

# SUN SETTER

A Story of the Spiralchain

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## Pithysia – 10 years after the Ban

Rian ap Selier grumbled softly under his breath. He made an elaborate show of stomping away from the house, dragging his worn boots through the dirty sand in a great furrow. He wasn't actually angry, but he didn't want anyone else to know it. It seemed as though the louder, angrier boys had friends. He wanted friends.

His seventh bright-day was coming up in only a few more weeks, and Rian was eager to finally be allowed to attend the town's schoolhouse with the other children. Those older, wiser boys and girls—some of them having twelve and thirteen bright-days—always mercilessly mocked the young ones for being too coddled by their mothers. Rian wouldn't have any of that. He would show them how strong and independent he could be. The joke was on them, of course—he was free. No other child of his age enjoyed the freedom he possessed while attending to the simple work he pretended to rail against. But if a little pretending helped to make him a friend or two, that would be nice.

There was no need for any of the children of Jay-Brook to know that he actually enjoyed the chores his mother assigned him. She slaved away in her little bake-shop all day, starting well before the first of the two suns crested the horizon. She asked almost nothing of him in the shop, and what little she asked, he did gladly. His father was gone—dead before Rian was born. But his mother loved him very much, and he in turn loved her just as much. They were all they had, mother always said. Mother wasn't from Jay-Brook—she had traveled a long, painful road to come to their little town and start fresh with Rian. He understood her sacrifice. So, when it didn't hurt her, when it was only pretend, he would act as though he were angry with her. He would act like a big, tough school-child. But he would never turn his back on his mother.

That was why he took the task she assigned to him so seriously. He carried a small pack slung over one shoulder and a single basket, woven of scrub reeds from Sir Boruy's shop, in one hand. He would collect the sweet, juicy berries of the sundrop bushes that grew on the western edge of town in that basket. Rian had been harvesting the berries since the very beginning of this year's long growing season, and he had developed an excellent talent for spotting the well-hidden little clusters of dull violet berries under the broad leaves of the bushes. If a few of the tasty morsels ended up in his belly while he gathered his day's haul, mother did not seem to mind over-much.

When he got home, she would smash the berries and reduce them down to a thick jam that she layered between thin slabs of her famous cake. The cake would sell in the bakery tomorrow, and when

they had sold enough of his mother's goods, that would pay the bank for another month in their small, cozy house.

It was not as glamorous a life as that of the skiff crews whose complex vessels sailed through the skies. It was not a life as adventurous as that of those who hunted bisolo in the outer ranges. But it was a life of hard work and simple reward, and it suited them both. It kept them out of trouble, and that was very important to mother. Rian had learned to play pretend from her, after all. Staying out of trouble was a very important part of the game of pretend they played together.

Rian worked his way out of town, walking quickly along the old road that would, if he followed it for all of three days, take him to Wren-Gully. As he walked westward, he squinted his eyes against the bright light of the second sunrise. He fancied that he saw something exciting out there in the vast, empty sand and sky, but he knew that he did not. He never did. Jay-Brook was a small town, surrounded on all sides by the rolling golden hills of the desert that gave the Reach its name. It was visited only infrequently by trade caravans from Wren-Brook, Falcon-Hill, or even farther-afield towns. Perhaps once a year an actual skiff came to the town, though the great flying barges had little reason to travel this far south. They were far from the mountains here, and beyond Jay-Brook there was only the Dry Sea. No one needed anything from that awful, mysterious place.

It took about an hour for Rian to travel far enough from town that the long, broken fence rails of the Dulcet Ring Corral came into sight. Years ago, a wrangling company had made the Dulcet Ring their home, and they brought with them an air of excitement that Jay-Brook had not recovered since the hunting in the region dried up. Unlike the other ranches that Rian had seen, the Dulcet Ring had not been a bisolo farm. What, exactly, they had penned and raised there, no one seemed to know. The corral had been abandoned for as long as Rian and Mother had lived in Jay-Brook.

There was an old man in town, Sir Jerzis, that told stories of the olden times, when the hunting was good, the Dulcet Ring Corral was busy, and the sand all around Jay-Brook became glass in the night. Mother often scolded Rian for spending time talking with Sir Jerzis though—he was not a well-loved man. He was an Arcon, which meant that he believed something that normal people—Sennites—did not believe. He believed that night was a special time, that the stars told stories, and that the moon was just as important as the suns. Rian knew that he wasn't supposed to agree with any of those things, but Sir Jerzis was nice to him sometimes, so he was nice in return. That was how friends were supposed to be made, after all.

Rian leaned up against the nearest post of the derelict railing and slipped the small drawstring sack from his back. It contained only two things, but those two things, together with his woven basket, were all he needed out here.

The first thing he pulled from the bag was a sturdy mat of thick cloth. It was dark blue in color, except for a detailed, intricate image of a doubled golden sun in the center of the mat. The smaller sun was positioned in the front of, and in the center of, the larger one, which was Rian's favorite symbol in the Verses of Sen. He lay the mat out on the sandy ground at the base of the fence post and spread it out. That way it would be ready when midday came.

The other thing in the bag was a long canteen, shaped like a tube rather than the circular canteens most other children carried. Rian sloshed the canteen vigorously, hearing the water inside. It was water that mother made a great show to collect from the rain barrels each morning for him, since he was too small to work the spigot by himself. There was an old well near the ruins of the bunkhouse of the corral, but he did not enjoy going there. Some of the children in town told stories of ghosts that haunted the bunkhouse, and while Rian didn't believe in ghosts, he didn't see much point in risking being wrong. There was also the matter of the small, mean sneers that town-folk gave to those who drank well-water. It was sometimes necessary to do so—one could not count on the rain to come every time the barrels were getting low, after all—but no one wanted to. Rain water came from the sky, from the palace of Sen. That was very important... almost as important as making sure the prayer mat was in a place where the slowly moving shadow of the fence post would not fall upon it.

Content that his mat was in the right place and his water bottle was adequately full, Rian took his basket once more in hand and started to explore the scrubby little bushes that grew up along the fence rows. The corral had once been a huge place—dozens of large pens for the unknown livestock that had been kept here stretched for hundreds and hundreds of yards all around the collapsed central bunkhouse. The little shade offered by the weathered wooden fence posts and rails provided all the protection a tender little plant was likely to find out here in the desert. The sundrop bushes loved that paltry shelter, and the ghost stories about the bunkhouse kept anyone else from thinking that Rian's secret garden was worth the trouble.

He worked hard throughout the morning. He followed a very specific pattern, avoiding the fence rows he had most recently harvested in favor of those he had not touched lately. The sundrop berries grew quickly, especially after a storm like last night's, but he had to be careful to not over-pick from certain bushes. He found himself pushing out a bit farther than he had planned, and he started to lose track of time. He had found a few bushes with huge little clusters of berries, and his basket was already close to full. He rewarded himself for his good fortune by stopping and settling down in the shade of a post, popping a few of the rich, juicy berries into his mouth.

As he sat there, his mind started to wander. He imagined a daring battle of skiff crewmen, or a gunfight at the Dulcet Ring back when it had been a bustling place. He pictured in his imagination what the chattel of the ranch must have been like—he had lately convinced himself that the desert around Jay-Brook used to be populated by huge, angry lizards—like those that had once lived in the Dry Sea. All of his daydreams flowed together in the heat of the day, and suddenly gunfighter skiff pirates did battle with winged lizard-cows in the clear midday sky.

A soft buzzing ran along the base of his skull, and Rian felt his stomach lurch. He looked up at the sky and saw the position of the suns—it was only moments away from their moment of alignment! He had to say his zenith prayers!

He left his basket where it was and took off at a dead run for his prayer mat. As he ran he flung one hand up in the air in the gesture his mother had taught him, thumb and forefinger extended, and heard his mother's voice chiding him softly in his mind.

“Don’t forget your prayers. You know how important it is that Sen hears how much you love him, Rian,” she said. The words that rang in his ears were the special speech that only Rian and his mother could send... one part of their special secret.

He fell, gasping for air, on his mat and pressed his forehead down to the coarse fabric. He said the prayers exactly as he had been taught – exactly as everyone said in town. Well, he mused as his lips made the sounds almost automatically, not *everyone* said the words. There was old Sir Jerzis – he said different prayers. And that, Rian knew, was why everyone distrusted him so.

It took almost twenty minutes to say the prayers properly, and Rian never said them improperly. Mother insisted that it was very important, and Rian did as his mother said. Always.

As he said the last little bit – “For Sen is the Light and the Truth, warming always the heart and brightening always the path. Protect me from the dark, great Sen. Always.” – he allowed his posture to slump. He curled up in the warmth of the day and allowed himself, full of sweet berries and tired from his mad dash, to rest. He had promised Sen that he would be a good boy, and surely the God who was the Sun, the one true God, wouldn’t mind if Rian took a little tiny nap.

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Rian woke to twin sensations of cool air and a subtle shifting of the ground beneath him. He leapt up, panic gripping him, as he realized that the suns had set. Night was here, and his mother would surely be worried sick. He felt several tingling vibrations against the back of his head, and he held up his hand to hear what her messages said.

As he started to make the gesture, he saw his prayer mat shift on the ground, sliding a few inches to the left.

This strangeness stopped him in his tracks, and he pulled his hand back down close against his body. Cautiously, he bent down and grabbed at the edge of his prayer mat. He lifted it suddenly, hoping to startle whatever scorpion or sand rat was wiggling around under it.

All he saw there was a smooth circle of glass, slightly bigger across than the span of his hand with fingers outstretched.

He dropped to his knees next to the glass and touched it cautiously. It was perfectly smooth and slightly warm to the touch – warmer than the sand around it. The glass seemed almost soft, and he felt it dimpling under his touch, like when he touched a fresh-baked loaf of bread and its fluffy top started to collapse. As his hand brushed the glass, he heard a low, buzzing voice in his mind. It came to him in much the same way as his mother’s secret messages, but he was not using the special hand-gesture that she had taught him for receiving such words.

“Help me,” the buzzing, echoing voice said.

Rian yanked his hand away and scabbled back in the sand, looking around for whoever had spoken.

There was no one around. The low hooting sound of a nightbird called out in the distance, but that was the only company Rian could see anywhere near him. He was starting to get scared. He had never been away from town at night before.

The little disc of glass started to move through the sand towards him, and he could not help but let out a terrified scream. He awkwardly surged to his feet and took off running, but when he chanced a glance back over his shoulder, he saw that it was following him. And, once in a while, it left a streak of bright red glowing sand where it passed.

Rian ran as hard and as fast as he could. He left behind his canteen and prayer mat and, most importantly, the basket of berries. But he kept looking back, and one time that he peered back over his shoulder he lost track of his footing and slipped. He fell and crashed down into the sand, catching a mouthful of the stuff on his tongue.

The little puddle of glass caught up to him before he could get back to his feet. It slowly orbited around him – not leaving any of those hot red streaks in the sand now, he noticed – and Rian was forced to stop trying to flee. The moment he was not lunging for an opening in the circling path of the glass, it came to a halt directly in front of him. He noticed that the glass was no longer perfectly smooth – it now had a small handprint etched into its surface.

His handprint.

He cautiously tried to take a step away, but the disc slid through the sand to cut him off. It didn't attack him, but it clearly didn't want him to leave.

Very nervously, he leaned down and held out one hand towards the glass. It seemed to quiver as he drew closer to it, and that little movement almost wore away his tiny courage. But Mother had raised him to be brave – she had been through much, and he could be strong for her. She would not run from a mystery like this.

He let his fingers brush across the handprint in the glass. The moment he made contact, he heard that buzzing, echoing voice again. It said, "Help me."

This time, Rian answered it. "What are you?" he asked.

"Dolu," the strange voice replied.

"What is that?" Rian asked quietly. He had heard the word before, but never with any context. "Is that like a ghost?"

"No," the voice said. "Help me."

"Help you with what?" Rian asked.

"Home," the voice said. "Go home."

Rian didn't need to be told twice. He turned to leave. The moment he did so, the voice grew louder and more insistent. "Family," the voice said.

Rian didn't know what to say. He stared at the glass disc and thought of his mother and her unanswered messages. She was probably very worried about him. "I have to get back to my mother. I am sorry."

"Miss family," the voice said. "Want home." The voice conveyed a sense of deep sadness that grabbed hold of Rian as firmly as any fist or snare. The voice wanted to go home to its family. Rian wanted to help—but he didn't know how. He was a very small person, and this was a very strange piece of glass.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked. Then he thought of something and said firmly, "And don't say 'help me,' because that is not being very specific at all."

The voice seemed to consider that for a time. When it spoke again, it said, "Dry Sea. Slip away. Help. Now. Hurry."

Rian didn't like the sound of any of that. The Dry Sea was dangerous—there were bandits and worse that lived out there. Everyone knew that.

But the voice sounded so sad.

"Can I take you with me? To my house? Maybe my mother can help me get you where you want to go?" he asked. He wanted to help—he really did. But this was a job too big for a little boy.

"Yes," the voice said hesitantly.

"Oh, good," Rian said, suddenly relieved. "I can go back and get my bag, and I can carry you in my bag. That way people won't be scared when they see you."

He sensed something then, from that voice. Not a word, but a sensation. A small little flicker of something that might have been laughter.

"Pick up," the voice said.

Rian did so, slipping his fingers into the sand under the glass and lifting it up. It came away from the ground easily—it was far lighter than he had expected. As he held it, the voice replied, "The glass is not Dolu."

The sand all around Rian began to tremble, shaking and dancing up into the air in a mighty tremor. Then, an impossible shape stirred in that very sand, skimming up and through it effortlessly, leaping up into the air.

It was a kind of worm, or perhaps a snake. It was made of a faint blue light, and through its shape he could see whatever was behind it; it was translucent almost to the point of transparency. It was thick and stubby, not long and sinuous, but it moved with a strange kind of grace anyway. Its front end was little

more than a big round mouth, and as much as it should have terrified him, it did not. He simply knew that this creature, this Dolu, would not hurt him.

"The glass vibrates with my words," the creature said as it hung there in the air. Its mouth did not appear to move in response to the words it said. "Carry it, and you can hear me. In the air, it is easier for me to communicate. But I am much safer in the sand."

"You... you probably can't come home with me," Rian said plainly. "You are very big. And people won't like you."

"Will you help me without taking me home to your mother?" the Dolu asked.

"Why me?" the little boy asked. "I can find you a bigger person to help you. There are lots of kids in town bigger than me."

"None of them can see me," the Dolu said simply. "I have watched you come to this place for months, waiting to see if you would be the one I waited for. You are not an Arcon."

Rian shook his head. Somewhat proudly, he proclaimed, "I am a Child of Sen."

The glowing worm turned its eyeless head towards him and seemed to regard him for a long time.

"I think perhaps that is not entirely true. But your kind make little sense to me. I know only that the Children of Arc have trapped me here. They alone can see my kind. But you can see me. You must help me. I must return to my family."

"In the Dry Sea?" Rian asked. "Nothing lives there."

"Nothing that can be easily seen," the Dolu corrected him. Its voice had taken on a chiding tone, like that his mother used when she was telling him he had done something wrong.

"I only know one Arcon. He's my friend. Maybe... maybe I can ask him to tell his friends to let you go?" Rian supplied hopefully.

"There is no time," the Dolu said. "My mate will whelp soon. I must be there for her."

It took Rian a moment to think about what that meant. "You're going to be a father?" he asked.

"Soon," the worm said. "I stayed too long here, watching your people. The others made it out before the Arcons sealed the border, but I did not. I stayed because I sensed a kindred spirit. Perhaps it is you I sensed."

Rian clutched the glass disc to his chest and said firmly, "I think you should be there for your baby."

"Babies," the Dolu corrected him. "My mate will likely whelp a dozen or more offspring. That is why I dare not leave her alone."

Rian nodded sharply. “So, we have to go to the Dry Sea, and I have to help you get past some people, and then you can be there for your babies and your... wife?”

“Mate,” the Dolu supplied softly.

“Mate,” Rian accepted.

“That is all I need. I cannot do it alone, or I would have left long ago. The Arcons have tools that hurt my kind. Without you, they would turn me back – or worse, capture me. With you, little friend, I have a chance.”

“Do you have a name?” he asked the Dolu.

“We do not do such things,” the creature said. “Though I could use a name if you preferred it.”

“I’ll think about it,” Rian said. He turned to the south and then let out a sigh. “We should get started then. It’s a long walk to the Dry Sea.” He thought about sending his mother a message, but he couldn’t figure out what to say. She was going to be very angry, either way. He thought of her face, so lovely, wet with tears. He thought of her clutching at her belly as she always did when she worried – her hands gripped tight against the gold metal ring stitched into her skin there – another part of their secret.

“Walking would take too long,” the Dolu said. “I will carry you.” Without waiting for Rian to agree, the worm dove down into the sand, passing through it as though it simply did not exist. Its path was an arching one, and it came back up right under Rian, lifting him up on its broad back.

The Dolu was not exactly solid. Its flesh was extremely soft, and he found himself sinking into it by a few inches before it grew more stretchy and tight under his weight. In that way, he rode sort of half-atop and half-inside the creature. It flowed forward through the air as though it were burrowing through the ground. Its mouth worked furiously, chewing up and swallowing the sky in front of it and using that strange act to both pull and propel itself forward. It was swift but very odd, and Rian could not help but cry out in glee as he took in the exhilarating experience with wide eyes.

They did not fly high above the ground – most of the time, they were no more than a few feet above the rolling hillocks of sand beneath them. But they sped over the terrain without hesitation, and a trip of days became a voyage of hours. Eventually the thrill of the ride gave way to the familiar companionship of boredom. Rian tried to speak with the Dolu, but it was apparently difficult for the creature to speak while in motion. The best it could do was to send back occasional one-word responses. Such answers never seemed good enough for Rian.

About three hours into their journey – which he noted cut across the desert on a route that avoided the roads where one might reasonably expect to find travelers – Rian decided to try and call his mother. He held up his hand as he had been taught, but the messages from her would not release into his mind. The steady buzzing that told him there were messages just kept gnawing at the base of his skull. He tried to send a message back to her, but that was no more successful.

“Why can’t I use the signal?” he asked his companion.

A single word answered him, and again, it was not a satisfactory response. “Interference” was all the Dolu said.

They traveled all through the night, and the first rays of the first sunrise were lighting the distant horizon to their left as the Dry Sea started to appear before them.

The desert fell away into the steep depression of the Dry Sea in a sheer cliff that revealed the barren, stone-strewn seabed. Once, when he was very young, Rian had traveled here with his mother. She had shown him the great bones of the creatures that once lived in the sea, and together they had imagined stories of the mighty lizards. Even now, they would make mocking roars at one another in playful gestures, pretending to be the long-lost masters of the long-dead sea.

No one knew when the sea had gone dry, but none lived that remembered when the Dry Sea had been anything but empty. There were verses in the Book of Sen that spoke of the sea, but they spoke of it as a dark place, an enemy of Sen’s benevolent light. Whatever that meant. Sir Jerzis swore by the moon and the sea, sometimes – usually when he was shrieking at children who had been bothering him. The moon and the sea were images of Arc, of the fallen God that true Senites did not believe in.

Rian thought that, deep down, his mother believed in Arc. Or at least she *didn’t* believe in Sen. But he would never say that. Never, ever. That was why it was so important that they always prayed, he knew. It was very, very important that no one ever have a reason to question what Rian and his mother believed.

The Dolu slowed its rapid lunging forward and settled down into the sand atop the cliff-face, allowing Rian to dismount and look out over the seemingly endless pit of stone and the gigantic skeletal remains of long-necked lizards that had died in the dim darkness of a time before Sen.

“We must go down there,” the Dolu said simply.

“Then just go over the edge,” Rian said with a little shrug. “You can fly.”

“Watch,” the worm-like creature said. It undulated forward towards the edge of the cliff. As it pressed out into the open air above the sheer drop, a cascade of sparks burst from its flesh. “There is a wall to my kind. You must help me get through.”

“How... how should I do that?” Rian asked, eyes wide. Those sparks had been terrifying – bright and sudden. They also left a strange, burning stench in the air that he worried was the skin of his new friend. The Dolu didn’t seem to be hurt, but he didn’t know the creature well enough to know if it was well or not.

“There is a place. I will take you there. The machines that make this wall are there, and you will shut them off for me. Then I will cross into the Dry Sea and return to my family, and you will be free to return home. Your people trade with the men in this place – you can ride in one of their wagons back to your mother.” The Dolu laid its plan out simply, and as it described the steps, Rian slowly grew to realize two things.

First of all, he would be going home alone. The Dolu would cross to the other side of this wall and not be able to return. While he had only known the creature for a few hours, Rian felt close to it, and there was an unexpected pang of regret at the idea that the creature would be leaving his life so quickly.

The other thing was that Rian suddenly realized who the people were where they were going. The only people that lived out here was a small Arcon church. When he had visited the sea, long ago, it had been because his mother had baked bread for the church in an effort to convince them to become customers during their rare visits to Jay-Brook. He remembered being afraid of the strange men and women that worshiped the god of the moon.

“I want to help you,” he said softly. “But I’ve heard stories of what Arcons do to Senites. They used to bury us alive. That’s what Kelia says. And they don’t drink rain water – they only drink well water. And... and there are other things. Scary things.”

“They are humans,” the Dolu said, its words strangely sharp. “They are no more or less fearsome than any of your kind. They are cleverer than the sun-worshippers. They have machines. But they do not turn on their own. And they would never turn on you – not if they knew what you could do.”

Rian stared at the eyeless creature and asked, “What does that mean?”

“An Arcon can only see my kind through special goggles. They can only touch us with complicated machines. And they cannot speak with us at all,” the Dolu explained. “That you can do everything they do, and more – without their bits and pieces of metal and glass – will make you cherished by them.”

Rian felt his stomach start to twist into a deep, paralyzing knot. “They can’t know,” he whispered. “That’s part of the secret. I can only talk to you because of our secret, and no one is supposed to know about it.”

The Dolu wiggled over closer to him. The top of its big-mouthed head came to Rian’s eye level, and it drew very close to him. If it had a nose, they would have been standing nose-to-nose.

“You are not from this world,” the Dolu said. “I will not spill your secret. How could I? Only you can speak to me. You do not need to tell them about me. About you. You can do whatever you must. All I know is, you must get to the machine that makes the wall and turn it off. And we must hurry. I can feel my mate – she is in pain. I don’t want her to whelp alone.”

Rian thought about that. He was going to have to lie to a group of adults... a group of scary adults. But his friend needed his help, and he wouldn’t let him down.

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It was just after a quick stop on a patch of smoothed sand for midday prayers that Rian and his Dolu approached the ramshackle Church of Arc.

The building was built on one of the rare promontories, where the former coastline jutted out over the empty seabed. It was a huge building, easily three stories tall, and it was made of equal parts dark,

weathered wood and large, intricately crafted glass. Rian had never seen so much glass construction in his life—such a display of wealth was unheard of in Jay-Brook. But here, the big building with its steeples and angled roof was punctuated with glass towers and, even stranger, great protruding coils and spikes of smoke-colored glass.

Where the Senite church in his town featured a dome ringed in bright windows of colored glass that showed images of the two suns, this church was all points and lines. Its few windows were very thin and covered in dark blue or smoke-gray glass. He looked back at his friend, who had sunk down low into the sand so that only the top of the big, round lip that surrounded its gaping mouth could be seen.

“Keep my glass upon you,” the Dolu said. “And I will stay as close as I dare. Find the machine and turn it off. It needs only be down for a moment, and I will win free.”

Rian nodded sharply and drew in a deep, steadying breath. Then, eyes fixed dead ahead, he stomped up the broad wooden steps that lead to the double doors of the Arcon house of worship.

He knocked on the door hesitantly at first, but when no one answered he redoubled his efforts, pounding hard with his little fists.

He heard a heavy, regular sound from beyond the door, and a moment later, the left door swung inward to reveal a single figure standing in the shadows. It appeared that the inside of the building was quite dark, and the man squinted in the light of the two suns high overhead.

“What do you want?” the man asked. He was younger than Rian had expected—perhaps the same age as Mother. His skin was paler than most people, but he had the same dark hair of the typical Pithysian. Basically, he looked like everyone else... just without the golden shine of sun-kissed skin. He wore a plain brown shirt with a long hem and heavy trousers made of the canvas that most people used for canopies and sun-shelters. The man’s feet were bare.

“I’m lost,” Rian said simply. It was an easy thing to say convincingly, since it was mostly true. He had no idea if, left on his own, he could get back to his mother. And he couldn’t even feel the little buzzing vibrations of her un-received messages in the back of his head. That’s how far away from her he was. As that thought started to sink in, he felt his eyes well with genuine tears. He had one hand thrust into his pocket, gripped tightly around the glass disc. He squeezed it even tighter.

All the while, as he had wrestled with those realizations, the man at the door had simply stared at him.

“No, no—no crying,” the man said. He stepped back into the entryway of the church and said, “Come in out of the sun. We will figure out how to get you home.”

Rian thanked him and entered, stepping into the cool darkness of the church. He winced as the man closed the big door behind him, but he heard the soft whisper of the Dolu’s voice reassuring him, “I am still here. Find the machine.”

The inside of the church was a low-ceilinged series of rooms with open archways connecting each chamber. There was light provided by an occasional ball of glass lit from within by a dancing ball of sparks that seemed to call out to Rian, but he kept his hands to himself. It was all very strange.

“How did you get all the way out here?” the man asked, leading Rian in through several barren chambers. Eventually they reached a room with an open ceiling that showed the two upper levels of the church, each a balcony overlooking this lowest level. Those balconies were bustling, filled to bursting, even, with machinery of glass and metal. There were a few people, like this man, working amid the machines, but none of them paid any attention to Rian.

“My mother was with a caravan. I must have wandered off in the night. I walk in my sleep, sometimes. It scares her. My mother, I mean.” He rambled through his story as he took in the sight of all these strange, wonderful machines. But which of them was the one he wanted? He had no way of knowing.

The man seemed to consider his story, leading Rian to a long pew and motioning for him to take a seat on it. Rian did so, still looking up and around.

“There are a lot of machines here,” he said, authentic awe in his voice.

“We are tinkerers,” the man said dismissively. “Our god wishes for us to find our own way through the world.”

Rian looked down at him and cocked his head slightly askance. “Sen shows us the way,” he said carefully. That was exactly what his mother would have wanted him to say, he thought.

The man sighed and settled down in the pew next to Rian. “I know better than to argue with one of you after you’ve given your heart to your church,” he said. “Suffice it to say, we see things differently here. But there are no caravans due to bring us supplies this month at all. Where was your mother’s caravan bound?”

“The machine we want is on the highest balcony,” the Dolu whispered softly. “The whole balcony is that one machine. I can’t get close enough to it to find the controls. I am sorry, Rian ap Selier, but you must find a way yourself.”

“It is a... a trip to see the bones,” Rian said, struggling to make sure the Arcon couldn’t tell that he was hearing the Dolu. “It was a trip with the other children of the village.” He fidgeted with the glass in his pocket.

“Education,” the man said approvingly. “How progressive.”

“Mother says we should always be learning new things,” Rian said solemnly. “Or old things, I guess. They say the bones are very old.”

“The oldest things in the world,” the man said knowingly. “Older even than the first Corziv.”

Rian looked at the man. "Are there any Corziv here?" he asked breathlessly. The small, goat-headed people were exceedingly rare in the south, and he had always wanted to meet one.

"Corziv do not worship Arc," the man said, a note of bitterness in his voice. "But you seemed like the sort who would like stories of the Corziv."

It was true, of course—but talking about them wouldn't help him help his friend. Rian wracked his mind, trying to think of a possible excuse to get up into the balcony. He looked up again, letting his jaw hang open in an earnest display of his wonderment, and then he saw something. There was an opening in the machinery of that topmost balcony, and hanging above the opening—a sort of arch—was a sign painted with clear letters. It read, "Observatory."

Rian was happy that his mother had insisted he learn to read, but he was even more happy that he had spent time with Sir Jerzis. One of the man's few hobbies—one he had shared with Rian during one of the few visits where he had not been in a foul mood—was watching the stars. He used a long spyglass for the job, and he kept it in a little nest on the roof of his house that he had always called 'The Observatory.'

"Can I see the bones from here?" Rian asked. "I've so wanted to see the bones."

The man considered Rian's request. Then, with a slight shaking of his head, he said, "I'm afraid that is not a good idea."

"Hurry," the Dolu said. "It is nearly time!" Its voice roared above a whisper, and it startled Rian.

He didn't want to let his friend down. He didn't want all of those little baby Dolu to grow up without a father.

He started to cry, his tears forced—he had always been good at crying—but rooted in real sadness. He was a good-tempered child, and this was, perhaps, his first true tantrum.

The man had no idea what to do with that.

Within moments, the man was patting him on the shoulder and ushering him to a doorway that led to a long stairway.

They climbed up and up and up, and when they reached the top, they emerged onto the highest balcony. Rian wiped his tears—and a little snot—with the back of his long, loose shirt sleeve. The man lead him directly towards the archway labeled 'Observatory.'

"What does this all do?" Rian asked.

"Never you mind," the man said sharply. He half-lead, half-dragged Rian through the archway. Beyond it, the top story of the church opened onto a broad, high-railed deck that looked out over the desert. It was open to the air, covered only with a broad sheet of dark blue canvas that kept the worst of the sun or the rain away. Cleverly set into the railing were several different large, elaborate spy glasses. "You may use any of those," the man said. "All are strong enough to show you the boneyards."

Rian moved towards the nearest of the long spyglass tubes and then stopped. "Can you show me how?" he asked politely.

The man snorted but moved towards the glass. He appeared unwilling to trigger another fit, and Rian smiled inwardly. All of that practice in pretend-fighting with his mother had been worth the trouble, it seemed.

As the man bent down to fix his gaze into the distance through the spyglass, Rian slipped back into the building, through the archway and into the midst of the machinery that hummed and flickered with light in glass tubes and bulbs all around the low railing that overlooked the levels below.

He ran up to the machine components nearest to him, noting how great gears of glass and metal turned inside transparent glass panels. His eyes scanned over the devices nearest to him, but he could find nothing that looked like a control of any kind. He thought of smashing in one of the glass panels, but he knew better than that—even babies knew that nothing could break Pithysian glass.

"Boy? What are you doing?" shouted the man's voice. He had called out loudly, and the sound had alarmed the men working on the second balcony. Some of them looked up to see what was wrong, and one fixed his eyes on Rian and shouted, "You there! Come down here!"

Panicked, Rian reached out to touch the machine. He laid one hand on the glass panel and it felt warm to the touch.

The world around him swam, and at the edges of his vision it seemed like everything wobbled and spun. He grew swiftly dizzy, and his stomach lurched as though he had drunk sour milk. But before he could stagger back or throw up, a little wave of sparks flew out of his fingertips and into the machine. With a great, grinding sound, the lights ceased to flicker and every gear in the mighty machine came to a sudden, awkward stop.

Behind him, through his spinning sense of vision, Rian saw the man advancing on him angrily, one fist balled up and drawn back as though to strike.

"Jump!" called the booming voice of the Dolu.

Rian didn't even think about it. He half-stumbled, half-jumped up onto the low railing that separated the balcony from the open air above the lower level. There he saw the Dolu, flying straight up, wiggling and rushing upward, a glowing blue form of lumpy skin and chewing, gnashing teeth. Rian jumped, and the Dolu spun, catching Rian upon its back. It continued up and forward, bending to rush over the third-floor balcony and right past the Arcon, who did not see it at all.

To Rian, it looked as though the man had just seen the boy begin to fly astride an invisible mount.

The Dolu rushed through the archway onto the observatory balcony and then over that balcony's higher railing, sailing out into the sky above the Dry Sea.

Rian didn't have time to worry about how he was going to get to his mother. He clutched onto the Dolu as the air whistled past his head, and then he closed his eyes and let the dizziness swallow him up. As he felt sleep overtaking him, he mumbled softly, "I think I would call you Sirocco." That was what the Dolu was, after all—a powerful wind in the desert, like the ones that sometimes swallowed up houses. Proud of himself for the name, Rian allowed sleep to take him.

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It was very dark when Rian woke up again. He was sleeping on the sand amid a pile of stones, though all of the rocks had been cleared away from where he slept to make a little shelter on three side of him. The night air was clear, and the stars were a bright nest around the pale light of the moon.

He heard two voices speaking in the distance. One was familiar, and Rian looked down to see that, even in his sleep, he had the disc of glass clutched tight against his chest.

"He is special," the Dolu said. "He helped me to get home. I would see no harm come to him."

"We will visit upon it not any harm," another voice, scratchy and deep, said. "It is the singular example we have sought for long years."

"He has a mother. He would return to her, given the choice."

The new voice paused for a time, then said, "Not always are choices to be given. It is the first of its kind that has come to any place where we might lay talon and wing upon it. A free human."

"There are surely others in the Reach. Or the Cradle."

"And not any of those places are to be reached by our kind. The Skallex have made a great many plans, and they have made not any mistakes in so long. We must know what it is they have done. The Time of Choosing will come soon—not more than forty turns of the season. We must know as much truth as can be known. We must know what it is they have done to the humans."

"I understand," the Dolu said. "He will be well cared for?"

"We will allow not any harm to befall him," the other one said again.

Rian lifted his head over the small wall of stone between him and those that spoke. He saw the Dolu, glowing softly in the night. Swarming around him in the sand were six or seven smaller Dolu, each the size of Rian's arm. They wallowed and played in the sand, and it glowed that dull, hot color where they thrashed about.

Talking to the Dolu was a creature Rian had never seen before. It was lit only by the glow of the Dolu, but he could tell it had scaly, lizard-like skin. Its head had a long crest at the back of it, and its mouth was thrust forward like a beak. Emerging from its back were two mighty wings, triangular in shape, covered in that same scaly skin. Lower on its back, nearer the waist, were two more such wings—those were smaller. It wore only a small waist cloth for clothing, and its feet were bare, coming to sharp little clawed tips where a person would have toes.

He gasped at the sight of the creature, and it turned to see him. Its eyes were a shiny gold color, and they locked on his with a strange mix of curiosity and worry.

“You will come with me,” the creature said. “We have a great distance to cross before morning.”

Rian shook his head. “I want to stay with Sirocco,” he said firmly.

“This cannot be,” the lizard said. “And you cannot return home. You have unleashed sorcery in the Reach. The Church will know. The *Lumini* will be sent, or other agents of the High and the Highest. You cannot be safe. Already, the inquisitors will be closing on your place of residence. You can only be safe with us.”

Rian didn’t know what any of that meant. Except inquisitors. He knew about inquisitors. They were the ones that put that golden ring into his mother’s belly – seared and stitched it there when she begged to be allowed to come to the Reach. They were the ones that mother always said were watching.

“Mother,” Rian whispered.

“I am sorry,” the lizard said. “We cannot save her.”

“What did I do wrong?” Rian asked, tears heavy in his eyes.

Sirocco replied softly, “Nothing. It is not a fair place, our world. Not a good one. But if you go with By’ri’de’yt, you can help to make it a better one.”

Rian came out from behind the little wall and approached the Dolu and the flying lizard. He walked up to Sirocco, careful as he stepped in the sand to not bump or touch the babies. Mother always said it was a bad idea to touch babies without permission. He leaned in against the Dolu’s glowing skin, sinking into its ghostly substance as he wrapped his arms around its ugly body. “I don’t want to go,” he whispered.

“You will not go alone,” Sirocco said. “Take the glass. It is mine. If something happens to you, if someone tries to hurt you, you will call me. I will come.” The Dolu turned its attention, and its alarmingly large mouth, towards the lizard. “No tricks, Gorogois. You will take care of my friend.”

The lizard inclined its long head.

“Save the world, Rian ap Selier. Save it, so that my spawn grow old free,” Sirocco said.

Rian nodded and hugged tighter before letting go. He stepped back, and the lizard wrapped one muscled arm around him, pulling Rian close to the creature’s torso and unfurling its four wings.

As it flapped those powerful limbs, it lifted Rian up into the night sky. He clutched for dear life to the lizard’s arm with one hand while the other gripped his glass disc.

Sirocco called out, his voice just as clear in Rian’s mind now as it had been when they were right next to each other, “Perhaps you might even make it so that *your* spawn can grow old free as well.”

Rian didn't know what that meant. His whole life, he had felt free. But right then and there, in that moment in the dark skies above the Dry Sea, he had never felt more trapped.