



Every light
casts a
shadow.

The
Black Prism

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**BRENT
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To my wife, Kristi, who's spent the better part of a decade proving me right.



Chapter 1



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The wolves stopped howling. Nothing was worse than hearing that chilling sound, but at least with

the sound he knew where they were. Now... Kip swallowed on the hard knot in his throat.

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

Then it was swallowed up in the roiling mists.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kip froze. He thought he'd approached silently.

“Coward,” the prisoner said. “Just following your orders, I suppose? Orholam will smite you for what you're about to do to that little town.”

Kip had no idea what the man was talking about.

Apparently his silence spoke for him.

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

Kip stepped forward. The man was suffering. Then he stopped. Looked at the dead soldier. The

front of the soldier's shirt was soaked with blood. Had this prisoner killed him? How?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't understand."

"You will. Take off my hood."

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

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

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

"Please!" the man said. "Please, the madness isn't on me. I won't hurt you."

"You're a color wight."

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

Because the Chromeria put down color wights like a farmer put down a beloved, rabid dog.

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

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

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

"What's your name?" the color wight asked.

Kip swallowed, thinking he should probably run away.

"Oh, for Orholam's sake, you think I'm going to hex you with your name? How ignorant is this

backwater? That isn't how chromaturgy works—"

"Kip."

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

Kip said nothing. Yes, and yes.

"Do you know *why* you feel destined for something greater?"

"Why?" Kip asked, quiet, hopeful.

"Because you're an arrogant little shit." The color wight laughed.

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

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

Who would recruit madmen to join them? "They didn't know you were a—"

"Oh, they knew."

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

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

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

"Would you believe me if I told you there's a prophecy about you?"

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

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

"What?" Kip asked.

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

"And I would help you why?" Kip asked.

"For a few straight answers before dawn."

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

"Shoot."

"What's the plan for Rekton?"

"Fire."

"What?" Kip asked.

"Sorry, you said one answer."

"That was no answer!"

"They're going to wipe out your village. Make an example so no one else defies King Garadul. Other villages defied the king too, of course. His rebellion against the Chromeria isn't popular everywhere. For every town burning to take vengeance on the Prism, there's another that wants nothing to do with war. Your village was chosen specially. Anyway, I had a little spasm of conscience and objected. Words were exchanged. I punched my superior. Not totally my fault. They know us greens don't do rules and hierarchy. Especially not once we've broken the halo." The color wight shrugged. "There, straight. I think that deserves the key, don't you?"

It was too much information to soak up at once—broken the halo?—but it *was* a straight answer.

Kip walked over to the dead man. His skin was pallid in the rising light. Pull it together, Kip. Ask whatever you need to ask.

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

What do I need to ask?

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

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

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

"Not Rekton you. You you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How close do you think I'd get to your town before someone came running with a musket? Besides, once the sun comes up... I'm ready for it to be done." The color wight took a deep breath, staring at the horizon. "Tell me, Kip, if you've done bad things your whole life, but you die doing something good, do you think that makes up for all the bad?"

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

"Me neither."

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

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

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

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

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

But Kip's eyes were pulled from the winking luxin by four soldiers and a man with a stark red

cloak and red spectacles walking toward them from the camp.

“My name is Gaspar, by the by. Gaspar Elos.” The color wight didn’t look at Kip.

“What?”

“I’m not just some drafter. My father loved me. I had plans. A girl. A life.”

“I don’t—”

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

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

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

Kip ran.

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

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

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

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

Chapter 2



Gavin Guile sleepily eyed the papers that slid under his door and wondered what Karris was punishing him for this time. His rooms occupied half of the top floor of the Chromeria, but the panoramic windows were blackened so that if he slept at all, he could sleep in. The seal on the letter pulsed so gently that Gavin couldn't tell what color had been drafted into it. He propped himself up in bed so he could get a better look and dilated his pupils to gather as much light as possible.

Superviolet. Oh, sonuva—

On every side, the floor-to-ceiling blackened windows dropped into the floor, bathing the room in full-spectrum light as the morning sun was revealed, climbing the horizon over the dual islands. With his eyes dilated so far, magic flooded Gavin. It was too much to hold.

Light exploded from him in every direction, passing through him in successive waves from superviolet down. The sub-red was last, rushing through his skin like a wave of flame. He jumped out of bed, sweating instantly. But with all the windows open, cold summer morning winds blasted through his chambers, chilling him. He yelped, hopping back into bed.

His yelp must have been loud enough for Karris to hear it and know that her rude awakening had been successful, because he heard her unmistakable laugh. She wasn't a superviolet, so she must have had a friend help her with her little prank. A quick shot of superviolet luxin at the room's controls threw the windows closed and set the filters to half. Gavin extended a hand to blast his door open, then stopped. He wasn't going to give Karris the satisfaction. Her assignment to be the White's fetch-and-carry girl had ostensibly been intended to teach her humility and gravitas. So far that much had been a spectacular failure, though the White always played a deeper game. Still, Gavin couldn't help grinning as he rose and swept the folded papers Karris had tucked under the door into his hand.

He walked to his door. On a small service table just outside, he found his breakfast on a platter. It was the same every morning: two squat bricks of bread and a pale wine in a clear glass cup. The bread was made of wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet, and spelt, unleavened. A man could live on that bread. In fact, a man *was* living on that bread. Just not Gavin. Indeed, the sight of it made his stomach turn. He could order a different breakfast, of course, but he never did.

He brought it inside, setting the papers on the table next to the bread. One was odd, a plain note that didn't look like the White's personal stationery, nor any official hard white stationery the Chromeria used. He turned it over. The Chromeria's message office had marked it as being received from "ST, Rekton": Satrapy of Tyrea, town of Rekton. It sounded familiar, maybe one of those towns near Sundered Rock? But then, there had once been so many towns there. Probably someone begging for an audience, though those letters were supposed to be screened out and dealt with separately.

Still, first things first. He tore open each loaf, checking that nothing had been concealed inside it. Satisfied, he took out a bottle of the blue dye he kept in a drawer and dribbled a bit into the wine. He swirled the wine to mix it, and held the glass up against the granite blue sky of a painting he kept on the wall as his reference.

He'd done it perfectly, of course. He'd been doing this for almost six thousand mornings now. Almost sixteen years. A long time for a man only thirty-three years old. He poured the wine over the broken halves of the bread, staining it blue—and harmless. Once a week, Gavin would prepare a blue cheese or blue fruit, but it took more time.

He picked up the note from Tyrea.

“I’m dying, Gavin. It’s time you meet your son Kip.—Lina”

Son? I don’t have a—

Suddenly his throat clamped down, and his chest felt like his heart was seizing up, no matter that the surgeons said it wasn’t. Just relax, they said. Young and strong as a warhorse, they said. They didn’t say, Grow a pair. You’ve got lots of friends, your enemies fear you, and you have no rivals. You’re the Prism. What are you afraid of? No one had talked to him that way in years. Sometimes he wished they would.

Orholam, the note hadn’t even been sealed.

Gavin walked out onto his glass balcony, subconsciously checking his drafting as he did every morning. He stared at his hand, splitting sunlight into its component colors as only he could do, filling each finger in turn with a color, from below the visible spectrum to above it: sub-red, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, superviolet. Had he felt a hitch there when he drafted blue? He double-checked in glancing briefly toward the sun.

No, it was still easy to split light, still flawless. He released the luxin, each color sliding out and dissipating like smoke from beneath his fingernails, releasing the familiar bouquet of resinous scents.

He turned his face to the sun, its warmth like a mother’s caress. Gavin opened his eyes and sucked in a warm, soothing red. In and out, in time with his labored breaths, willing them to slow. Then he let the red go and took in a deep icy blue. It felt like it was freezing his eyes. As ever, the blue brought clarity, peace, order. But not a plan, not with so little information. He let go of the colors. He was still fine. He still had at least five of his seven years left. Plenty of time. Five years, five great purposes.

Well, maybe not five *great* purposes.

Still, of his predecessors in the last four hundred years, aside from those who’d been assassinated or died of other causes, the rest had served for exactly seven, fourteen, or twenty-one years after becoming Prism. Gavin had made it past fourteen. So, plenty of time. No reason to think he’d be the exception. Not many, anyway.

He picked up the second note. Cracking the White’s seal—the old crone sealed everything, though she shared the other half of this floor and Karris hand-delivered her messages. But everything had to be in its proper place, properly done. There was no mistaking that she’d risen from Blue.

The White’s note read, “Unless you would prefer to greet the students arriving late this morning, my dear Lord Prism, please attend me on the roof.”

Looking beyond the Chromeria’s buildings and the city, Gavin studied the merchant ships in the bay cupped in the lee of Big Jasper Island. A ragged-looking Atashian sloop was maneuvering in to dock directly at a pier.

Greeting new students. Unbelievable. It wasn’t that he was too good to greet new students—well, actually, it *was* that. He, the White, and the Spectrum were supposed to balance each other. But though the Spectrum feared him the most, the reality was that the crone got her way more often than Gavin and the seven Colors combined. This morning she had to be wanting to experiment on him again, and if he wanted to avoid something more onerous like teaching he’d better get to the top of the tower.

Gavin drafted his red hair into a tight ponytail and dressed in the clothes his room slave had laid out for him: an ivory shirt and a well-cut pair of black wool pants with an oversize gem-studded belt, boots with silverwork, and a black cloak with harsh old Ilytian runic designs embroidered in silver thread. The Prism belonged to all the satrapies, so Gavin did his best to honor the traditions of every land—even one that was mainly pirates and heretics.

He hesitated a moment, then pulled open a drawer and drew out his brace of Ilytian pistols. They

were, typical for Ilytian work, the most advanced design Gavin had ever seen. The firing mechanism was far more reliable than a wheellock—they were calling it a flintlock. Each pistol had a long blade beneath the barrel, and even a belt-flange so that when he tucked them into his belt behind his back they were held securely and at an angle so he didn't skewer himself when he sat. The Ilytians thought of everything.

And, of course, the pistols made the White's Blackguards nervous. Gavin grinned.

When he turned for the door and saw the painting again, his grin dropped.

He walked back to the table with the blue bread. Grabbing one use-smoothened edge of the painting, he pulled. It swung open silently, revealing a narrow chute.

Nothing menacing about the chute. Too small for a man to climb up, even if he overcame everything else. It might have been a laundry chute. Yet to Gavin it looked like the mouth of hell, the evernight itself opening wide for him. He tossed one of the bricks of bread into it, then waited. There was a thunk as the hard bread hit the first lock, a small hiss as it opened, then closed, then a smaller thunk as it hit the next lock, and a few moments later one last thunk. Each of the locks was still working. Everything was normal. Safe. There had been mistakes over the years, but no one had to die this time. No need for paranoia. He nearly snarled as he slammed the painting closed.

Chapter 3



Three thunks. Three hisses. Three gates between him and freedom. The chute spat a torn brick of bread at the prisoner's face. He caught it, almost without looking. He knew it was blue, the still blue of a deep lake in early morning, when night still hoards the sky and the air dares not caress the water's skin. Unadulterated by any other color, drafting that blue was difficult. Worse, drafting it made the prisoner feel bored, passionless, at peace, in harmony with even this place. And he needed the fire of hatred today. Today, he would escape.

After all his years here, sometimes he couldn't even see the color, like he had awoken to a world painted in grays. The first year had been the worst. His eyes, so accustomed to nuance, so adept at parsing every spectrum of light, had begun deceiving him. He'd hallucinated colors. He tried to draft those colors into the tools to break this prison. But imagination wasn't enough to make magic, one needed light. Real light. He'd been a Prism, so any color would do, from those above violet to the ones below red. He'd gathered the very heat from his own body, soaked his eyes in those sub-reds, and flung that against the tedious blue walls.

Of course, the walls were hardened against such pathetic amounts of heat. He'd drafted a blue dagger and sawn at his wrist. Where the blood dripped onto the stone floor, it was immediately leached of color. The next time, he'd cupped his own blood in his hands to try to draft red, but he couldn't get enough color given that the only light in the cell was blue. Bleeding onto the bread hadn't worked either. Its natural brown was always stained blue, so adding red only yielded a dark, purplish brown. Undraftable. Of course. His brother had thought of everything. But then, he always had.

The prisoner sat next to the drain and began eating. The dungeon was shaped like a flattened ball: the walls and ceiling a perfect sphere, the floor less steep but still sloping toward the middle. The walls were lit from within, every surface emitting the same color light. The only shadow in the dungeon was the prisoner himself. There were only two holes: the chute above, which released his food and one steady rivulet of water that he had to lick for his moisture, and the drain below for his waste.

He had no utensils, no tools except his hands and his will, always his will. With his will, he could draft anything from the blue that he wanted, though it would dissolve as soon as his will released it, leaving only dust and a faint mineral-and-resin odor.

But today was going to be the day his vengeance began, his first day of freedom. This attempt wouldn't fail—he refused to even think of it as an “attempt”—and there was work to be done. Things had to be done in order. He couldn't remember now if he had always been this way or if he'd soaked in blue for so long that the color had changed him fundamentally.

He knelt next to the only feature of the cell that his brother hadn't created. A single, shallow depression in the floor, a bowl. First he rubbed the bowl with his bare hands, grinding the corrosive oils from his fingertips into the stone for as long as he dared. Scar tissue didn't produce oil, so he had to stop before he rubbed his fingers raw. He scraped two fingernails along the crease between his nose and face, two others between his ears and head, gathering more oil. Anywhere he could collect oils from his body, he did, and rubbed it into the bowl. Not that there was any discernible change, but over the years his bowl had become deep enough to cover his finger to the second joint. His jailer had bound the color-leaching hellstones into the floor in a grid. Whatever spread far enough to cross one

of those lines lost all color almost instantly. But hellstone was terribly expensive. How deep did they go?

If the grid only extended a few thumbs into the stone, his raw fingers might reach beyond it any day. Freedom wouldn't be far behind. But if his jailer had used enough hellstone that the crosshatching lines ran a foot deep, then he'd been rubbing his fingers raw for almost six thousand days for nothing. He'd die here. Someday, his brother would come down, see the little bowl—his only mark on the world—and laugh. With that laughter echoing in his ears, he felt a small spark of anger in his breast. He blew on that spark, basked in its warmth. It was fire enough to help him move, enough to counter the soothing, debilitating blue down here.

Finished, he urinated into the bowl. And watched.

For a moment, filtered through the yellow of his urine, the cursed blue light was sliced with green. His breath caught. Time stretched as the green stayed green... stayed green. By Orholam, he'd done it. He'd gone deep enough. He'd broken through the hellstone!

And then the green disappeared. In exactly the same two seconds it took every day. He screamed in frustration, but even his frustration was weak, his scream more to assure himself he could still hear than real fury.

The next part still drove him crazy. He knelt by the depression. His brother had turned him into an animal. A dog, playing with his own shit. But that emotion was too old, mined too many times to give him any real warmth. Six thousand days on, he was too debased to resent his debasement. Putting both hands into his urine, he scrubbed it around the bowl as he had scrubbed his oils. Even leached of all color, urine was still urine. It should still be acidic. It should corrode the hellstone faster than the skin oils alone would.

Or the urine might neutralize the oils. He might be pushing the day of his escape further and further away. He had no idea. That was what made him crazy, not immersing his fingers in warm urine. Not anymore.

He scooped the urine out of the bowl and dried it with a wad of blue rags: his clothes, his pillow, now stinking of urine. Stinking of urine for so long that the stench didn't offend him anymore. It didn't matter. What mattered was that the bowl had to be dry by tomorrow so he could try again.

Another day, another failure. Tomorrow, he would try sub-red again. It had been a while. He'd recovered enough from his last attempt. He should be strong enough for it. If nothing else, his brother had taught him how strong he really was. And maybe that was what made him hate Gavin more than anything. But it was a hatred as cold as his cell.

Chapter 4



In the early morning chill, Kip jogged across the town square as fast as his ungainly fifteen-year-old frame would allow. He caught his shoe on a cobblestone and pitched headlong through Master Danavis's back gate.

"Are you okay, boy?" Master Danavis asked from his seat at his work bench, his dark eyebrows rising high above cornflower blue eyes, the irises half filled with the stark ruby red that marked him drafter. Master Danavis was in his early forties, beardless and wiry, wearing thick wool work pants and a thin shirt that left lean, muscled arms uncovered despite the cold morning. A pair of red spectacles sat low on his nose.

"Ow, ow." Kip looked at his skinned palms. His knees were burning too. "No, no I'm not." He hitched his pants up, wincing as his scraped palms rubbed on the heavy, once-black linen.

"Good, good, because—ah, here. Tell me, are these the same?" Master Danavis put out both of his hands. Both were bright red, filled with luxin from the elbow to his fingers. He turned his arm over so that his light *kopi*-and-cream-colored skin wouldn't interfere as much with Kip's examination. Like Kip, Master Danavis was a half-breed—though Kip had never heard anyone give the drafter any trouble for that, unlike him. In the dyer's case, he was half Blood Forester, his face marked with a few strange dots they called freckles, and a hint of red in his otherwise normal dark hair. But at least his lighter than normal skin made what he was asking Kip easy.

Kip pointed to a region from the dyer's forearm to his elbow. "This red changes color here, and the other one's a bit brighter. Can I, uh, talk to you, sir?"

Master Danavis flicked both hands down with disgust and ruby luxin splashed onto ground already splattered a hundred shades of red. The goey luxin crumpled and dissolved. Most afternoons, Kip came to sweep up the remnants—red luxin was flammable even when it was dust. "Superchromats! It's one thing for my daughter to be one, but the alcaldesa's husband? And you? Two men in one town? Wait, what's wrong, Kip?"

"Sir, there's ah..." Kip hesitated. Not only was the battlefield forbidden, but Master Danavis had once said that he thought scavenging there was no different than grave robbing. "Have you heard from Liv, sir?" Coward. Three years ago, Liv Danavis had left to be trained at the Chromeria like her father before her. They'd only been able to afford for her to come home at the harvest break her first year.

"Come here, boy. Show me those hands." Master Danavis grabbed a clean rag and blotted up the blood, dislodging the dirt with firm strokes. Then he uncorked a jug and held the rag over its mouth. He rubbed the brandy-soaked rag over Kip's palms.

Kip gasped.

"Don't be a baby," Master Danavis said. Even though Kip had done odd jobs for the dyer for as long as he could remember, he was still scared of him sometimes. "Knees."

Grimacing, Kip pulled up one pant leg and propped his foot on a work bench. Liv was two years older than Kip—almost seventeen now. Not even the lack of men in the village had made her look at Kip as anything more than a child, of course, but she had always been nice to him. A pretty girl being nice and only accidentally patronizing was pretty much the best Kip could hope for.

"Let's just say that not all sharks and sea demons are in the sea. Chromeria's a tough place for a Tyrean since the war."

“So you think she might come home?”

“Kip,” Master Danavis said, “is your mother in trouble again?”

Master Danavis had refused to apprentice Kip as a dyer, saying there wasn't enough work in little Rekton to give Kip a future, and insisting he only was a halfway decent dyer himself because he could draft. He'd been something else before the Prisms' War, obviously, because he'd been Chromeria trained. That wasn't cheap, and most drafters were sworn to service to pay the expense. So Master Danavis's own master must have been killed during the war, leaving him adrift. But few adults talked about those days. Tyrea had lost and everything had gotten bad, that's all Kip or the other children knew.

Still, Master Danavis paid Kip to do odd jobs and, like half the mothers in town, would give him a meal anytime he wandered by. Even better, he always let Kip eat the cakes the women in town sent, trying to attract the handsome bachelor's attention.

“Sir, there's an army on the other side of the river. They're coming to wipe out the town to make an example of us for defying King Garadul.”

Master Danavis started to say something, then saw that Kip was serious. He said nothing for a moment, then his whole demeanor changed.

He started asking Kip questions rapid-fire: where were they exactly, when was he there, how did he know they were going to wipe out the town, what had the tents looked like, how many tents had he counted, were there any drafters? Kip's answers were unbelievable even to his own ears, but Master Danavis accepted it all.

“He said King Garadul is recruiting color wights? You're certain?”

“Yessir.”

Master Danavis rubbed his upper lip with thumb and forefinger, like a man would smooth his mustache, though he was clean-shaven. He strode to a chest, opened it, and grabbed a purse out. “Kip, your friends are fishing this morning at Green Bridge. You need to get out there and warn them. The king's men will seize that bridge. If you don't warn them, your friends will be killed or taken for slaves. I'll warn everyone here in town. Worse comes to worst, use that money to get to the Chromeria. Liv will help you.”

“But—but, my mother! Where—”

“Kip, I'll do my best to save her and everyone here. No one else is going to save your friends. You want Isabel taken as a slave? You know what happens, right?”

Kip blanched. Isa was still a tomboy, but it hadn't escaped him that she was turning into a beautiful woman. She wasn't always very nice to him, but the thought of someone hurting her filled him with rage. “Yes, sir.” Kip turned to go, hesitated. “Sir, what's a superchromat?”

“A pain in my ass. Now go!”

Chapter 5



This was not going to be pretty. The note, the you-have-a-son note, hadn't been sealed. Gavin could pretty much guarantee that the White's people read all of his correspondence. But Karris had laughed after giving him the note, which meant *she* hadn't. So she didn't know. Yet. But she'd gone to report to the White. Where Gavin was expected.

He rolled his shoulders and stretched his neck to one side and then the other, each giving a satisfying little pop, then started walking. His Blackguards fell in step behind him, each carrying a wheellock musket and wearing an ataghan or other weapon. He climbed the stairs to the open roof balcony of the Chromeria. As always, he noticed Karris first. She was short, with a naturally curvy figure now carved into too-hard planes and veins by years of strenuous training. Her hair was long and straight and platinum blonde today. Yesterday it had been pink. Gavin liked it blonde. Blonde usually meant she was in a good mood. Her hair color changes were nothing magical. She just liked to change frequently. Or maybe she figured she stood out so much that she might as well not even try to blend in.

Like the other Blackguards protecting the White, Karris wore fine black trousers and blouse, cut for fighting and plain except for the embroidery of her rank on the shoulder and at the neck in gold thread. Like the others, she carried a slim black *ataghan*—a slightly forward-curving sword with a single cutting edge for most of its length—and rather than a shield, a metal parrying stick with a punch dagger in the middle. Like the others, she was extensively trained in the use of both, and a number of other weapons. Unlike the others, her skin wasn't the deep black of a Parian or an Ilytian.

Nor was her mood dark, apparently. There was a mischievous little twist to her lips. Gavin raised brow at her, pretending to be mildly peeved about her earlier prank with the shades in his room, and came to stand before the White.

Orea Pullawr was a shrunken old woman who was taking more and more to the wheeled chair she sat in now. Her Blackguards made sure that every guard rotation had at least one burly man in case she needed to be carried up or down stairs. But despite her physical infirmity, Orea Pullawr hadn't needed to fend off a challenger for the white robe for more than a decade. Most people couldn't even remember her real name; she simply *was* the White.

“Are you ready?” she asked. Even after all these years, she still had trouble accepting that this wasn't hard for him.

“I'll manage.”

“You always do,” she said. Her eyes were clear and gray except for two broad arcs of color surrounding each iris, blue on top and green below. The White was a blue/green bichrome, but those arcs of color were washed out in her eyes, desaturated now because she hadn't drafted in so long. But each arc was as thick as possible, extending from the pupil out to the very edge of each iris. If she ever drafted again, she'd break the halo: the color would break through into the whites of each eye, and that would be the end of her. That was why she didn't wear colored spectacles. Unlike other retired drafters, she didn't even continue the pretense of carrying around her unused spectacles to remind everyone of what she once was. Orea Pullawr was the White, and it was enough.

Gavin headed to the dais. Above it, mounted on arcing tracks so it could be adjusted for any time of day or month of the year, a great polished crystal hung. He didn't need it. Never had, but it seemed to

make everyone more comfortable to think he required some crutch to handle so much light. He never got lightsick either. Life just wasn't fair. "Any special requests?" he asked.

How exactly the Prism felt the imbalances in the world's magic was still a mystery. Shrouded in religious hokum about the Prism being connected straight to Orholam and therefore all the satrapies, the subject had not even been studied before Gavin became the Prism. Even the White had been quite nearly fearful when she asked about it, and she was as brassy a woman as Gavin had ever met.

Not that they'd made much progress, but long ago he and the White had struck a bargain: she would study him intensely and he would cooperate, and in turn she would allow him to travel without Blackguards dogging his every step. It worked, mostly. Sometimes he couldn't help but tease her, since it seemed they hadn't learned anything in the sixteen years he'd been the Prism. Of course, when he pushed her too far, she'd bring him up here and say she really needed to examine how the light moved through his skin. So he'd balance. In the open air. In the winter. Naked.

Not pleasant. Gavin being Gavin, he'd learned pretty much exactly where the line was. Emperor of the Seven Satrapies indeed.

"I'd like you to start allowing the Blackguard to do their jobs, Lord Prism."

"I meant about the balancing."

"They train their whole lives to serve us. They risk their lives. And you disappear, every week. We agreed you could travel without them, but only during emergencies."

Serve us? It's a little more complicated than that.

"I live dangerous," Gavin said. They fought about this all the time. Doubtless the White figured that if she didn't make a show here, he would push for more freedom. Doubtless she was right. Gavin looked at the White flatly. The White looked at Gavin flatly. The Blackguards were very, very quiet.

Is this how you would have handled them, brother? Or would you have simply charmed them into submission? Everything in my life is about power.

"Nothing special today," the White said. Gavin began.

A Prism, at core, did two things no one else could do. First, Gavin could split light into its component colors without external aids. A normal red drafter could draft only an arc of red, some a wider arc, some a lesser arc. In order to draft, they had to be seeing red—red rocks, blood, a sunset, a desert, whatever. Or, as drafters had learned long ago, they could wear red spectacles, which filtered the sun's white light to deliver only red. It gave less power, but it was better than being utterly dependent on one's surroundings.

The same limitations applied to every drafter: monochromes could draft only one color; bichromes could draft two colors. Generally, it was colors that bordered each other, like red and orange, or yellow and green. Polychromes—those who controlled three or more colors—were the rarest, but even they had to draft from the colors they could see. Only the Prism never needed spectacles. Only Gavin could split light within himself.

That was convenient for Gavin, but it didn't help anyone else. What did help was this: standing atop the Chromeria, light streaming through his eyes, filling his skin with every color in the spectrum bleeding out of every pore, he could feel the imbalances in magic in all the world.

"To the southeast, like before," Gavin said. "Deep in Tyrea, likely Kelfing, someone's using sub-red, and lots of it." Heat and fire usually meant war magic. It was the first place most non-drafting warlords or satraps went when they wanted to kill people. No subtlety. The amount of sub-red being used in Tyrea meant either they'd been having a quiet war, or the new satrap Rask Garadul had set up his own school to train battle drafters. It wouldn't be something his neighbors would be happy to learn. The Ruthgari governor who occupied Tyrea's former capital Garriston definitely wouldn't be

happy to learn it.

~~In addition to the surfeit of sub-red, more red magic than blue had been used since Gavin last~~ balanced, and more green than orange. The system was self-regulating, initially. If red drafters around the world used too much red, it would begin to get harder for them to draft, and simultaneously easier for the blues. Sealed red luxin would unravel more easily, while sealed blue would seal better. At that level, it was an inconvenience, an annoyance.

Legends spoke of an era before Lucidonius came and brought the true worship of Orholam when the magic centers had been spread throughout the world: green in what was now Ruthgar, red in Atas and so forth, all worshipping pagan gods and mired in superstition and ignorance. Some warlord had massacred almost all the blues. Within months, they said, the Cerulean Sea had turned to blood, the waters choked of life. Fishermen on every side of the sea had starved. The few surviving blue drafter had heroically worked to bring the balance back by themselves—using so much blue magic that they killed themselves. The seas cleared, and the red drafters returned to drafting as before. But this time there were no blue drafters left. Anything using red luxin failed, the seas turned bloody again, famine and disease descended.

And so it went. Nearly every generation huge natural disasters wiped out thousands who believed they'd done something to offend their capricious gods.

Prisms prevented that. Gavin could feel what was out of balance long before there were any physical signs, and fix it by drafting the opposite color. When Prisms failed, as they inevitably did after seven, fourteen, or twenty-one years, the Chromeria had to prevent disasters the hard way—in addition to running around putting out fires (sometimes literally), they would send missives throughout the world, perhaps urging blues not to draft unless it was an emergency, and reds to draft more than usual. Because everyone could only draft a finite amount in their lives, that meant hastening the reds to their death, and keeping the blues from doing useful work in all of the Seven Satrapies. So at such times, the Chromeria sought a Prism's replacement with great fervor. And Orholam was faithful to send a new Prism every generation, or so the teaching went.

Except for Gavin's generation, when in his ineffable wisdom, Orholam had somehow sent two—and torn the world apart.

Gavin spun in a slow circle, spreading his arms wide and releasing goutts of superviolet light to balance the sub-red, then red to balance blue, then orange to balance green. When the world felt right once more, he stopped.

He turned and smiled at the White. Her expression, as usual, was a cipher. Her Blackguards—even one of whom was a drafter and thus had an idea of how much power Gavin had just handled—looked similarly unimpressed. Or perhaps they were simply habituated. He was the Prism, after all. It was his job to do the impossible. If anything, they relaxed slightly. Their job was to protect the White, even from him, if it came to it.

Gavin was the Prism, and thus ostensibly the emperor of the Seven Satrapies. In reality, his duties were mostly religious. Prisms who became too much more than just figureheads found themselves forcibly retired. Often permanently. The Blackguard would die to protect him from anyone else, but the White was the head of the Chromeria. If it came to it, they'd fight for her, not him. If it did, they knew they would likely all die, but then, that was what they trained for. Even Karris.

Gavin wondered sometimes, if that ever happened, would Karris be the last to try to kill him, or the first?

“Karris?” the White said. “There's a ship waiting for you, heading for Tyrea. Take this. You can read it once you set sail. When you can, scull the rest of the way. Time is of the essence.” She handed

Karris a folded note. It wasn't even sealed. Either the White trusted Karris not to even open it before her ship sailed, or she knew she'd read it immediately whether it was sealed or not. Gavin thought he knew Karris well, and he didn't know which she'd do.

Karris took the note and bowed deeply to the White, never even glancing at Gavin. Then she turned and left. Gavin couldn't help but watch her go, her figure svelte, graceful, powerful, but he kept his glance brief. The White would notice regardless, but if he stared, she'd probably say something.

She waved her hand as Karris disappeared down the stairs, and the rest of the Blackguard withdrew from earshot.

"So, Gavin," she said, folding her arms. "A son. Explain."

Chapter 6



Green Bridge was less than a league upstream from Rekton. Kip's body screamed at him to quit running, but every time he slowed his pace, he imagined the soldiers coming up the opposite side of the river. He had to get there first.

About twelve nightmares of enslavement and death later, he did. Isabel and Ramir and Sanson were relaxing against the bridge, fishing. Isabel was bundled against the cold, watching while Sanson tried to tease out rainbow trout and Ram told him how he was doing it wrong. They all looked at Kip as he bent over, puffing. No sight of soldiers anywhere.

"Gotta go," Kip said in between breaths. "Soldiers coming."

"Oh, no, oh, no! Not *soldiers!*" Ram said in mock panic.

Sanson jumped to his feet, thinking Ramir was serious. Sanson was bucktoothed and gullible, good-natured, always the last to get a joke and the most likely to be the butt of it.

"Relax, Sanson. I'm joking," Ramir said, punching Sanson's shoulder, too hard.

When they'd first heard about the recruiters demanding levies, it had taken them about a second to conclude that if one of them were pressed into King Garadul's service, it would be Ram. At sixteen, he was a year older than the rest of them, and the only one who seemed remotely like a soldier.

"I'm not," Kip said, still bent over, hands on his knees, breathing hard.

Still uncertain, Sanson said, "My ma said the alcaldesa had a big fight with the king's man. She said the alcaldesa told him to stick those orders in his ear."

"If I know the alcaldesa, she didn't say *ear*," Isa said. She grinned wickedly, and Sanson and Ramir laughed. They just weren't getting it.

Kip saw Isa look at Ram—just a quick glance, looking for his approval. As she found it, Kip saw her pleasure double, and he felt sick in his stomach. Again.

"What's going on, Kip?" she asked. Big brown eyes, full lips, full curves, flawless skin. It was impossible to talk to her and not be aware of her beauty. Prettier even than Liv, really, and infinitely more *here*.

Kip tried to find words. People are coming to kill us, and I'm worried about some girl who doesn't even like me.

From Green Bridge, it was three or four hundred paces to the nearest orange grove. There was precious little cover between the bridge and the trees.

"There are—" Kip started, but Ram ran right over his words.

"If they conscript me, I'm going to volunteer to become a battle drafter," Ram said. "It's dangerous, I know, but if I have to leave everything I love here, I'm going to make something of myself." He looked into the distance, off to a grand future. Kip wanted to punch him in his handsome heroic face.

"Why don't you and Sanson run off?" Ram asked. "You know, hide from the big bad army? Isa and I want to say goodbye."

"Why can't you say goodbye with us here?" Sanson asked.

Isa blushed.

Ram's eyes flashed. "Seriously, you two, don't be assholes, huh?" he said, pretending to be joking.

"Ram, listen," Kip said. "The army is coming to make an example of us. We need to leave. Right."

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