the world around them,” Rahze explained. “Trust me, Myrren, if there were something after us, I would be able to feel it. It is not a matter of magic; no spell of concealment could prevent any adversary from tilting the balance somewhat.”

“It was real,” Myrren insisted softly. “This is the second time I’ve seen it.”

“You heard my master,” Kail said sharply. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Kail, please,” Shial implored him. He returned her look and relented, but he did not take his hooded gaze off Myrren.

Pulling on his boots, Rahze walked to Myrren’s side and put a hand on her shoulder. “I do not doubt that you are troubled. But you have nothing to fear. If nothing else, there are two Atma Knights to protect you. Most likely, these unpleasant dreams are arising from your longing for your husband. Trust me, you will rejoin him soon.” She did not look very reassured, but he straightened up and turned to them. “Come. Let us be on our way.”

They worked quickly, breaking camp and mounting their horses for the day’s ride. But as they set off, Shial heard Myrren speak, so softly Rahze and Kail did not catch it. Her own elven ears could barely pick up the words.

“It was no dream,” she whispered.

The biting chill grew no worse, but the clouds in the sky grew thicker. By early afternoon, the snow was whirling down, forcing them to

ride with heads bowed as it blew into their faces. The snow on the ground grew deeper until their horses floundered with every step, and still the blizzard continued.

"We have to find shelter!" Shial said over the whistle of the wind. "We'll freeze if we stop... but the horses can't take much more of this!"

"Agreed," Rahze said. His voice was as calm as ever; raising it to be heard over the wind was his only concession to the weather. "I believe there is a waystation near here. Old and disused, but it will provide shelter. We may be able to reach it before dark."

Shial's horse suddenly stumbled in the deep snow. She lurched in the saddle and nearly fell, but clung to the reins. "We're not going to make any progress this way, especially if this gets any worse!" Snow-laden tree branches trembled in the wind, dusting them with sprays of fine white powder. "I'm the only one without magic. Can't any of you change the weather or something?"

"Runic magic is not suited for affecting things of the elements," Rahze said, "but perhaps Myrren can do it."

"Do what?" Myrren asked. "Even if I knew how to stop a storm, there's no way I could change this! It's too big!"

"There is no need," Rahze said. "Simply clear a path for us."

Myrren shook her head, dislodging snow from the hood of her cloak, but acquiesced. "I'll try." She lowered her gaze and concentrated; her eyes closed intently.

And she gasped, swayed and fell from her horse into the snow. Shial leaped down immediately, taking Myrren's hand and pulling her to her feet. "Myrren, are you all right?"

"It's here!" she said. "I felt it! Or... rather... it felt me, when I drew the magic." She pointed shakily to a nearby stand of large gray trees. "There! It's watching us."

"Kail," Rahze said calmly, "go search."

"But, master—" Kail began to protest.

"Do it, lad!" Rahze ordered him. Kail looked defiant, but grudgingly drew his sword from a loop at his belt and spurred his horse forward. Blade held out before him, he rode toward the trees.

Shial looked in the direction Myrren had pointed. She saw nothing except gray and white, the leafless trees and the falling snow. "Are you sure, Myrren? What does it look like?"

"I don't know... It's all black."

"I don't see anything," Shial said. "Could you be mistaken?"

"No!" she said emphatically. "I can *feel* it. I know it's there."

Shial brushed at Myrren's cloak, sweeping some of the loose snow off. "We have to find you shelter and some dry clothes," she said, unnerved by her friend's strange behavior. "If this gets soaked, it won't keep you warm any more."

For a long minute, they waited with their eyes on the trees. Then,

## BROKEN RING

suddenly, Myrren said, "It's gone." A moment later, Kail rode back to them, his horse's hooves spraying snow, and sheathed his blade.

"Nothing, master," he reported. "I searched thoroughly. Nothing but trees and snow."

Rahze looked up at the gray-clouded sky. "I am sorry, Myrren. We must ride now; we have much ground to cover before we reach the waystation." Myrren got back up onto her horse and Shial hers. "Can you clear a path?" the elder Atma Knight asked her.

Myrren shook her head. "No... no. I won't risk it. I think it's attracted to my magic."

"Kail?" Rahze asked.

Kail looked stricken. Shial, knowing what a strain his magic was on him, was about to raise a protest when he held up a hand. "I'll try, master," he said, bowing his head.

For a moment, there was nothing. Then the wind shifted, and the falling snow swirled around them rather than landing on them. Kail's grimace of concentration tightened, and the snow ahead of them slid aside as if parted by invisible hands, leaving a path of bare earth and frozen leaves. They rode forward, their way now unimpeded, but Shial could not help looking back at the grove where Myrren had insisted their unseen follower had been. She saw nothing except the trees.

As they rode, the snow continued to part before them to leave a clear path. Shial looked at the drifts on either side, the borders of which were as sharp as if sliced by a knife. The snow was surprisingly deep, and she wondered how much longer Kail could maintain this magic.

They made excellent time on the magically cleared path despite the blizzard, which raged until it seemed as if they were riding through a white tunnel. By the time it began to darken, though, they had seen no sign of the waystation, and the storm showed no hint of abating.

Rahze frowned at the beginnings of night in the sky. "We are not far. Lad, rest."

They drew their horses to a stop and Kail let his breath out with a gasp. The snow immediately began to touch them again, fluttering down to fill in the trail ahead. Shial reached out a hand, and Kail took it gratefully as if to draw strength from her. Beneath the hood of his cloak, he was red-faced and panting for air. "How are you feeling?" she asked him.

He took a drink from his canteen and gave her a tired, weak look. "Exhausted... I've never had to use my magic for so long at a time."

She squeezed his hand comfortingly. "Can you keep on?"

"I don't think so," he said. "I need to rest."

"You did well, lad," Rahze assured him. "We will make it the rest of the way." Riding at the rear, Myrren lowered her head and let the hood of her cloak drape her face.

After giving Kail several minutes to rest, they started off. The going was rough as soon as they reached the limits of the cleared path; the

horses floundered in deep snowdrifts, and their progress became painfully slow. Night came quickly, and before long they were riding through darkness.

“How much farther, Rahze?” Shial asked in growing desperation.

The Atma Knight reached into his saddlebags and withdrew one of the things they had picked up in Ral Ardente—a slim metal rod tipped with a glass globe. He twisted something on the rod and the globe came alight, filling with soft yellow brightness to show them the way. The magical light would guide them where the wind and snow would extinguish a normal torch.

“Not much farther, I hope,” he said. “The horses need to rest as well.”

Despite his words, the waystation had not appeared after another hour of travel. The horses were exhausted, and they had been forced to dismount and walk, slogging their way through the deep snow. Shial was barely able to go on; her clothing was soaked and the wetness was seeping into her boots. The chill was penetrating to her skin, battling with the heat of her fatigue and making her muscles cramp. Myrren, in her already wet cloak, and Kail with his prior fatigue, looked even worse. Though it was only a few hours past sundown, the forest was as dark as midnight. Only Rahze’s glowing torch allowed them to see the snow that continued to fall.

“I... can’t go on,” she finally forced out, dropping the reins.

“I’m almost frozen,” Myrren agreed. “We... we’ll have to set up the tent and try to spend the night here.”

“There is no need,” Rahze said. He extinguished their torch, but there was still light: a comforting yellowish glow, a spot of brightness through the trees. “That is the waystation. It must already be occupied. Come!” He started forward, and Shial followed with a surge of renewed energy.

The trees thinned out as the ground rose up into a dome-shaped hill, blanketed with white by the snow. But it was no natural hill: there were narrow slitted windows through which the warm yellow light glowed. In the south side of the hill there was a stone door, carved with ornate patterns. To Shial, the little waystation was sanctuary, as welcoming as the trees of the Shaelwood.

Rahze strode forward to the door. “There should be room for the horses within as well, if—”

He got no further. The trees rustled violently, dislodging a shower of snow, and a dark form plunged down from the branches, landing between them and the door, blocking their way. “Who are you?” it demanded. “Come no further on pain of your life!” The dark form whipped back a hand as if to strike, and burning green light slashed through the darkness.