

ADAM LEE

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Even many years later, she remembered the candlelight.

When it was just the two of them in their small shack of a house, things were peaceful. She helped tend their little vegetable plot outside, pulling weeds and raking leaves. When the plants were ready to pick, she helped her mother cook dinner in the tiny, dingy kitchen, standing on a chair so she could stir the sauces that bubbled on the stove in the big, shiny copper pot, and fetched water from the well outside so it could be washed and dried afterward. They played cards together at the table into the night, talking and laughing in the soft waxy light of the candles. When it was time for bed, her mother would tuck her in and sing a soft, wordless song to lull her to sleep. She remembered the feel of her mother's hands, the strong, silky brown fingers curling around her own, and the way the lone candle in her bedroom seemed to outline her mother's dark hair in a thin golden halo.

They had peace for weeks on end, sometimes. But when her father came home, everything was different.

She remembered the stiff, formal black of his uniform, the brassy gleam of its buttons. She remembered the way the kitchen always smelled when he was home, the musty, medicinal tang that came from the green glass bottles he heaped on the table. And he never smiled. She supposed it must have happened sometimes, but in her every memory, a bitter, sullen look burned on his face, as though he had been grievously offended by a stranger and was constantly suspicious that anyone might be the guilty party.

They rarely cooked or played cards when he was home. Whenever he was around, she could feel the tension thick in the

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air, like the smell of a distant thunderstorm on a summer night. Sometimes they ate around the table, pushing aside empty bottles to make room, spooning stew into their mouths in silence. Sometimes there was a screaming fight, and they didn't eat supper at all.

On those nights, Wyre went to bed early. Trying to quiet the ache in her stomach, she huddled in the darkness of her bedroom, in the furthest corner of her straw-filled bed, as close to the wall as she could get. She could hear her parents' voices, muffled by the closed door but still loud, angry. The only light in her room was the thin line of candlelight along the bottom of the door, which was always flickering as shadows moved back and forth across it. Sometimes it would end with a slamming door, or shattering glass; sometimes with a cry and the heavy thud of a blow.

Whenever that happened, she pulled the sheet over her head, shivering with fear, uttering silent prayers for protection. *Please, great Lord Vraxor, make it stop. Make him go away. Let me sleep so that I can wake in the morning and find him gone.* But sleep, on those nights, rarely came until the candle had gone out in a wisp of smoke and the gray light of dawn was seeping in.

* * *

Wyre knew from an early age that strange things sometimes happened around her. She had never told anyone, not even her mother, fearful of what it might mean.

There was the summer day she'd spent working in the garden. Their herbs were growing abundantly, and her mother had asked her to clear a new patch of ground so they could plant more. Wyre was eager to help, but it was hot, sweaty, exhausting

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work—chopping at stubborn weeds and digging furrows in the hard ground with a hoe—and after a long afternoon, she was filthy, scratched all over by thorns, besieged by clinging burrs, and thoroughly miserable. *I wish these weeds would just die!* she thought in frustration.

Nothing had happened then; at least, nothing she'd noticed. But her mother had called her from indoors, asking her to fetch a bucket of water so they could wash up for dinner. When she'd returned the next day to finish her interrupted task, she froze in amazement. In the patch of ground she hadn't yet cleared, all the weeds were withered and black.

Then there was the time her mother had gone into town to buy some supplies for their kitchen. Wyre was playing behind their house, imagining herself a heroic soldier like her father, waving an invisible sword as she defended their home from invading enemies. Then she turned the corner—and froze when she saw a large, shaggy stray dog, all black and almost as big as she was. When it saw her, it bared its teeth and growled, a low, violent sound like ripping fabric.

In a sudden panic, she backed away as fast as she could, almost tripping over her feet, but the dog followed. Foam dripped from its muzzle as it snarled, padding slowly towards her, until she was backed up against the wall of their house.

Cornered, with nowhere to run, she desperately tried to scare it off. "Go away!" she screamed, thrusting out a hand—and she felt something inside her, a strange, hot sensation. In that same instant, the dog flinched and yelped, then took off running.

And then there was the time with the candles.

When she was seven, her father came to stay with them

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for some weeks, one of his longest visits since her birth. As an officer in the military, he came home between campaigns. She gathered, in a confused childish way, that his army had just won a major victory and that many of the men had been granted leave as a reward.

That summer, their family went to church more than usual, three or even four times a week. Their church was a building of crude clapboard, nestled among scrub trees, in the little village that was a long walk down the road from their house. Behind the altar, a black iron stand shaped like Vraxor's trident held three long red candles, their flames filling the drafty interior with a soft light.

Most weeks, the services were conducted by an acolyte: a tall, shaven-headed man in black robes who would preach to them about glory and power, about the unimaginable rewards that awaited in the afterlife for those who were faithful followers of Lord Vraxor. Once a month, a priest would come from far-away Ral Ardente, an enigmatic figure robed and hooded in red that would read in a sonorous voice from the huge black *Book of Vraxor*, telling stories of battle and heroism from the ancient Godswar. Wyre imagined her father fighting in some of those battles.

Though they spent long hours in the rough wooden pews, Wyre liked going to church. She had always been a patient, quiet, imaginative child, and the time was no monotony to her. She could listen to the sermon and let her mind wander.

Besides, she and her mother were guaranteed peace for those hours. Her father was always on his best behavior at church; men and women would compliment him on his uniform and say how brave he must be on the battlefield, and he would bow his head and thank them in a deep cheerful voice. After

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church, on good nights, his jovial mood would last even after they got home, and Wyre would sit at his feet and listen while he told stories from his life in the army.

It was on one such day that they came home after church. It was early evening darkening to dusk, the deep blue sky banded with black clouds. Her father seemed peaceful, and Wyre felt hopeful as her mother bustled about the house lighting candles and setting the table for dinner.

As her mother set the first plate on the table, her father rose from his seat. He looked at her mother calmly, and without a change of expression, slapped her across the face.

The crack of the slap echoed through the house. Wyre froze in sudden fear as her mother staggered, pressing a hand to her face.

“I’m very disappointed in you, Marissa,” her father said coolly. “You’re much too quiet in public. When people praise me for my valor, I expect you to be at my side to accept the compliment graciously. If you hang back without speaking, as you did today, they’ll think you don’t respect me.”

“I’m sorry, my love,” she said. “I’ll try to do better.”

“See that you do.”

He returned to his dinner as if nothing had happened.

But somewhere within Wyre’s mother, a tiny spark of rebellion flamed. She looked down at him and added, “But—”

In the space of a breath, her father was roaring with anger. “Don’t you *ever* speak back to me!” he bellowed, rising from the table in a whirlwind of fury. He lashed out and struck

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her across the face, backhanding her so hard it knocked her off her feet.

She cried out as she fell hard, and the jarring impact of her body on the floor knocked over the candelabra she'd lit. It fell off the table, the flames flickered and went out, and their house was plunged into sudden darkness.

"Wyre!" her father screamed. "You get those lights back on, girl!"

Wyre, who'd been sitting in silence the whole time while gripping the edge of the table until it hurt, was jolted into motion and scurried under the table.

Almost immediately, her hand closed on the smooth iron base of the candlebra. But the box of matches her mother had dropped was nowhere to be found. Clinging to the candle stand, she groped blindly across the floor, trying desperately to locate them.

"Wyre!" her father roared. "Now!"

She felt the panic rise up to engulf her, like a hot coal smoldering in her stomach. Then, something inside her seemed to snap. A tingling surge flowed down her arm, and with a soft *whoomph*, all three candles burst into life at once.

Too weak with relief to question what had happened, she rose, holding the lit candelabra, and set it on the table. Her father gave her a suspicious look, and her heart skipped a beat, but then he resumed eating dinner without another word.

After a moment her mother arose, wiping away a trickle of blood from the lump swelling at the corner of her mouth. She looked unsure what had happened, but Wyre was sitting silently,

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looking meekly down at her plate.

* * *

It was a day like any other in late autumn, two years after the strange incident with the candles. The days had a crisp chill in the air, and frost silvered the ground at nights.

It was early evening, and Wyre was returning home, heading toward their little house that glowed with yellow candlelight in the dusk. She had finished her chores early that day, and her mother had let her go down to the village to play with friends. She knew she was late for dinner, but she'd lost track of time, only remembering when her stomach growled with hunger. *But it should be a scolding, no more*, she thought to herself.

She pushed open the front door, and froze. As soon as she entered the house, she saw her father sitting at the table.

He wore his uniform, all fine black with shiny brass buttons and Vraxor's red trident on the breast, and carried a sword at his side in a scabbarded sheath of leather. But he was surrounded by bottles—more bottles than she'd ever seen, all green and brown glass, covering the entire surface of the table. His hair was mussed, his clothing disheveled, and there was a rank, sour smell in the air.

"There you are, my girl," he said as Wyre came in, in a heavy, slurred voice. "Come give your father a kiss."

The sight of him in this strange state frightened her. Wyre glanced to the side, where her mother was standing by the wall, near the kitchen area of their home. Her eyes were just slightly too wide, her face frozen, as if there was something she urgently wanted to say but dared not. But Wyre could read the

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message all too well, could hear it like a looming, oppressive weight in the air: *danger, danger.*

Seeing no alternative, Wyre went over hesitantly and embraced her father. He kissed her wetly on the cheek, roughly tousling her frizzy hair.

“Good girl,” he said. “Come and sit with me.”

Trying to edge away as much as possible, Wyre sat down at the table. Though he’d told her to join him, her father seemingly forgot she was there as he went on speaking, a rambling diatribe he had evidently been in the middle of when she’d come home. It wasn’t exactly to her or to her mother; he seemed to be addressing the air, in a slurred voice like the slow dripping of oil from a rusty drum.

“It’s a damn injustice, that’s what it is, Avagad getting the promotion to captain instead of me. They said *he* was a better tactician? Hah! That pig-shit idiot couldn’t find his own boots in the dark! They told me I wasn’t reliable! Me! Who says I’m not good enough, that’s what I want to know!” he snarled, suddenly angry. He banged a hand down on the table, making the bottles jump. “Who says?”

His strange talk was unnerving Wyre, and she instinctively tried to change the subject. “Mother, I’m hungry,” she said. “When will we have supper?”

Her father looked blearily at her. “Good question, Marissa. Where’s supper?”

Wyre’s mother came forward. The feeling of silent terror in the air around her seemed to sharpen, to coalesce.

“There... there isn’t any, my husband,” she said.

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“There’s nothing in the garden now, and we have no money...”

“Liar!” he snarled. “Don’t tell me there’s no food in my own house! What did you do with all that money I sent you? Did you give it to other men? Did you, you whore?”

“We spent it all,” she said shakily, gesturing towards the table.

“Don’t you lie to me, bitch. I know there’s more.” He began to rise from his seat, his voice getting louder. “Give it to me!”

All this time, Wyre had been gripping the edge of the table, holding it so hard her fingers were starting to hurt. Now something strange happened inside her, a feeling she’d had once before, as if she’d swallowed a hot coal. The table began to vibrate; the bottles shook and rattled, moving across its surface.

“What is this?” Her father turned on Wyre, who was speechless, paralyzed with fear. “What are you doing? You stop that! Stop it right now!”

He lifted a hand, and Wyre flinched, pulling in her arms to protect herself. But before he could strike, Wyre’s mother screamed at him. “No! You leave her alone!”

He whirled on her, baring his teeth, his face suddenly twisted in a frenzy of rage. He curled his hand into a fist and punched her, hard, in the side. With a startled, agonized gasp, Wyre’s mother sank to the floor. She curled up around the spot where he had hit her, wheezing.

“I’ll show you,” he snarled, standing over her. He lifted a boot—one of his shiny, polished army boots—and kicked her, deliberately, in the side.

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Wyre heard the sickening sound of the kick, a visceral thud, the crackle of a breaking rib. Her breath robbed by the first blow, her mother was unable to scream, but she made a sound, a hoarse, bubbling whistle. Before she could recover or move, he kicked her again. She tried to shield herself from the blow with an arm, and there was a second, sharper crack. Still voiceless, she whimpered in pain.

But her father still wasn't done. In a froth of blind anger, he drew back his boot a third time, aiming at her face—

"No!" Wyre barely realized the shrill scream had come from her own throat. Like a string stretched to the breaking point, her tortured endurance finally snapped. She shoved her chair back and leaped at him, grabbing at his arm, trying to pull him back. He roared as she clawed at him, scratching desperately at his arms and neck with her fingernails.

But she was only a child, and he was a grown man. After a moment, he regained his balance and backhanded her away, hard. The blow blinded Wyre with pain, and she was sent sprawling to the floor. She lay stunned, tasting blood in her mouth, feeling the slow, hot throb of that coal in her stomach.

Then his boots walked into her field of view, and panic seized her. Still hurting too much to run, she scrambled backwards, crabwalking away as her father loomed over her.

"You're just as bad as your mother," he snarled, disregarding the blood that dripped from the gouges along his face where she had clawed him. "Worthless bitches, the both of you. Well, I've had enough disrespect in my own house. I'm going to teach you a lesson once and for all. This is for your own good."

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She thought he was going to kick her and braced for the blow, but he didn't. Slowly, deliberately, he put a hand on the hilt of his scabbarded sword.

Wyre heard her mother cry out, a choking, frantic scream. But the world was narrowing now, shrinking until it only contained her and her father, who was still fixated on her. The hot coal in her stomach was flaming brighter, red-hot, white-hot. She thought she could feel it shining through her body, like a candled egg.

"This is the last time you'll ever—" her father began, and then, seized by a sudden vast and terrible anger, Wyre lifted her arm to point at him. And the fire inside her erupted.

It was like a fountain of molten lava filling her, like emerging from deep dark water and breaching the surface into sunlight, like being born anew. An aura of red light that coruscated like fire flamed into being around her body and burst outward like a storm, like a hurricane. Her father, advancing on her, was caught up in its fury like a leaf in a gale.

For an eyeblink of an instant, time slowed to a crawl, and she saw him hanging there, halfway in the act of drawing his sword, his face frozen in anger as if he hadn't yet realized what was happening. Then time surged forward, and her father was lifted up and flung into the wall with shattering force.

He dropped to the floor with a thud, as limp as a rag doll. In the same instant, the strange wild power drained from Wyre, and the living red fire faded away.

Wyre came back to herself with a jolt, and realized with a gasp what she had done. The fierce anger was gone, leaving only a horrible weight of guilt and fear. Hesitantly, she

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approached her father where he lay.

He was sprawled on his back, motionless. His legs were twisted, his outflung arm twitched as if struggling to move. Something about the shape of his body was wrong, as if all his insides were broken to pieces.

His eyes were wide and rolled wildly, whether with rage or fear or agony she couldn't tell. A tiny trickle of blood leaked from the corner of his mouth, into his short-cropped beard. He tried to speak, but it came out as a bubbling gurgle.

The sight of his broken body was terrifying, and what was worse, when Wyre turned away in panic and revulsion she saw her mother approaching. She was bloody, bruised, but on her feet; her right arm hung limp and useless at her side, and the look on her face was grim. Wyre flinched, knowing no possible punishment could make up for this. *She's going to take me to the priests*, Wyre thought in frantic fear. *They're going to put me on the altar!*

"I didn't mean it!" she cried, her hands held out in supplication. "I didn't—"

But her mother stopped without saying a word. Wyre realized her mother wasn't looking at her, but at the dying man on the floor. She spoke no word, but there was a grimly satisfied smile on her mother's lips, a terrible justice in her eyes.

She put her good hand on Wyre's shoulder, a comforting, familiar presence. Wyre took her mother's hand, standing protectively next to her, and like judges pronouncing a sentence, they stood and watched him die.

It didn't take as long as she had expected. Within minutes, his breathing grew rapid and shallow. His eyes

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widened, but they were unfocused, as if gazing off into some impossible distance. Then his panting breaths stopped altogether, and his eyes became still and clouded.

Wyre looked up at her mother. “Was it good, what I did?”

“Yes, honey,” her mother said warmly. Only a slight tightness to her voice betrayed the pain she was in. “It was good.”

“People will be mad at me, though,” Wyre said mournfully.

“Don’t you worry about that, daughter. I’ll make it all better. Trust your mother.”

She went to the far corner of the shack and knelt down. One-handed, she pried up a loose floorboard, revealing a small cavity underneath. She pulled out a small sack of rough-woven cloth that jingled heavily with coins.

“We need to go now, Wyre,” she said, holding the money bag.

“Go? Go where?”

“That’s not important. Just away from here. I was going to take you away soon, no matter what. Now we have to do it a little sooner, that’s all. Go to your room now and get anything you want to take with you, but do it quickly. Then meet me back here.”

It only took Wyre a few minutes to gather her meager possessions. Averting her eyes from her father’s body, she helped her mother put on a long cloak, draping it awkwardly

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over one shoulder to hide her broken arm and pinning it shut at the neck. Wyre's mother blew out the candles, plunging their home into darkness for the last time, and together they fled into the deepening night.

* * *

Emerging from the kitchen, the waiter set two bowls of steaming broth and a plate of brown bread on the table. He looked expectantly at them, until Wyre's mother flipped a coin to him. He snagged it out of the air, bowed and departed.

Wyre looked expectantly at her mother, who said, "Eat, my love. But not too fast. Your belly needs to get used to being full again."

Until that moment, Wyre's hunger had faded to a dull hollow feeling, just below the threshold of her notice. But as soon as the first bite passed her lips, it sprang back red and ravenous, and despite her mother's advice, she ate as fast as she could.

It had been two days since Wyre had killed her father in the grip of that strange power. They'd taken the back roads away, staying to overgrown and little-used paths and hiding in the underbrush if anyone passed them, drinking cold water from streams and sleeping huddled together under a thin blanket in the chill of the autumn night. All that time, they'd eaten not a bite, and though Wyre's belly throbbed with hunger pangs, she'd kept dutifully silent. Finally they'd come to this place, a nameless rural village many miles from where they'd lived, and her mother had decided it was worth the risk of finding an inn where they could eat and sleep in a bed.

But as soon as they'd entered the rough-hewn wooden

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building that served the little town as inn and tavern, they saw something that gave them pause. At a big round table in the middle of the room, five soldiers in black uniforms were carousing, laughing roughly as their tankards clashed together. Wyre's mother had glanced nervously at them as they walked past and claimed an empty table, but the soldiers seemed to pay them no mind.

Something else had been bothering Wyre since they'd sat down. In a far corner of the room, in a table half-in and half-out of shadow, a man sat by himself. He was dark-skinned like her, and wore black and carried a sword like the soldiers, but his clothes weren't a uniform; they were basic, unadorned black, dusty from the road. He was drinking from a tankard, but Wyre had an uncanny feeling that he had ordered it just for something to do. Every so often he picked up the ale, sipped it, and scanned the room. And every time, she felt his eyes on her, like an invisible pressure. It made Wyre nervous, wondering why the stranger was so intent on them, but so far she'd said nothing to her mother.

But then the food came. They were both starving, and they ate hungrily. Once the bread was reduced to crumbs and the spoons tinkled in their empty bowls, Wyre's mother got up, draping the cloak over herself to conceal her bad arm.

"Stay here, my love," she said, and walked up to the bar. "I'll be right back."

From the table, Wyre watched. The bartender, a sour-looking man in a stained brown apron, looked suspiciously at the strange woman who'd come to his tavern by herself.

"Is there a doctor in town, my good man?" her mother said, leaning her good arm on the bar and affecting a casual

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manner, despite the pain Wyre knew she was concealing. “I tripped and fell, and I have some bruises I’d like him to look at.”

The bartender shrugged. “Doctor Shull is probably who you want. He has a practice on the north side of town. Look for his shingle on the second floor.”

The town’s dusty main street ended at a tall, narrow building of weathered wood, with a rickety-looking wooden staircase that led up to a second-floor entrance. They climbed the steps and knocked on the door, and after a moment, a chain rattled and it was opened by an older man, mostly bald except for thin tufts of hair, his face thin-boned and quizzical like a bird’s.

“Yes?” he said querulously. “What do you want?”

“The innkeeper sent us to you, doctor,” Wyre’s mother said. “My arm is hurt. Will you look at it?”

“Yes, yes, come in,” he said impatiently. “Don’t stand around all day.”

The doctor’s office was a single tiny room, its walls covered in shelves that held row upon row of glass jars full of dried herbs and murky liquids. Only a curtain separated it from the even smaller area in back where the old man lived.

While Wyre sat on the edge of a low shelf, which groaned under her weight, her mother collapsed into the room’s only chair. Relieved of the burden of having to conceal her injury in public, her face was suddenly pale, and sweat sprang out on her brow. But she kept stoically silent, gritting her teeth, as the doctor took her broken arm, lifting and moving it dispassionately.

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“How did this happen?” he finally asked.

“My daughter and I were out picking berries,” she said. “I tripped and fell down a hillside. I rolled most of the way to the bottom.”

“Did you now.” His tone was neutral, giving no hint of whether he believed this. Wyre’s mother stayed silent.

“Well, the arm is definitely broken,” he said at last. “I will splint it, bandage the bruises, and then an herbal remedy for the pain. This is good”

“It’s good,” her mother said. “Thank you, doctor.”

Wyre sat in the corner, watching silently, while the doctor set and splinted her mother’s arm and tied a sling around her neck to hold it in place. She lifted her shirt, and he rubbed ointment on the ugly bruises on her side and wound tight cloth bandages around her ribs.

“Thank you for your time, doctor,” her mother said once he was done with his ministrations, dropping a few small bronze coins into his hand. Then she dug deep into her money pouch and added another coin—one that was larger, and glinted of silver. “And if anyone should happen to ask, we would be grateful if you told them that you knew nothing of us.”

The doctor raised an eyebrow. He made no reply, but the coins disappeared into a pocket, and he nodded silently.

“What was that for, mother?” Wyre asked as they made their way down the steps outside the doctor’s office. Her mother looked drawn and weak, but for the first time in some days, she was smiling.

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“We have to go far away from here, Wyre. Even farther than this. Someplace where no one will know us. It’s very important that you don’t tell anyone what happened. It has to be our secret, forever. Do you understand?”

“Because of what I did to father?”

“Yes, dear.”

“I still don’t know *how* I did it,” she said. “It was like there was something inside of me that was very big and angry, and all I had to do was let it out. Maybe I shouldn’t have done it. But it felt...” She tried to come up with the right word. “...good,” she finally decided on.

“It *was* good. It was what he deserved. But he has friends who may be very angry when they find out about it. We have to be sure that they never find us.”

“I’ll never tell anyone, then,” she said solemnly. “I promise.”

Her mother smiled. “Good girl.”

When they returned to the inn, both the soldiers and the man in black were gone, to Wyre’s relief. The booths and tables were filling up with men from the village, dusty, weatherbeaten farmers coming in from their fields for the evening, and the bartender and waiter were hurrying to serve them ale.

They had rented a room for the night, and now, unnoticed in the bustle, they climbed the stairs to the second floor where doors branched off a narrow hallway. Wyre’s mother turned the key in the lock, and the door opened with a squeal of rusty hinges.

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The room within was barely a cubicle, with a straw bed, a rickety table and a chipped ceramic pitcher and washbasin. It had a single small window, and the breeze rustled at the shutters.

Wyre's mother struck a match and lit the single candle on the table, illuminating the room in soft light. The smell of the molten wax was so much like home that it brought hot tears to Wyre's eyes, and she sat down heavily on the mattress.

She tried to hide it, tried to remain stoic and silent as her mother had done at the doctor's, but a gasping sob escaped her teeth. Her mother noticed it and sat down next to her.

"Do you feel homesick, my love?" she said.

Her vision blurry with tears, Wyre nodded.

Her mother stroked her hair. "I know it's hard, Wyre. I feel the same way. But everything is going to be much better from now on. Your new life will start tomorrow, I promise. Now, let's get some sleep, and you'll feel better in the morning."

Sniffling, she nodded. They lay down next to each other, Wyre's arms around her mother, her mother's one good arm around her. Her mother blew out the candle, and the room was plunged into darkness.

Wyre awoke sometime around dawn. Gray light peeked around the edges of the shutters, sketching the interior of their little room like a drawing in charcoal. Her mother lay next to her, deeply asleep, her chest rising and falling slowly as she breathed.

Something had awoken her, but at first she wasn't sure what. Listening intently in the stillness, she could hear faint voices, like people talking downstairs. But it wasn't a sound: the world felt somehow *off* in a way she couldn't describe, as if

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everything was tilted just slightly off normal. Whatever it was, the conviction suddenly seized her, it was a feeling of wrongness. Something was about to happen, something bad.

In a breath of panic, she grabbed her mother's shoulder, preparing to shake her awake, to warn her. But before she could, there were heavy, tromping footsteps on the stairs, and a sudden, thunderous pounding at the door that froze Wyre's heart in her chest.

“Open, in the name of Lord Vraxor!”

* * *

“We didn't do it!” Wyre's mother screamed as she was dragged down the main street of the town.

It was the soldiers they'd seen in the tavern who'd come to their door at first light. Aside from one older sergeant, a grizzled man with an ugly scar on his forehead, they were young men, scarcely more than boys. That was to be expected: the great majority of Vraxor's army was in the field, waging war in the west under General Warde Kahliana, part of the priesthood's great campaign of expansion and conquest. The soldiers who'd been left behind to serve as the home guard were, for the most part, the dregs: raw, inexperienced recruits, or those who'd proved unsuitable for other reasons.

But there were five of them, and they had swords. Even so, and even though Wyre's mother still had one arm in a sling, it had taken three of them to hold her and to haul her from their room as she fought back, struggling wildly. Wyre had been too terrified to resist as one of them seized her by the arm and dragged her roughly after.

“Don't waste our time,” the sergeant growled. “Your

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fate is sealed. We know what you've done. When the lieutenant didn't report for duty, the division commander sent a messenger to his home, and found his body. And we had an informant who told us we'd find you here."

In a sudden cold sweat of fear, Wyre thought of the strange man in the tavern, the one who'd been watching them so intently. *He knew who we were*, she thought. *He could tell what we did*. She tried to pull away, but the soldier's hand was like an iron band around her arm, dragging her remorselessly onward.

It was early in the day, the dawn sky streaked with gray and silver, and the town was mostly silent and asleep. Even so, there were a few people out on the street to witness the spectacle of the soldiers dragging their prisoners along. Wyre looked at them in mute appeal as her boots scraped along in the dust, but everyone they passed turned away, averting their eyes. No one wanted to get too close to the justice of Vraxor, lest they be swept up in it.

"I know my husband is dead," Wyre's mother pleaded, sobbing. "But we didn't kill him. We found him dead, and we were afraid. We ran because we thought we'd be blamed for it."

"Save your breath, lying whore. Lieutenant Tehliari was loved by all his men. He had no enemies. And you were the last one to see him alive."

"Maybe she's telling the truth, sergeant," one of the soldiers said uncertainly. "She's only a woman. They said every bone in his body was broken."

"Don't be stupid. Of course she did it," the sergeant scoffed. "Who do you think killed him if not her? This little brat of hers? Likely she poisoned him to make him unconscious, then

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beat him to death with a garden tool or some such thing.”

“So what are we going to do with her?”

The old soldier turned and spat. “Our orders said we could deal with the murderer on the spot.”

They were outside the little town now, having taken the dirt road past the point where the ramshackle houses and farm buildings ended. To the north and south were fallow, vacant fields, but here the road petered out in a small clearing, carpeted in dead grass, surrounded by peeling birch trees whose leaves were burned gray by an early frost. The trees whispered mournfully as the wind passed through them.

“This will do,” the sergeant decided. “Hold her down.”

As Wyre watched in frozen horror, two of the soldiers kicked her mother’s legs out from under her, forcing her to her knees with a startled gasp. A third took her by the shoulders and slammed her to the ground in front of the sergeant. She no longer seemed able to scream, but she panted in fear, hoarse, rasping, rapid breaths.

The sergeant loomed over her like a hangman. “Marissa Tehliari! You stand accused of the murder of an officer of the military. In the name of our dread Lord Vraxor, we find you guilty of this crime. The penalty is death.” He slowly, ceremonially drew his sword, a long, slender blade that glittered in the dawn’s cold light. “Such sentence to be enacted immediately!”

Now she did speak, her voice muffled by her face being pressed to the ground. “Please. Do whatever you want with me, but not in front of my daughter. Don’t make her see this.”

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The old soldier laughed grimly as he hefted his sword. “Condemned prisoners don’t get requests. Besides, it’ll be good for her. Teach her what happens to those who break Lord Vraxor’s law.”

“No!” Wyre cried. She knew she had given her promise, but this was too much to bear. “Let her go. It was me. I killed him. My mother didn’t do anything. Punish me instead!”

For an instant, there was silence. Then all the soldiers burst into rough, mocking laughter.

“Nice try,” the sergeant sneered, lifting his sword above his head, and her mother cried out, “Don’t look, Wyre. I love you, always. Don’t look!”

Still held tight in the fifth soldier’s grip, Wyre was rigid with dread. She wanted to scream, to cry out to her mother, but it felt as if her lips were welded shut. She turned her head away, shut her eyes tight. But she couldn’t close her traitorous ears, and she heard it all: the hiss of the sword’s fall, and the sound—an awful, heavy sound. It was the sound of finality, like a door closing on her life. Then there was only a soft patterning, like drops of rain.

Wyre wanted to keep her eyes shut forever. She never wanted to see anything ever again. But then she heard voices, and her eyes betrayed her as well. Almost involuntarily, she looked.

The soldiers, except the one holding her arm, were ranged around the clearing. The sergeant was still standing there with sword upraised, its edge now coated with red. Mercifully, someone had spread a cloak over her mother’s body.

“Now what, sergeant?” one of the soldiers was saying.

“What do we do with the girl?”

The sergeant shrugged. “We weren’t given any orders about her. But the division commander said to leave no loose ends. And she was in the company of a fugitive. We’ll deal with her too. Bring her here.”

Now Wyre did scream. As the soldier’s hand around her arm became an irresistible force pulling her forward again, she gave rise to a wordless howl of grief, terror and fury all combined. She fought back with all her might; she bit, kicked, scratched. But it availed her nothing. For a wild instant, she tried to summon the strange power she had wielded once before, but that too was gone. In place of that feeling like fire filling up her inside, she felt empty, hollowed out by despair. Whatever power had saved her from her father wasn’t coming again. Perhaps it was gone forever.

A brutal hand on the back of her neck slammed her down, pressing her cheek against the earth. Squirming in the soldier’s grip, in a frenzy of fear, Wyre glanced up and saw the glitter of the rising sword blade, saw the executioner raise his arm to strike—

“Pardon me, gentlemen.”

The voice was a stranger’s: not loud, but it carried with it an undertone of calm confidence, absolute self-assurance.

Pausing in the act, the soldiers froze in shock, all looking around to see who had spoken. Even Wyre looked.

Standing there, at the edge of the clearing, was the man in black from the tavern.

There was silence in the clearing. The squad of soldiers

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stared in bewilderment at the man in black. Even with her head pressed against the dirt and her vision stinging and blurred with tears, Wyre turned her head as much as she could to look at this intruder.

His skin was dark like her own, his curly hair cut short against his scalp. He wore plain black, not a military uniform, in spite of his calm, soldierly bearing and the silvery longsword that hung from a loop at his belt. But neither did he wear the red or black robes of the priests of Vraxor or their acolytes. Try as she might, Wyre couldn't fit him into any of the categories she knew. He was a stranger, an alien.

The soldiers evidently had the same difficulty. “Who are you?” one of them finally said.

The man gave an eloquent shrug. His gaze roved over the clearing, taking in the five of them, the girl they held down on the ground with the sword poised above her neck. Then he saw the cloak-draped form that had been Wyre’s mother. His eyes narrowed.

“Who I am is not important,” he said in a slow, sonorous voice. “When I saw this girl in the tavern the other day, I knew immediately what she was. I had to report back and ask for instructions. They came this morning, but not quite in time. And for that, I am most sincerely sorry.”

In astonishment, Wyre realized that the stranger’s last sentence was directed at her.

“Are you an agent of the *sen’vrax*?” the sergeant demanded. “What are your credentials? Identify yourself!”

The man in black smiled, but it wasn’t a friendly smile. There was something implacable about it, something merciless

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and cold. “No, soldier. I do not serve the priests of Vraxor. Here is all you must know. I am taking this girl with me, and you will do her no further harm.”

“We’ll see about that,” the sergeant said with a black scowl. “We acted under orders to execute justice on a criminal, and you’re trying to interfere with us. You can share the same fate. Men, kill him!”

With a slithering rasp of steel, three of the soldiers drew their swords and advanced. They were military weapons, heavy two-handed broadswords. The man in black drew his sword as well, but it seemed absurdly thin next to theirs, almost delicate.

And then something impossible happened. The man in black whispered something under his breath, what sounded like a single word. Wyre felt a sudden rush, a wellspring of burning heat—the same feeling as whatever power had possessed her when she’d killed her father. But it wasn’t coming from inside her. It was radiating from him, from the stranger. And in the same moment, the man’s sword burst into a corona of flickering orange fire.

The first soldier moved, a clumsy lunge. The man in black stepped aside casually; his burning sword flicked out, almost like a kiss, ringing against the soldier’s weapon and deflecting it.

But when the two weapons touched, the orange fire leaped from one to the other, like a bolt of lightning jumping from the clouds to a tall tree. The arcane energy seared down the length of the soldier’s broadsword, briefly outlining it in the same orange fire; but when it touched his hands, it grounded out with a spray of sparks and a sizzle like meat dropped in hot oil.

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The soldier screamed in pain, let his sword fall with a clang, and dropped to his knees, holding up his hands and staring at them in disbelief. They were burned black, the fingers curled into useless knots.

But the man in black was still moving. All in that same graceful step, his sword darted inward and upward, seemingly caressing the soldier's neck. There was a second explosion of orange fire, and he fell dead, his head half-severed.

The rest of the squad gaped in disbelief. Then Wyre felt the pressure lift from her neck. The soldier that had been holding her down in the dirt stepped away from her, drawing his weapon, and all the recruits charged their enemy, screaming in rage and fear.

But the man in black had been toying with them. Now he moved like a whirlwind, his sword weaving trails of orange fire in the air around him. The soldiers closed around him like a hedge, but they were impossibly clumsy and slow next to his effortless, brutal grace. He avoided their blows seemingly without trying, like a leaf drifting in the breeze. And every time that burning orange blade struck home, there was another burst of magical fire, shearing through metal and flesh alike with the same ease.

It was over before Wyre even thought to look away. All four of the young recruits lay dead around the clearing. Only the sergeant was left, and one of his hands was blackened and useless, seared by the merest glancing contact with the stranger's blade. His useless sword lay in the dirt at his feet.

As the man in black approached, the sergeant dropped to his knees. "Mercy!" he pleaded. "I surrender!"

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“Mercy?” The intruder smiled thinly. “Did you show mercy to that helpless woman?”

“Who *are* you?” the soldier said desolately.

The man in black ignored the question. “Consider your situation, soldier. You have asked me to spare your life. But if I did that, you would have to report that you had failed. Your squad is slain, your orders left uncompleted. The priesthood of Vraxor does not look kindly on failure. They would put you on their altar, stab you through the heart with their silver knives, and send your soul to your dark god’s keeping for its eternal punishment.”

He thoughtfully tapped his fingers on his chin. “Under the circumstances, I consider that this *is* a mercy.”

This time, Wyre did close her eyes, just as the stranger thrust. The sergeant’s scream was awful, but it was quickly cut short.

After a moment, she heard footsteps in the grass over her. Trembling with terror, she glanced up.

The man in black stood above her. He had quenched the orange flames of his sword and replaced it at his side. He held out a hand to her, but she flinched from those beckoning dark fingers, convinced that his touch would burn her the way it had burned the soldiers.

A look of compassion came to his face. “I will not hurt you, child. I promise. Take my hand.”

Hesitantly, she reached out and took his hand. His fingers were dry and cold, the skin smooth. His grip was firm; he pulled her to her feet.

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“My name is Rojan Sendai,” he said. “What is yours?”

“I... I’m Wyre. Wyre Tehliari.”

“Wyre. Do you know how I found you?” he said.

She shook her head mutely.

“You used magic. It was powerful—a very rare talent in one so young. The traces of it still clung to you, even several days later. When I saw you in the tavern, I knew immediately that you were like me.”

“Like you?” she said. “Who are you? What do you want with me?”

“I belong to the Order of the Atma Knights. Do you know what that is?”

When he saw she did not, he continued, “We preserve the balance of the world. We travel wherever we are needed, righting injustice, protecting the weak and the powerless, casting down cruel and unfit rulers and replacing them with ones who are better.

“It was the doctor who betrayed you, the one who tended your mother’s wounds. He sent a message to the local garrison commander. I dealt with him myself, then I came for you and your mother. I was too late to save her, and believe me, I am sorrier than I can ever say. But you are the important one, Wyre. You are the one I came for.”

The mention of her mother brought back everything that had happened the last few days, everything she had shut out of her mind in shock and terror. Suddenly she was bawling, sobbing too hard to speak. She had never dared to cry in front of her

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father; had never wanted to show weakness in front of her mother, who had depended on her help. Now it was like a river rising in flood, all those years of pent-up emotion spilling uncontrollably out of her. Her mother and father were dead, and she was hopelessly, awfully alone in the world.

She felt her feet lifted from the ground. Dimly, she realized the man in black had picked her up, was carrying her against his chest.

“The pain goes deep,” he said. “Your grief feels as if it could fill all the sea. I know. But it will pass, Wyre. The sun will rise again, and the world will be made anew.”

“Where are you taking me?” she sobbed, though she could barely muster the strength to care.

“When we find children with powers like yours, we take them to our home, the city of Cyrene. We can teach you to control the power you possess, to use it wisely and with intention. That is why I came for you. You will be one of us.”

That idea brought Wyre’s sobs to a startled halt. She thought of that red fire bursting out of her, that one moment where she had been awash in a feeling of absolute confidence, of invulnerability. She thought of the man in black and his burning sword, his strong voice, his confident bearing, the way he had so easily struck down those who’d wanted to hurt him. Like a door opening in the darkness, there was a sudden sense of possibility, a path ahead of her that she had never dreamed of.

“You... you can make me strong?” she said. “Like you? So no one will hurt me ever again?”

“Yes.”

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“And if I ever saw anyone hurting someone who didn’t deserve it? Like a man who was cruel to his wife, or who got angry at his children. Could I do something... good?”

Nestled against his chest, she felt his smile. “You would have the power to put a stop to it.”

For the first time in many days, Wyre felt a warm glimmering of emotion that she realized was happiness. It shone through her sorrow like a far-off beacon, a distant light seen through rain.

“I’m going to *like* being an Atma Knight,” she murmured. Already a great weariness was overtaking her, raw sorrow and exhaustion and relief all mingled together. And as the man in black carried her onward in unflagging, confident steps, her eyelids grew heavy, and she felt herself slipping away into a deep, healing sleep.

*The story continues at:
www.adamleebooks.com*