

PEACE MAKER

A Story of the Spiralchain

Jeremiah L. Schwennen

Depal

Forza sat in a soft chair, nestled in a heavy blanket. The weather was cool, though winter had not yet fallen, but she found it impossible to stay warm in the drafty apartment she had called home the past few months. She could feel the crawling, buzzing, gnawing sensation of trouble at the back of her neck, and she absently scratched that spot, thankful for her neatly trimmed nails that did not rend her delicate flesh. Whatever was going to happen, whatever required her intervention, would happen soon. The itching only started when chaos was imminent, and chaos could not be tolerated.

She returned her gaze to the large box in front of her – a tev, they called it. Its shining glass surface protruded from the frame that held it slightly, and she could see figures moving about on the image it presented in many shades of dull, ugly gray. A small collection of men – not a single woman, she noted with a derisive snort – were standing on a platform or a stage of some sort, while many others pressed in around them with large, flashbulb-mounted photocams. The men did not seem to mind, and they smiled and waved to those reporters and photocams.

The men had names she did not know, but their ranks – their ranks were of great importance to the reporter-announcer speaking from the tev. On the left was Amel Quin, First Ambassador of the House Sept, a visiting dignitary. He was important to Forza – or so the nagging sense of danger seemed to indicate. He was flanked by other officials of House Sept, all of them lean and tall, with dark, mysterious eyes. He wore a suit marked by the tiny diamond pattern of his House, and Forza studied him carefully. He did not appear to be in danger – he appeared happy.

His opposite number – the man whose hand he shook in elaborate slowness, allowing even more of the reporters and photocams to bear witness – was a bit shorter and notably older than Amel. This man had dark skin that hung in wrinkles and folds, and he wore a loose fitting garment, not unlike a robe belted with some kind of gnarled vine. The narrator introduced him as Malcom Brenan, First Ambassador of House Ryad. This peace conference she was witnessing was happening here, in this city, governed by House Ryad, and that perhaps explained why the entourage with Malcom was larger by far.

Suddenly the images on the screen whirled – Ambassador Brenan appeared to collapse, and his minions swarmed in around him, pressing back the reporters that sought to close in around the fallen

scion of Ryad. Ambassador Quin's men also swept in around their leader, but they did not form a circle around him – they hurried him away.

Outside the window of the tiny room, Forza heard a deep, rustling roar. The people of Jaggri had seen what she had seen on the television. The announcer confirmed it – the Ambassador of House Ryad was dead – struck down by an assassin.

The itch on her neck grew unbearable, and Forza stood, casting the blanket aside. Chaos was upon Jaggri, and if she did not act quickly, it would spread. The plague could not be allowed to gain a foothold again.

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“Run, Cera!” Semora shouted. She clutched her twin sister's hand tightly as they darted through the darkening alley. An hour ago, they had been shopping for a gift for their mother to commemorate this important day and the great work of their father. But then something had happened, and as though a switch had been thrown, the city was awash in anger. They had been running ever since, though they followed no particular route.

The two girls turned round a corner and Cera drew to a stop, leaning down, palms upon her thighs, gasping for air. “I... I think we lost them,” she said between shuddering breaths.

Semora nodded. She too was out of breath, but she recovered more quickly. She wasn't burdened with the legacies her sister carried, thankfully. “We have to make it back to the hotel. Father will be worried.”

“What happened?” Cera asked.

Semora sighed. She had heard the angry words spoken by those chasing them. “The Ryad Ambassador is dead,” she explained. She stepped closer to her sister and touched her chin lightly. “It will be fine. Tensions are high, as father warned us. That's all. We had nothing to do with this.”

Cera wiped a single tear from her pale cheek, and Semora took that hand, deformed by her legacy so that the fingers had little separation from one another, in her own. She squeezed it tightly, and Cera squeezed back.

Before either of them could say anything more, a large man came around the corner and shouted, “Here they are! The murderer's children!”

Every fiber of Semora's being wanted to stand up to the man and argue with him, but this was not the time. Still clutching Cera's hands, they ran once more, around the corner and out of the alley.

Jaggri was a maze of tightly packed brick buildings and expansive parklands filled with large, gnarled trees. As they emerged from the bend of the alley, one of those parklands rose up before them, just across the street. "In there!" Semora shouted.

"No!" Cera said, digging her heels into the smooth concrete street they had emerged onto. "They can find us by talking to the trees." She turned back and pointed to the buildings that had formed the walls of the alley they were just in, and Semora saw a bank of large, twisted trees growing from the roof of each, its flowing branches hanging down into the space between buildings.

Semora grunted in frustration. She looked up and down the street, which was thankfully free of cars, but she could see no particular route that didn't bring them near greenery of some kind. "Blasted Ryads," she muttered.

A hand grabbed her by the shoulder from behind, and Cera screamed as she backpedalled away. Semora fought against the man's heavy grip but managed to turn to face her assailant. He was the same man from the alley – apparently he was the fastest member of the lynch mob. Wonderful.

"You aren't going anywhere, girl," the man said angrily, spittle spraying from his mouth across Semora's face. From the corner of her eye she saw Cera starting to twist her hands into the delicate, painful gestures of their mother's lessons, but Semora held up her own hand to stop her. She didn't need any of that kind of help.

"We did nothing wrong," she explained calmly. Calm was important. She was a daughter of House Sept, and their power was born of calm.

"Your people killed our ambassador," the man said, spittle flying once more. "We'll make all of you snakes pay!"

Snakes. She felt her carefully maintained calm flicker under the insult. *Snakes.* The word burned. Had she been able to see Cera anymore, she imagined her sister also choking back outrage at the epithet. But Semora's field of vision had narrowed – a sign that she had summoned enough of her symbiont to do what needed to be done.

She hissed softly, "You underestimate us." Then she reached out with both arms, throwing them around the man's stout chest. He was almost too big for her small arms to encircle. She stretched just slightly, and the minute her fingers locked with one another at the small of the man's back, this struggle was over.

Her arms contracted, pulling tighter and tighter in a smooth motion that first squeezed all the air from her attacker's lungs and left him gasping. He flailed, beating his meaty fists upon Semora's delicate shoulders, but hers was a grip that could not be broken. She continued to constrict, her body suffused with the power of the monster bound to her soul, and a moment later she heard the man's ribs begin to crack. Whatever birthrights this Ryad bastard possessed, they did him no good. She flexed one last time and the constriction completed, snapping tight as the man contorted in soundless, breathless pain.

Semora let go of her left hand with her right and shook her arms, dropping the man's dead body to the street.

"I could have handled him without hurting him," Cera said softly.

"I have no doubt," Semora said as she wiped her hands on her pant legs. "But he is not here alone, and my way was faster."

"Can you squeeze them all to death?" came a feminine voice from the alley.

Cera started and stammered, "Who are you?"

Semora turned her attention to the stranger. She was old, but her body brought to mind strength, not weakness. She was short and her dark hair was shorn close to the scalp, nothing like Semora and Cera's near waist-length blonde hair. She wore a plain blue sun dress with a woven shawl thrown across her shoulders. She did not look much like a Ryad.

"Your father has been arrested, and Ryad justice moves swiftly. I have a room nearby. Let me help you," the woman explained.

"We will go nowhere with a stranger," Semora said, stepping closer to her sister.

"There are a dozen angry Ryads behind me, child. If you want to live, you will come with me." The woman strode confidently past the girls and down the street.

"Maybe we should," Cera whispered. "She's not one of them."

"But what is she?" Semora asked. "Father has many enemies, Cera. The Eogs, the Myhrs..."

The sounds of movement – angry movement – began to grow louder in the alley.

"I want to help father," Cera said. "And I don't want us to have to kill anyone else. I have a good feeling about her, Sem."

With a resigned sigh, Semora joined her sister in running to catch up with the old woman.

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The girls fell asleep almost at once. Forza watched over them as they dozed on the couch, and she even gave up her blanket to them. They were younger than she had expected, perhaps fifteen years of age. The more outgoing of the two, the normal-appearing Semora, had asked a few more questions which Forza brushed off. They didn't need to know anything about her.

It was the quieter sister that most interested Forza. Cera was afflicted with what the Depalese called “legacies” – physical reminders of the soulmerge made by her ancestors with a tribe of monsters, the Sept in this case. Cera’s fingers were fused three-quarters of the way up from the palm, and from the way she walked, Forza imagined her toes were similarly afflicted. As far as obvious legacies, hers were on the subtle side, but there was so much potential in those whose soul carried such strong traces of the symbiont. If these girls were to help her root out the source of this discord, it would be Cera that proved invaluable.

“Why are you staring at my sister?” Semora whispered, her eyes open in narrow slits but her baleful glare evident.

Forza leaned back in her chair, which she had turned to better study the girls, and whispered back, “I stare at you both.”

Semora’s eyes opened wider. “You aren’t Sept. Why are you helping us?”

Forza pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders. The draft was back, as was the prickling sensation at her neck. “I am a seer, of a sort. I saw that you needed aid, and that your father did as well. I am here to help.”

The girl’s eyes narrowed once more. “Father says that all seers are charlatans. Like Amistro.”

Forza cocked her head to the side. “I do not know any Amistro.”

“He was on the tev,” Cera said, waking and stretching her arms with an awkward yawn. “Back when they were in colors. We watched him in the mornings before lessons. Semora used to want to marry him.”

Semora rolled her eyes. “I most certainly did not. He was just a bit cute, that’s all. But his fortune-telling was all rubbish.”

Forza sighed. Children. She had no patience for children. They were mankind’s second worst invention.

“Did we sleep all night?” Cera asked, suddenly sitting upright.

Forza nodded. “It was for the best. Things have calmed down a bit now – we can more easily move about. I have been watching the reports, and it seems as though your father’s arrest has calmed some of the rioting.”

“Is he safe?” Cera asked, eyes wide. “Why would they think he had anything to do with killing the Ryad ambassador? He came here to make peace.”

“We’re easy targets,” Semora said sullenly. “And now we’re trapped here, surrounded by the enemy.”

“Did your father have anything to do with Ambassador Brenan’s murder?” Forza asked. She could feel the indignation rising in the minds of the girls and knew their answer before either of them said it aloud.

“Of course not! Father has fought for peace forever. He signed the Cattalan Accords with House Noc just last year, and before that he helped negotiate the seven year armistice with House Piav,” Cera explained in heated tones. “Father wants peace more than anyone else in House Sept.”

Forza stood slowly, bones creaking. It was not a familiar sensation. “I suspected as much. I had hoped that was the case. The reports on the tev tell a very different tale.”

“Mother told us all about that. It’s called propaganda. It’s the same reason why all of the Ryad tev shows about the police always have actors made up like Septs play the criminals. It controls public perception of us.” Semora folded her arms across her chest. “You can’t trust anything the tev says.”

“But you can trust me. And if your father is as dedicated to peace as you think, you can trust one other person in this city.” Forza turned towards the kitchen and said, “You can come out now, Morgan.”

The girls turned in unison to see a figure emerge from the unlit kitchen.

Morgan Kail was a stout-bodied man of middling years and an average height. He wore heavy slacks of dark fabric and a long, fur-tufted overcoat of similar material. His skin was weathered and his short hair was a steel gray color. “Good morning, ladies,” he said with an elaborate bow.

“Harx!” Semora said, scrambling off the coach and throwing the blanket that had been covering her a moment before towards the man. Her sister was slower to react, and Semora grabbed Cera by her disfigured hand and tugged adamantly. “We have to run!”

Cera, however, resisted her sister’s forceful actions. She stared at Morgan, her eyes focused so intently upon him that Forza thought at first she might be seeing through the rakish detective.

“He’s not here to hurt us, is he?” Cera asked Forza, not taking her eyes off of Morgan.

“Not at all,” Forza said. “Morgan has nothing to do with that ridiculous blood feud between your Houses.”

“It is as she says,” Morgan said, standing upright and smiling. His smile did not help matters – his own legacy rendered his canine teeth alarmingly large. His entire expression was categorically wolfish.

“They can’t be trusted!” Semora said. Forza felt the panic rising in the young woman, and Forza feared she would have to intervene, but then Cera surprised her.

“That’s what they think about us too,” Cera said softly. “Hear him out, please. Semora, we have no allies here. Mother is hundreds of miles away and everyone in the city hates us. We need friends.”

“And you think a lout from House Harx is equal to the task?” Semora said with a scowl. “You must have hit your head when we were running from that mob yesterday.”

“We really haven’t time for these pleasantries,” Morgan said. “My allegiance is not to House Harx, but to House Allineal. Have you heard of us?”

Semora stepped closer to her sister and wrapped one protective arm around her. “Allineals are even more despicable than Harxes. A person doesn’t just change their House. You were born a Harx, were you not?”

Morgan nodded.

“Then you are a Harx. Your symbiont is that of the Harx,” Semora stated plainly. “And there can be no kindness between yours and ours. That truth is as old as symbiosis.” Semora scowled.

“You are very young to be telling me of absolutes, girl. My blood and my politics are different things. Our world might be in a better state if more people had such proclivities,” Morgan explained. He stepped closer to the girls and extended a hand, which Semora eyed suspiciously.

“Shake his hand,” Cera whispered.

Semora loosed her grip on her sister and took a confident step closer to Morgan. “I don’t shake hands. But perhaps a hug?” she asked with a sly smile.

Morgan smiled. “I watched what you did to that burly Ryad last night. I’m not stupid, girl. I can’t make you accept my help,” he chanced a quick glance towards Forza, but she shook her head slowly, imperceptibly. Morgan knew much of Forza’s nature, but he had not yet come to appreciate her philosophy. She would not compel anyone to do anything if she could help it. If mankind was to survive, it would do so exercising what passed for its best judgment.

“The Allineals are believers in true peace, are they not?” Cera asked from behind her sister. “What is it you call it?”

“The Perfect Order,” Morgan said with reverence. “We believe that one day, all of the ancient animosity among the eleven Houses can be put to rest and humanity can begin to advance once more.”

Semora snorted, but said nothing. Her sister pushed past her and took the hand that Morgan had offered, shaking it firmly with her diminished grip. Morgan then smoothly lifted that hand to his lips and kissed it gently, causing Cera to blush furiously and pull her hand back, stuffing her misshapen hand in her pocket.

“No offense, my dear. I was raised a gentleman.” Morgan said. “But now that we have determined that I am not set upon this world to slay you, can we talk matters of true importance?”

“I haven’t determined any such thing,” Semora said quietly.

“Yes,” Cera said, elbowing her sister. “What is it that you want to discuss?”

“As you told Forza, your father had nothing to do with the assassination. But in lieu of evidence to the contrary, the Ryads will have no choice but to think he did. The Ryad ambassador was killed in an unconventional way—his blood had somehow thickened. His heart could no longer pump it, and he died. The doctors can explain it only as poison, and as you surely know, it is widely held that poison is a Sept solution of choice.” Morgan started to pace a small path through the room—a trait Forza loathed. “That is not sufficient evidence for any discriminating court of law, but as you may know, the peace talks between House Sept and House Ryad were not popular here in Jaggri. The Ryads are amongst the most isolated, insular of the Houses—such minds fear change.”

“So you think a Ryad did this and tried to make it look like it was our people?” Semora asked.

Morgan shrugged. “Nothing quite so direct, I’m afraid. I suspect involvement by an outside agency. I smelled something strange at the scene. Someone that did not belong there—and Jaggri security is notoriously strict on allowing outsiders into the city. Whoever it was, I got his scent. We can follow it and find the truth, if you are willing to help.”

“What do you need us for?” Semora asked. “If you already managed to investigate the crime scene, you can surely move around the city more easily without us slowing you down and drawing attention.”

“Well, I... why do I need them exactly, Forza?” Morgan asked.

Forza walked over to the window and looked out. She saw a few motor cars chugging down the street, but little other movement this early in the morning. It was such a far cry from what it had been when they first came. The great moving posters that had once hung on the outer walls of buildings advertising goods and services were gone, fallen into disrepair and forgotten. Where once men and women had spoken to each other on small devices carried in their pockets, now they used only the calling machines located on street corners in large, awkward booths. Humanity was unwinding, losing the progress it had made at a faster and faster rate each year. Depal was slipping into chaos, and she did not know why. She had only her intuition, and her intuition pointed to these two girls. They were part of the solution.

“A seer keeps her own counsel,” Forza said enigmatically.

“Rubbish,” Semora muttered.

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It was nearing sundown. For the better part of the day, Semora and Cera had been following the strange old woman and the even stranger, reprehensible, Harx. Morgan sniffed at the air, channeling his

birthright to follow a trail that was imperceptible to the rest of them. They had begun as close to the site of the press conference as possible, and then Morgan had taken off, the rest of them barely able to keep up with his easy, confident lope.

Semora could not understand why the many Ryads they passed as they snaked their way through the city did not acknowledge them. After the naked hatred shown to them last night, it made no sense that they disregarded them now.

"It's her," Cera said softly when they paused to catch their breaths. They were near the outer edge of the city, but on a poorly maintained roadway. A parkland was close at hand where the great totemic trees of the Ryad faith were growing atop the mossed-over remnants of old flat-screen tevs and fuelless motor cars.

Forza was talking quietly with Morgan, and Semora hated that the two of them were keeping secrets.

"I am not sure how, but Forza is somehow making it so that the others do not see us. Isn't that a Piav birthright?" Cera's voice sank even lower. "She isn't pretty enough to be a Piav."

"Agreed," Semora said.

"Time to move," Morgan said, cutting off any further chance for conspiratorial conversation. "The trail leaves town. We'll cut through the parkland and leave that way – it's safer than trying to sneak all four of us past the border patrol."

"Border patrol?" Semora asked. "We're leaving House Ryad lands?"

"The trail seems to be heading directly for House Uorg territory," Morgan said.

"An Uorg set up our father?" Semora said. "I didn't think such manipulation was in their nature. Mother always said that Uorg's were too stupid to lie well and too stubborn to lie poorly."

"It doesn't seem likely," Morgan conceded. "More likely, perhaps, is the idea that our true foe simply sought refuge across the border, where he had a better chance of evading capture."

"Except he didn't count on a Harx' nose," Cera said with a shy smile.

Semora rolled her eyes. Her sister was *flirting* with that man. He was their father's age! She silenced her criticism and instead looked to Forza, asking, "And whatever it is you have been doing to hide us, will that work in the parkland? There are many Ryads that can see anything that any of these trees can see."

Forza glared at Semora and, for an instant, Semora saw the old woman's forehead wrinkle in a strange way, revealing a dimple in its center.

They pressed into the parkland in awkward silence, Forza in the lead and Morgan at the rear now that their quarry's trail had been deduced. Night fell and the trees all around them obscured the stars

and the sliver of moon. They moved along walking paths that were worn down to bare stone from more than a century of use, and Semora recalled the history lessons her mother had insisted the girls study before they could accompany their father to Jaggri.

This was one of the oldest cities of House Ryad, and perhaps one of the oldest in this part of the world. The floating cities of the east were older, of course, but there was history in the lands of Ryad that the Sept could learn much from, mother had said. Mother was overly fond of history, of course—of the glimmering trinkets, fabulous technologies, and sumptuous conveniences of bygone days. She would have loved traipsing about this stinking, overgrown garden. Semora, though, was a child of the now. She was quick-witted and short-tempered, and she could not wait to see what the future would bring. The past held no interest at all for her, and the wild even less so.

“Fence,” Forza whispered from up ahead.

“That’s unfortunate,” Morgan said, louder, from behind. “There appear to be some hounds on our trail.”

Cera’s eyes grew wide and she squeezed Semora’s arm. “Dogs?” she gasped. Semora shook free of her sister’s grip and said firmly, “Stay calm. I will get you out of this.”

Cera’s fear of dogs was old and somewhat ironic, given her strange attraction to Morgan. For as long as they had been walking on their own two feet, Semora had been saving her sister from dogs.

She ran forward to see the fence Forza spoke of. It was a tall woven affair of linked chain, but luckily there was no sharpened wire or spikes across its top like so many of the fences she had seen on the tev. Fences were rare in Sept territory – they kept so few of her kind in check.

“Keep the dogs away from my sister,” Semora said. “I will get us over this fence.”

Forza lifted one eyebrow in a veiled expression that Semora chose to read as surprise, and then the old woman turned her back and moved towards the now audible sound of howling hounds.

Semora closed her eyes and concentrated, seeking the calm that helped her channel her birthright. Growing up, she had always felt lucky – luckier by far than her sister – because she carried no visible legacy of her symbiont. The connection between her soul and the bloodline of the race of serpentine monsters from which the people of her own race had taken their name was subtle and deep, and only through meditation could she unlock the birthrights of that connection. Those birthrights were purely physical – crass, father called them – but they were useful.

She blotted out sound and sight, then with greater care she pushed away memory and worry. When her mind was empty and still, she felt the sinews and muscles of her body begin to undulate. She opened her eyes to see diamond-shaped patterns of scales and spots flowing across her skin, rippling as her arms slowly lengthened. The experience was painful, but she had grown accustomed to the pain. This was no different than the constriction she had used to kill that Ryad brute last night, but it was more visible,

evident—all the things that Semora hated. She hated the monstrous appearance of her power, but she loved her sister more.

She reached up, her arms stretching and tensing as they climbed up the fence. The fence was all of twelve feet tall, and the trees pruned away from it—without the cable-like strength of her outstretched arms, they had no means of climbing over the fence easily. But as her arms continued to stretch, working their way down the other side of the fence at a total length of close to twenty feet, she knew they would be fine.

“Cera! Come quickly!” she shouted.

A moment later her sister appeared from the underbrush. Cera did not pause to take in the sight of Semora’s outstretched limbs—she had seen this trick many times before. They had snuck in and out of their parents’ house a dozen times on Semora’s rope-like limbs, and even with her disabled grip, Cera easily scaled up Semora’s arms and down the other side of the fence.

Then Forza came, similarly nonplussed by that sight that mortified Semora. The old woman grabbed one arm and set her feet upon the other, climbing like one born to it. While Cera had pulled herself up one hand on each arm, stroke by stroke, Forza’s way was quicker. When she reached the top of the fence she simply leapt down to the ground beyond, landing silently and gracefully next to Cera.

“Morgan!” Cera called. “Hurry!”

Morgan charged towards the fence, and Semora recoiled, nearly losing her focus and causing her arms to whip back into their normal form.

Morgan was bleeding from a dozen bite and claw wounds, and a large dog was following close at his heels, barking and snarling. The Harx was panting heavily, and his large, frightening teeth had distended to an almost absurd degree. Blood dripped from those fangs and, when the hound chasing him snapped at his feet, Morgan dropped to all fours and tore a great chunk from the beast’s shoulder with one snap of his jaws.

Semora fought back the urge to vomit as Morgan looked up and wiped the back of one hand across his face, clearing away only a portion of the blood there. Behind him now, the dog lay whimpering.

Morgan ignored Semora’s arms and instead climbed the fence unaided, easily leaping up, grabbing hold, then leaping again to clear the top. Semora was thankful that he had not touched her. She had almost forgotten what he was, what violence and rage all the Harx carried with them. Now she remembered. She would not forget again.

With a minimal effort, she grabbed tightly to the bottom of the fence from the far side, near Cera, and then allowed her arms to retract, pulling her up and over the fence and then down to her feet in a surprisingly fluid backflip.

“Let us give Morgan a moment to compose himself,” Forza said firmly.

Semora and Cera said nothing. They instead looked towards their destination – a forest deeper and darker than the simple twisted parklands they had just left. In the distance, a few towers of dark metal studded with rows of blinking lights could be seen – proof that as wild as this land appeared to be, there was civilization there, somewhere.

“It’s not far,” Morgan said cautiously from behind them. “Forza, bear straight north. I will catch up in a few minutes.”

The old woman nodded curtly and took Semora’s left hand in her right, Cera’s right in her left, and led them into the forest. As the darkness swallowed them up, she whispered, “Do not be afraid,” she said.

The words brought no comfort.

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Four more hours of travel in the forest brought them close to midnight. Morgan had been quiet, but he produced a flashlight from his coat that made the trek less horrifying for the girls. Forza was concerned for the two young Septs. She became increasingly convinced that Cera was the key to whatever they were approaching, but she had seen not one glimmer of the girl’s talent, aside from being observant. Not everyone on Depal reaped the benefits of symbiosis... some carried only the legacies.

Morgan, in the lead as he had been for the past few hours since only he could detect whatever trail it was they were following, dropped to one knee and sniffed sharply at the air. “Oil,” he declared. “There is a motor car up ahead.”

Not far from them, a small cloud of fireflies briefly illuminated the area and then drifted on.

“I will investigate – the rest of you stay back here,” Morgan said, standing.

“I’m going with you,” Semora said. “If the man who framed our father is up there, I want to see him for myself.”

The two of them disappeared up ahead, and Forza took Cera’s hand in her own. The girl was frightened, and while Forza had no experience offering comfort, she knew what it was like to fear the unknown.

Nearly five minutes passed without a sound, and neither Morgan nor Semora returned. Cera still held Forza’s hand and she squeezed it tightly. “Something bad has happened,” she murmured.

Forza did not know. She probed forward with her mind and found no response – but her power was not what it once was. She had not even been able to shield their presence from the hunting dogs back in the park.

“I shall go up ahead, child,” Forza said. “Remain here, safe.”

“No,” Cera said. “I am going with you.”

Forza smiled slightly at the girl’s newfound courage and then slowly led the way forward. They pushed through an almost curtain-like screen of branches and vines, and as they emerged on the other side they saw a large vehicle, the likes of which Forza had never before seen. It was a wheeled craft, like the motor cars common to so many cities, but it was large and boxlike. Large enough to carry many people.

“A motorhome,” Cera said in awe. “Our grandfather had one as a young man. He showed us pictures. I thought they were all gone.”

The door in the side of the contraption was ajar, and a pair of low steps protruded from the doorway. Forza climbed them, and as she stepped down on the first of them it issued forth a great creaking whine.

From inside, a soft, high voice said, “Come in, please.”

Forza felt Cera press up tightly behind her, trembling. But there was nothing to be done. Morgan and Semora were inside, surely... with whoever their host was.

The inside of the motorhome was lit only by a burning oil lamp, but its colorful gold and orange carpet and walls glowed brightly in that light. As Forza stepped up into the hallway that ran down the center of the place alongside the small kitchen area, she caught sight of Morgan and Semora, both unconscious, on the bed in the room to her left. But to her right was the quarry, and she was taken aback.

The boy was no more than a child. An infant, even. He might have been four years old, perhaps even five. He sat there on a small chair, nearly naked save for a loose-fitting pair of slacks that were cut off at the knees with ragged edges. The boy had bright blonde hair, she thought, but it was impossible to tell clearly, for he was drenched from head to toe in slick, red blood.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” he said in his child’s voice. Forza could hear something old and bitter in that tone, but she could not understand what she was seeing. She reached out with her mind, and she could feel nothing from this bloody baby before her.

Cera though – Cera sensed something. With a quiet rage, the thin young woman stepped right up beside Forza and pointed one malformed hand directly at the boy. “You are not human,” she said simply.

The child threw back his head and laughed. In his high, innocent voice, tinged with that heavy, implacable dread that Forza could not name, he said, “I am more human than you, Cera Quin of House Sept.”

“Your soul is twisted,” Cera said. “Unmerged with the beasts of old. How?”

“I walk in the shadow of monsters greater even than yours,” the boy said, standing. Inexplicably, the blood that covered his body began to run, to drip and to pool around his feet. It flowed endlessly, originating from a source that Forza could not discern. “Your forefathers bound their souls to the pitiful monsters that roamed this world. But I am the product of a new union, a new soulmerge, and I am but the first. We will bring all to ruin. To chaos. We will tilt this world upside down and shake it until its ugly secret falls out.”

The boy began to slowly sink into the pool of blood at his feet. He was escaping somehow – forming a portal in the blood.

Cera extended the other hand, and Forza nearly recoiled as she felt the air in the motorhome crackle with power. She felt it then, finally – Cera’s birthright.

Ribbons of light and heat and power spun from Cera’s hands, lashing out and surrounding the bloody child, spinning round its form and then yanking upward, plucking it from its gruesome escape route and suspending it in the air as blood ran freely from its floating form to soak into the carpet below.

“You will pay for what you have done,” Cera said simply. Forza could hear the exhaustion in the girl’s voice – she was not practiced in her soul-sorcery, and it was draining her fast.

“Will I?” the child asked, half choking and half chortling as tiny bubbles of blood burst from his mouth. “You see what I am, do you not? Would you take me before your judges and trials and let all of Depal know that I exist?”

Cera looked stricken. Then, with a casual ferocity that Forza might have expected from her sister, but certainly not her, Cera threw her arms wide open. The bindings of magic that ensnared the bloody child snapped tight, slicing the child to ribbons. Disturbingly, once his skin ruptured, blood rushed from every wound, splashing down to the pool below him as his body deflated and collapsed until all that hung in the air was a grotesque, rumpled skin.

“Check on the others, please,” Cera said, leaning against the counter of the motorhome’s small kitchenette. “I am very tired.” With a shrug, the streamers of energy she had willed into existence faded and the deflated corpse of their foe splashed to the soaked carpet below.

Forza walked to the bedroom and saw that Morgan and Semora were indeed alive – they had been rendered unconscious by some power that the bloody child possessed. Her abilities allowed her to feel the specifics; the way that the boy had stilled the flow of blood in them until they collapsed. She understood how the child had murdered the Ryad Ambassador – the same technique, applied with even more force. She placed one hand on Morgan’s arm and willed his body to heal, then she repeated the working on Semora. They would wake soon.

Instead of waiting for that, she stepped back into the main room of the motorhome, but Cera had gone outside. Forza found her sitting on the folding steps outside the door, holding out her awkward hand as a pair of fireflies touched down upon it.

“You are a sorceress,” Forza said simply, joining Cera in sitting on the step.

“That is what it is called, I suppose,” Cera murmured. “Father says that there is a science to it. That I see the entanglements between things and that I can manipulate them. Sorceress sounds nicer. Much like how seer is a much nicer word than dragon.”

Forza inclined her head, proud that the girl had deduced her true nature but not surprised, given the talents she had now revealed. “I am sorry that we cannot bring the child to justice and free your father,” she said. She was genuinely sorry – but also accepting of necessity.

“You said that you and Morgan came to Jaggri to preserve peace,” Cera said sullenly. “But there will surely be war now. I... I should have better controlled myself. I have cost my people and my father everything. They will blame us for killing their ambassador forever.”

“There are greater forces at play, child. We may not have preserved *this* peace, but your actions may well have preserved peace the world over. Can you imagine what revealing that creature to the world might have done? Depal survives, and thrives, because of symbiosis. That child had no symbiont, and look what horror that wrought in him. If he is but the first, there is a greater war than any feud between Houses on our horizon, and you have forestalled it. You are as much a maker of peace as your father, Cera.”

Cera leaned over and placed her head upon Forza’s shoulder. She cried a little, and Forza awkwardly pulled the girl in close, embracing her and comforting her as humans often did.

This was the advantage to being trapped in this form, she told herself. To touch, to embrace – this was the power humans possessed and did not appreciate. They would hold on, no matter what. And so would she.