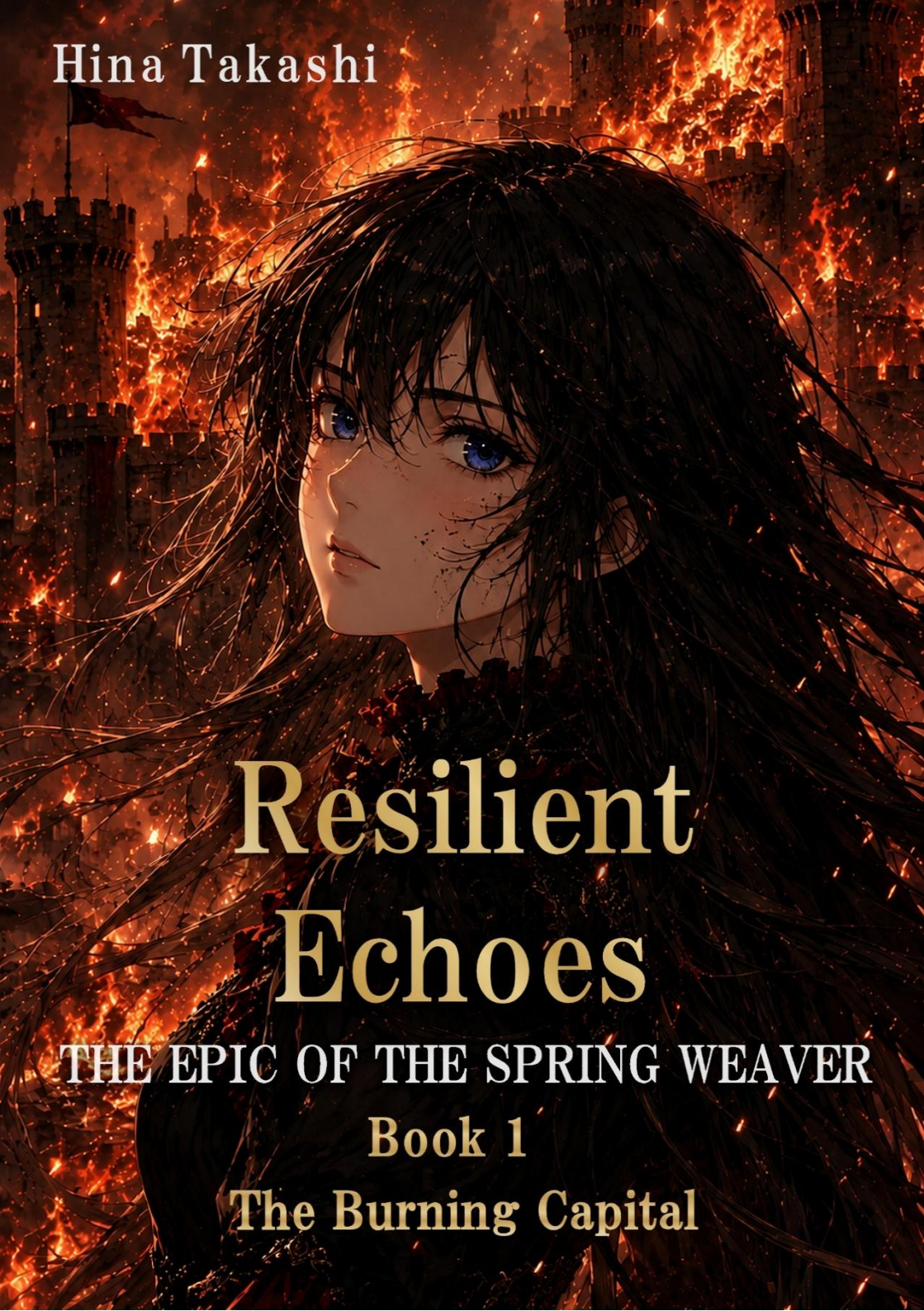




Hina Takashi

Resilient Echoes

THE EPIC OF THE SPRING WEAVER

Book 1

The Burning Capital

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The Burning Capital

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Character relationship map:

<https://studio-hirop.com/character-eng.html>

Prologue

“Dr. Chararyo, sir. Still burning the midnight oil in the archives?”

An old man's voice drifted through the library.

A young girl sat alone at a massive wooden desk, almost swallowed by it. She clung to the edge while guiding an oversized quill across the page with small, deliberate movements.

“The compilation of the ancient chronicles has stalled. The court keeps burying me beneath trivial work.”

She answered with the composure of an adult.

Between towers of books, the light of a reading lamp caught the gold of her bobbed hair. Her ears tapered to fine points. Even at a distance, her eyes shone green.

An elf.

Her appearance belonged to a child. The robe of a royal scholar did not. She had lived far longer than she looked.

“Ancient history, is it, sir? That’s a world beyond an old watchman like me.”

“Not entirely. “

She looked up.



“The past, the present, and the future are never separate. They're links in the same chain. You and I are bound to it as well. The officials in this castle dismiss the ancient material civilization as a fairy tale. They're wrong.

It existed. There were people who saw it.”

The old man smiled. Not the practiced smile of a court official. Just quiet warmth.

The elf hesitated for a moment. She wasn't used to that.

“At least... that's what my mother told me. The witnesses belonged to the **Immortal Clan**. They've long since vanished. So, I gather fragments. One record at a time. One truth at a time.”

She rested the quill.

“Thirty thousand years ago, the world was different. People lived in cities more magnificent than anything we know.

Beautiful Castles.

Palaces suspended in the sky.

Then it disappeared. Without warning. They placed greater faith in material than in nature or the spirit. The darkness born from that prosperity consumed them. It left only scars.

Magic.

And monsters.”

The watchman bowed his head.

“I cannot pretend to understand the learning of a royal scholar. But...

...something in those words reaches me, sir.

At my age, I should know better than to feel excited.”

“You won't hear me laugh.”

She smiled.

“I don't want this to become another paper written for stubborn officials. I want words that wandering minstrels will remember.

This is an epic. The fragments are endless. But every journey begins somewhere.”

She dipped the quill again.

“People still remember the rebellion. The one that nearly brought back the Demon King. You were young then. I believe the remnants of that ancient darkness were there as well.”

She lowered the pen to a blank page.

The first line appeared.

The strongest magic is the magic that moves the human heart.

— *The Epic of the Spring Weaver* —

On the edge of a quiet mountain village, a little girl with sun-browned skin chased a pack of boys, waving a stick over her head. Her long black hair was tied into a ponytail. The boys scattered through the road, shouting and laughing as they fled.

“Karen.”

A woman's voice carried across the village.

“Our guests will arrive before evening. It's time to come home.”

“Mom!”

Still clutching the stick, the girl threw herself into her mother's arms and grinned, her cheeks flushed.

Dust rose around them.

Her mother blinked it from her eyes.

“Who's coming?”

“Someone who knew your father.”

“My father? “

Karen had never met him.

Her mother said he rested beneath the stone in the cemetery by the square. Every day she stood before it, hands folded, speaking to him.

So, someone who knew... a stone?

Karen tilted her head.

“The people who raised your father are coming. They're very important.

Now hurry home. You need to change. And wash your face. You're covered in mud.”

By dusk, a carriage rolled into the village square. Its polished black body was edged with delicate golden patterns.

The first to step down was a girl dressed in white. Her skin was pale as new snow. Silver hair reached below her knees, swaying softly with every step. She



carried a bouquet of crimson roses in both arms.

“A doll...

It's walking.”

Karen covered her open mouth. Her eyes widened.

A boy climbed down after her. Chestnut curls framed a quiet face. He wore formal black and white, with a gold crest upon his breast.

“Lady Elizabeth.

And Lord Harton as well.”

Karen's mother hurried forward, bowing so deeply she almost knelt before taking the girl's hand. She greeted her not as a child, but as an honored elder.

“My brother seldom appears before people,” the silver-haired girl said.

But today is different. I persuaded him.”

“You've only just defeated the Demon King. And yet you came all the way to this little village...”

“It took five years.”

Elizabeth smiled.

“But it's over. All of it.”

She looked toward the little girl.

“And today is Calzac Darc's Memorial Day.

...Is this her?”

“Yes. His daughter. Karen.”

Elizabeth studied her.

“She looks so much like him.

The eyes. The hair.

But those rosy cheeks...

They're yours, Ellen.

She'll grow into a beautiful young woman.

Don't you think, Brother?"

The boy standing behind her gave the smallest nod.

"She's terribly mischievous," Ellen said with an embarrassed smile.

"Especially for a girl."

"I'm not going to be beautiful."

Karen folded her arms.

"I'm going to be an adventurer. I'm going to defeat the evil Demon King."

Ellen laughed softly.

"I'm sorry. She's only a child."

She crouched beside her daughter.

"The Demon King is gone, Karen. Lord Harton defeated him."

Karen blinked. Her eyes moved between the doll-like girl and the quiet boy.

"Are you adventurers?"

"No."

Elizabeth knelt before her.

"We are keepers of memory. Our people gather beautiful memories.

And you are one of them, Karen.

One of my favorites."

She reached out and gently touched the little girl's cheek.

"My brother says great hardship awaits you. That's why I wished to see you. I don't want Calzac's daughter to suffer.

But if that is your fate...

...you will meet many people.

You will overcome each trial.

And one day...

...we will meet again.

You carry Calzac's blessing.

His last words were these.

Protect Karen.

I came to deliver them.”

Karen listened without understanding.

Beside her, her mother wept.

She did not know why.

She did not understand the fairy-like girl's words.

Nor did she remember them. The strange evening sank beneath the surface of her mind and vanished into childhood.

Years passed.

Chapter One: Ordeal

Part I — The Dark Dungeon

Karen looked back.

The darkness seemed alive. Somewhere beyond it, she imagined the monsters were still following.

She closed her eyes.

The last of her magic gathered at her fingertips. Her teeth chattered. The sound echoed in the silence.

“LUX...”

The word barely escaped her trembling lips. A gentle glow blossomed from her hand and spread through the cavern.

Nothing moved.

The monsters were gone.

Only a narrow stream slipped away into the depths.

She had no idea where she was. She had lost the others.

She let out a long breath. Relief and despair arrived together.

The pale ring of light surrounding her body drew her eyes.

She remembered the first spell she had ever cast.

LUX.

Three years ago. She had only just begun training as an adventurer in the royal city of Katomar.

The power had risen inside her like something that had never belonged to her. Her own body had felt strangely distant, as though another, older force had laid its hands upon her.

She had watched that small flame above her palm for hours.

Soft.

Warm.

It had seemed to spring from the earth itself.

LUX had been the first spell every adventurer learned.

It healed nothing.

It killed nothing.

It was only a light against darkness.

Now, nothing mattered more.

Only a few days earlier, reports of monsters had reached a village beneath the Saltera Mountains. No villagers had been harmed.

That alone was enough to summon adventurers.

Karen and five companions accepted the commission.

None of them were famous. Had the village possessed the money to hire veterans, it would have done so.

The reports suggested kobolds. Nothing worse. Creatures that sometimes climbed to the surface.

Karen was the youngest among them. The least experienced. It was her first expedition.

She had been assigned to the rear, supporting the others with healing magic and medicines.

“Just stay behind us.”

They had laughed.

Someone had clapped her shoulder.

Then, humming to themselves, they had stepped into the dark mouth of the cave.

Only a few hours had passed.

How had it become this?

Why am I here?

Karen shook her head. Her long black hair drifted across her shoulders like dark silk.

They had forgotten the oldest rule.

Never relax.

Not even once.

The weaker monsters near the entrance had fallen without effort.

Then the trap had sprung.

A ward.

One hidden beneath the stone floor.

In an instant it had thrown them deep into the dungeon.

The monsters came almost immediately. Creatures she had never seen before. Fire burst from mouths split to their ears.

The three warriors in the front line fell one after another.

Karen could do nothing.

She no longer remembered where she had run.

Or how far.

Only that she was alive. It felt impossible.

The last screams of her companions still echoed inside her skull.

She covered her face. Then she sank to her knees.

No tears came.

Only nausea.

It rose from somewhere deep inside her chest. Her breastplate felt too tight. Her heart refused to slow.

Karen loosened the laces of her armor and drew a long breath.

The armor was forged from a rare metal. Light enough for the weak to wear. Strong enough to leave their movements unhindered.

Ice Chainmail.

It had belonged to her father.

He had been a great adventurer.

An adventurer's life was spent beneath the earth, hunting

monsters. Sometimes they reclaimed treasure stolen from the surface. Without them, the creatures below would spill into the open world and prey upon those who could not fight back.

That was why adventurers were honored. The honor was paid for with lives.

Some among the demon races possessed keen intelligence. They guarded their domain fiercely, carving labyrinths into the earth and filling them with hidden doors and deadly traps.

Even so, young men and women still chose that path.

For glory.

For those they wished to protect.

When Karen's mother realized her daughter would never abandon the dream of following her father, she spent two and a half months resizing his armor. She remade it into something no smith in the kingdom could match.

Magic dwelled within it. It turned aside fire. That alone must have carried Karen through the sea of flames.

Her breathing finally steadied.

She forced herself to think.

The stone walls meant nothing to her. The stream around her boots was cold enough to numb flesh.

Yet beneath the Ice Chainmail, her skin bore no burns. Not even a mark.

The spell *LUX* gave off a trace of warmth. It kept the cold at bay.

She searched for food.

Medicine.

Nothing.

The light would fade soon enough. She no longer had the strength

to cast another spell.

She did not want to die here.

Alone. In the dark.

Her instructor's words returned to her.

Never surrender hope. Not under any circumstances.

She weighed what little remained.

Stay where she was.

Or find a way out herself.

If the monsters returned—

Karen began walking upstream. Toward the surface. Toward the direction she chose to believe.

The current grew steeper. So did the ground beneath her feet. A faint hope stirred inside her.

Without noticing, she forgot the strain in her lungs.

The passage opened into a vast chamber. Its ceiling disappeared into darkness.

She stopped.

A waterfall blocked the way. It plunged from somewhere high above, straight through the blackness. Mist drifted across the cavern.

A dead end.

Despair settled over her once more. Her shoulders sagged. She stood without moving.

I'll have to turn back.

A low growl rolled through the chamber.

Behind her.

Karen threw herself to the right.

A massive, fur-covered arm swept past where she had stood, scraping across the shield she snatched into her left hand.

Claws flashed.

A werebear.

One of the beasts twisted by dark power. Some believed they had once been adventurers who had wandered too deep and never returned.

Karen struck back. The wall stood behind her. There was nowhere left to run. Her weapon glanced harmlessly across hide armored with coarse, wire-like fur.

The werebear's second blow ripped the shield from her grasp. The next came at once. Its claws tore through her left side.

The wound was nearly fatal.

She felt no pain.

Only certainty.

This was death.

Karen gathered what strength remained. She drove herself into the creature's chest.

The last attack failed.

Her knees buckled. She collapsed.

The werebear raised its arm to finish the kill.

Karen watched the claws descend.

Fear never came.

Only anger.

Not at the beast.

At herself.

To die here.

Like this.

Then the impossible happened.

The werebear's arm spun through the air. Severed cleanly at the shoulder. Before the beast could even scream, its body crashed to the stone with a thunderous roar.

It was already dead.

A figure entered Karen's fading vision.

He looked younger than she was.

A boy wrapped in a black cloak stood beyond the fallen beast, looking down at her. The blade in his hand shone with a strange, translucent light. As he slid it back into its scabbard, she caught sight of the insignia beneath his cloak.

A Lord.

A title granted only to the greatest adventurers.

"Louis. How is she?"

Another figure emerged from the darkness and called to the young Lord who had saved her.

"Badly hurt. I need to treat her now. Ed, give me a hand."

Only when she heard the word treat did the pain arrive. It tore through her side. Her vision blurred.

"It's all right. You'll be fine."

Louis knelt beside her.

His voice was gentle as he removed her armor and blood-soaked clothing.

The wound reached deep into her body. Fresh blood pulsed from it.

He placed both hands over the gash.

"MACURE."

The spell left his lips almost as a whisper.

His hands moved slowly across the wound.

“There. No scar.”

The torn flesh closed beneath his touch. Not even a mark remained.

“It’ll hurt for a while. The pain will pass. The organs need longer.”

He let out a quiet breath.

“We made it in time.”

His gray eyes settled on hers.

“You’re the one who called me.”

Karen managed to raise herself onto one elbow.

I don't remember calling anyone...

Her thoughts drifted without finding an answer.

Louis lowered his hood. Soft platinum-blond hair fell around a youthful face. His gray eyes held a cold brilliance, like sunlight caught inside ice.

“Louis.”

A girl’s voice cut in.

“What exactly were you touching while you had the chance?”

More figures stepped from the darkness.

One.

Two.

Six in all.

An adventuring party. Each wore the same black cloak.

Louis flushed and glared toward the speaker.

“I was only noticing.”

He shrugged.

“She’s nothing like Shunra. Like a washboard.”

“What did you say?”

The girl took a step forward.

“And when have you ever seen my body?”

“Enough. “

The boy called Ed stopped them both.

“She's lost too much blood. We're taking her back to the castle.”

He turned to the girl.

“Shunra. Take her. Teleport there first.”

“No problem.”

She folded her arms.

“But put some clothes on her. I'm not dragging her through the castle like that.”

She was tall and slender, with short golden hair.

An elf.

She took Karen's hand.

“*IANUAE*.”

Light swallowed them.

Karen lost all feeling in her arms and legs. The cavern disappeared.

In the last fragments of consciousness, she felt her body lifted, as though the light itself had carried her away.

Part II — Castle Town

Light.

Karen blinked against it.

The streets of Katomar emerged from the glare, familiar at last. Shunra supported her by the shoulder as they walked. Little by little, her eyes adjusted.

The elf stood half a head taller than Karen. The tips of pointed

ears slipped in and out beneath short blond hair. She had changed into a pale blue robe over black, a simple garment that suited her lean, almost boyish frame.

Karen wore a long dress in place of the armor destroyed in the dungeon. A braided cord cinched it beneath her breasts. The embroidered red collar hung lower than it should, exposing the curve of her cleavage. One hard movement and the dress would betray her. It was the sort of clothing a village girl might wear to a festival, not an adventurer.

As the haze lifted from her mind, fragments of the day began to settle into place.

She was walking beneath the sun.

She still found that hard to believe.

The training grounds where she had spent her apprenticeship lay nearby. The streets around them had not changed.

“Sasuke's a ninja.”

Shunra kept talking without pause.

“He hardly ever speaks. Strange man. But he gets the job done.”

She barely waited for breath.

“Aramis likes pretty clothes. Looks harmless. He's deadly with a sword. They say he's a womanizer.”

She tapped her own chest.

“I'm Shunra. The elf was obvious.”



“Um...”

Karen found her voice.

“Thank you. For saving me.”

“I didn't.”

Shunra shrugged.

“Louis healed you. The platinum-blond boy.”

Her eyes drifted to Karen's chest.

“He was touching you.”

She wrinkled her nose.

“Grinning the whole time.

Disgusting.

I still get chills thinking about it. I don't know what he sees in those things.”

Karen folded both arms across her breasts. The elf's stare was far too direct. She looked capable of reaching out just to prove a point.

“But Louis only has eyes for Edgar.”

Shunra snorted.

“Two men. Perverts. The thought alone makes me sick.”

She leaned closer.

“Just between us.”

“Edgar...”

Karen hesitated.

“Who's Edgar?”

Shunra stopped.

“You don't know? You were with them.”

Karen searched her memory for the quiet young man.

Before she found him—

“Oh.”

Shunra pointed across the street.

“The cakes here are wonderful. You should come back sometime.”

She smiled at the bakery as though nothing else mattered.

Then she resumed criticizing Louis.

Karen listened in silence. She had never imagined an elf could talk this much. Or this bluntly.

The elves she knew by reputation were graceful, quiet people. Descendants of the ancient fair folk. Or so everyone believed.

They reached the castle gate.

A broad-shouldered guard lowered his long spear across their path. Beneath his helmet, a bearded face studied them with practiced suspicion.

Shunra pulled back her cloak. The Lord's insignia caught the light.

The guard snapped upright.

The gates opened at once.

Karen had never crossed them before.

Most adventurers dreamed of earning an audience with the king and a place among the royal guard. Most never reached the castle at all. They abandoned the road. Or died on it. Like her companions.

Only then did it truly strike her.

She had survived. The others had not.

She had run. She stood breathing in this peaceful city because they no longer could.

Still, no tears came.

“You're not cut out for adventurer.”

Shunra spoke without warning.

Karen lowered her eyes.

I already knew.

“You aren't quick. Those arms won't swing a sword. And you're no mage. So why become an adventurer?”

She looked Karen up and down.

“A shrine maiden? With clothes like that. About the only thing you'd contribute on an expedition is giving the men something to look at.”

She tilted her head.

“I never asked your name.”

“I'm Karen Darc, from Saja.”

Karen answered with the full name expected between adventurers. Her irritation crept into her voice despite herself.

Shunra's bright green eyes widened. She studied Karen's face.

Then she nodded.

“I see.

So that's it.”

Karen frowned.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

A large hand settled on Shunra's shoulder. Before she could react, it spun her around.

A giant towered over them. His skin carried a faint green cast. Not a single hair grew above his neck.

A troll.

“Shunra Lisren.”

His voice rolled like thunder.

“I heard you were back from Eldor. I've been looking for you. I wanted to see you.”

“Get your filthy hands off me, you brainless overgrown brute!”

Shunra's voice could match the troll's.

People were gathering now. Castle officials, servants, ladies-in-waiting, merchants on errands. They kept their distance, watching with undisguised curiosity.

“What’s the matter? Don’t be like that. You and me, we’re practically old friends.”

The troll gave a suggestive chuckle.

Shunra's face reddened.

“When did you and I become anything to each other?”

She glared at him.

“What is it? Without Edgar around, you’ve suddenly found your courage?”

“Wh-what did you say?”

The troll's face darkened to purple. He seized Shunra by the collar and lifted her slender body off the ground.

Hanging there, she spat straight into his twisted purple face.

“You little—”

His fist rose.

“Go on. Try it.”

Shunra's voice was steady now.

“Put a single mark on me and see what Edgar has to say.”

She smiled thinly.

“Though I doubt you’ll have much use for that fist afterward.”

Her face had already returned to normal.

“Hmph. Suit yourself.”

The troll dropped her. Then he turned on the crowd.

“You lot! This isn’t a show. Move along!”

He waved his arms, driving the spectators away.

Then he looked at Karen.

“What about the big-breasted girl? Who’s she? You pick her up somewhere?”

His long arm reached toward Karen.

Shunra stepped between them. She said nothing. She simply stared into the troll’s face.

“Hmph!”

The troll wiped the spit from his face and turned away. After five or six steps, he looked back.

“Give my regards to dear Louis.”

Shunra pulled off one of her shoes and hurled it at him. It struck the troll squarely between the shoulders.

He glanced around at the spectators, grinning.

“No wonder nobody wants to ride a filly like that.”

His broad back disappeared through the crowd.

“That was ugly.”

Shunra slipped her shoe back on.

Karen watched her.

“That overgrown brute is Garanka. A troll.

Apparently, Bruno’s favorite warrior.”

Shunra snorted.

“Which is hilarious.”

Bruno was the king of Lathazar. Lord of this castle.

Karen had heard the name Garanka before. He was the chief of the Royal Guard, said to be the strongest warrior in the kingdom. For a novice adventurer like Karen, he was someone far beyond her reach.



This was the first time she had seen him.

“What are you staring at?” Shunra glanced at her. “Don’t tell me that’s your type.”

Karen shook her head at once.

“No.”

“Good.”

Shunra lowered her voice.

“He’s a bastard. I ran into him once. He tried to force himself on me.”

She glanced around.

“Keep that to yourself. If Edgar heard about it, that troll would be dead. Edgar is very particular about things like that.”

She shrugged.

“Garanka’s a bastard, but not enough of one to deserve death.”

Edgar. The name had come up again.

Karen had met him. She was almost certain. But she remembered little about him. The young man who had helped Louis treat her had been just a boy. Yet Garanka had clearly feared the name.

Who was Edgar?

And how could someone that young—

“It’s been a long time since I came to this castle.”

Shunra was already onto something else.

“Nothing’s changed. Bruno’s so stiff. Bad-tempered and stubborn. What a miserable combination.”

She had no hesitation insulting the king.

They found the inn soon enough.

It was nothing like the cheap lodgings Karen knew in town. This was guest quarters for visitors to the castle.

“Here.” Shunra pointed at the building.

“The food’s awful. But the beds are soft.”

She sounded delighted.

Inside, Shunra exchanged a few words with a man dressed like a court official. An attendant was summoned at once.

Karen shifted uneasily.

“Um... I don't have any money.”

She had always struggled to pay for even the cheapest room. And the dungeon had taken what little she had left.

Shunra gave her another incredulous look.

“Edgar sent you here.”

She sighed.

“With his name, you walk straight in. You don't need to worry about the cost. Edgar is a guest of the king.”

That settled it. They were shown to a room.

Part III — The Tyrannical Troll

“Mr. Edgar...?” At last, lying in bed, Karen managed to ask.

The room they had been given was splendid. It had a marble bathtub and furnishings unlike anything she had known. Karen had slipped into one corner of a bed so large she had never seen its like.

“You really are an amateur, aren't you?”

Shunra looked at her.

“Every adventurer knows the Harton siblings.”

Of course, Karen knew of them.

They were the heroes who had defeated Arthur, the Demon King who had once ravaged the kingdom with dark magic. That had been more than ten years ago. Karen still remembered standing by the roadside at the edge of her village, waving as the Harton siblings returned in triumph. She had been a little girl then.

“The elder brother's name is Edgar.

Edgar Harton.”

“But that was more than ten years ago...”

Shunra paused.

A trace of uncertainty crossed her face.

“I don't know much myself.”

“People say powerful magic keeps Edgar from aging. There are rumors he's one of the Immortal Clan.”

Shunra lowered her voice.

“Some even say he's Arthur's nephew.”

She paused.

“If that's true, then he's a vampire.

Just rumors.”

“Yes.”

Shunra glanced toward the door.

“Oh. I'll have some herbs prepared. Wait here.”

The door closed.

The elf's hurried footsteps faded down the hall.

Karen was alone. She lay still, looking around the spacious room.

There were things everywhere she had never seen before.

She knew of such luxuries only from stories. At eighteen, there were many things whose names she did not know, much less their purpose.

Gold and silver ornaments stood in the corners and on the shelves.

A tapestry hung from one wall. It was at least twice the size of the one she had seen in the village chief's house.

A white horse with a magnificent mane was embroidered across it.

Even the fresh undergarments Shunra had given her felt strange against her skin.

Was this the silk her had heard about?

They seemed made more for adornment than use. They were far too thin.

The pain was gone now. Louis had been right.

The healing spell he had used, *MACURE*, and the teleportation spell, *IANUAE*, were powerful arts that only skilled practitioners could wield. They demanded great concentration and precision. A mistake could cost the caster his life.

Karen had never seen magic like that before.

She touched her left side.

Carefully.

The wound was gone. Not even a scar remained.

Smooth skin. The healing was complete.

The wound had reached her organs. Yet nothing remained.

Too much had happened today.

Too quickly.

Too much for one day.

At times, it felt like a bad dream.

Perhaps becoming an adventurer had been a dream, too. Perhaps she would wake to find herself the only daughter of an ordinary family.

Her mother would be heating milk. A rooster would be crowing. A goat would be rattling its bowl. Far away, the wheels of a wagon would groan over the road.

Soon, people would begin bringing proposals for her. Peter, her childhood friend, would come by. He was a hard worker. So would the third son of the wealthy McBellan family.

Aunt Elune, who loved to fuss over everyone, would come by

almost every day with the latest gossip.

In time, Karen would marry an ordinary man. She would build an ordinary, happy home. Three children. Perhaps four. She would raise them.

There would be the occasional fear of monsters. An outbreak of disease. But no great misfortune.

She would live out her days in peace. And one day, she would tell her grandchildren about her childhood.

How she had been a wild little girl.

How she had loved playing at sword fights.

How she had pretended to be an adventurer and rolled around with the neighborhood troublemakers.

The grandchildren would listen with doubtful faces. They would wonder if any of it had really happened. And Karen would laugh.

Perhaps that was how it was supposed to be.

It was impossible to believe they were already dead.

Only half a day ago they had been together.

Amos the dwarf. Pede the hobbit. Sharin the mage. Ben, who drank too much.

Surely they were still crowded around their usual tavern table, grumbling over cheap ale.

Amos had a rough streak. Pede was hopelessly absentminded. Sharin trusted no one and loved anything that glittered.

None of them deserved to die.

Ben...

He claimed to be in his early thirties. Tall. Brown hair. Brown beard. He had the eyes of a child. He was always talking about

impossible dreams. He had been Karen's first man.

It had only been last night.

Their party had taken rooms at a small inn in the village. They had been drinking in the tavern downstairs, trading complaints and jokes as always, when Ben caught Karen's eye.

The usual signal.

Ben stood first. A little later, Karen followed.

Perhaps the others had guessed what lay between them. No one had ever said a word.

Ben had been waiting on the second-floor balcony. The wooden boards creaked beneath their feet. A spring breeze drifted through the night.

The same embrace.

The same kiss. His large hand stroked her hair. His beard tickled her cheek.

"I want to settle here," he had said.

"Open a little shop. Live quietly."

They lay beside each other on a narrow bed that still carried the warm scent of sun-dried linen.

Karen had stared at him.

He was always chasing impossible dreams. She had never expected those words from him.

Then he asked her. Would she come with him?

If she had said yes...

Perhaps none of them would have set out on that reckless expedition.

Amos. Pede. Sharin. They would have teased them first. Then they would have wished them happiness.

“We'll have to find another member.” Amos would have grumbled as always.

Sooner or later, they would have admitted the truth. They were already too old to keep chasing dreams.

Louis.

Edgar.

Shunra.

People like that belonged in legends. There could not be a Lord so young.

None of it was real. It had to be a dream.

If she opened her eyes—

The door opened.

A huge man ducked beneath the lintel.

Greenish skin.

A troll.

Perhaps the dream had simply gone on.

Karen could not move. She could not even scream.

“So. That noisy little elf isn't here.”

Garanka swept his gaze around the room. His size made it feel half as large.

“Easy.

I'm not here to frighten you. As you can see, I'm a gentleman. I only wanted a word. That elf girl would only get in the way.”

Karen shrank backward beneath the blanket.

“I am Garanka Samie. Captain of His Majesty's Royal Guard.

The Samie family has served the crown for generations. We've always been warriors.”

He looked at her.

“And you?”

A formal introduction between adventurers demanded an answer.

“Karen Darc. An adventurer trained in Katomar. My mentor was Eric Jarva.”

“Karen. A fine name. How old are you?”

“That isn't something adventurers ask each other.”

“An adventurer, hm?”

Garanka laughed. He made no effort to hide his contempt.

She was only a novice. From where he stood, Commander of the Royal Guard, that was hardly surprising. Even Jarva, her mentor, would have been little more than an obscure adventurer in his eyes.

“Well then. I have a question.

Why did you enter the castle with Shunra Lisren, Lord of Eldor?

You can't possibly be friends with someone like her.

Was it Edgar Harton's doing?”

Edgar again.

Karen was tired of hearing the name. Garanka's condescension grated on her.

Adventurers prized freedom.

Equality.

They walked their own road. Fame and rank existed, but neither gave one adventurer the right to lord over another.

She had no desire to explain the day's horrors to this overbearing giant. She wanted only to be left alone. This was her room. He had forced his way inside in broad daylight without so much as asking permission.

To barge into a woman's room on first meeting was insult enough. Shunra had been right. He was no gentleman.

The monster that had burned her companions alive.
The Werebear 's claws tearing into her side.
They were all the same. One senseless cruelty after another.
She had dreamed of becoming an adventurer since childhood. She
should have been filled with confidence. With purpose. Instead, she
was here. Enduring this. Still alive.

Why?

Why am I here?

“Can't answer?”

Garanka grinned.

“Then your body can answer for you.”

He ripped the blanket away.

Karen had already measured the distance between him. Her body
would move. That was enough.

As Garanka stepped in, she drove her foot upward with
everything she had. The kick caught him where it mattered.

He had not expected her to fight back. The giant staggered.

Karen slipped beneath his outstretched arm and landed on the
floor.

She ran for the door. Almost flew.

Then the strength left her legs.

The room swayed. The floor turned strangely soft beneath her feet.
Like running across a loaf of fresh-baked bread. The thought
drifted through her mind.

The world went white. She collapsed.

“Well.”

A familiar voice broke the silence.

“I hate to interrupt your fun, Garanka. But that's far enough. You can't damage a guest Edgar entrusted to us.”

Shunra.

She was sitting on the windowsill. When had she returned?

One long leg crossed over the other, chin resting on her hand. The afternoon light filtered through the curtains, turning strands of her golden hair almost transparent.

“Hmph.

So, you're back. The Demon God of Eldor.”

Garanka clicked his tongue. His confidence was already gone.

“We'll finish this another time, Karen.”

He backed toward the door. Then he disappeared into the corridor.

Karen lay where she had fallen. She was crying.

Not as an adventurer.

Not as a woman.

As someone crushed by her own helplessness.

The tears she had held back all day burst through at once. They



would not stop.

She had been entrusted with supporting her companions. Instead, she had fled without saving a single one.

Why had she run?

Why hadn't she died with them?

She hated herself for surviving.

She did not yet know the burden fate would one day lay upon those narrow shoulders.

Shunra jumped lightly from the windowsill and walked over.

"Funny. You didn't cry when the monsters nearly killed you. Humans usually scream. They beg not to die."

She tilted her head.

"So why are you crying now? That troll barely laid a hand on you. Were you really that frightened?"

"Why...?"

Karen's lips trembled.

"You've fallen for Louis."

Shunra sounded utterly certain.

"That's why you're crying. Don't worry. I won't tell anyone. That you and Garanka looked awfully close."

She shrugged.

"Not that it matters. Louis would never fall for someone like you."

What is she talking about?

Karen stared at her.

She could not make sense of a single word.

When had Shunra come back?

"You planned this!"

"What?"

“You let that troll into the room!”

Shunra frowned.

“Oh, don't be ridiculous. Why would I do that? You're Edgar's guest.

He'd kill me.

I warned you what Garanka was like.”

She folded her arms.

“Besides...

It didn't look as though you hated it. I figured I'd only be interrupting.

Maybe you invited him.”

Shunra stepped closer.

Karen lashed out. The slap never landed. Shunra caught her wrist with ease.

“Don't talk to me like that, you little brat!”

Karen shouted as the elf twisted her arm behind her back.

“Brat?”

Shunra raised an eyebrow.

“Who are you calling a brat?”

“You!”

Karen glared at her.

“Obviously! I'm older than you. How old are you, anyway?”

“I'll be one hundred and ninety-two soon.”

“You're making fun of me...”

“Elves live a little longer than humans.”

Shunra answered flatly.

“I'm still considered young. But don't call me a brat.”

She bent down and lifted Karen from the floor. The ease of it was

startling. Her slender body should never have possessed such strength. She carried Karen as lightly as if she were picking up a fallen blanket and laid her gently back on the bed.

“No! Don't touch me! You monster!”

Shunra sighed.

“Humans. You call anything that isn't human a monster.”

She pulled the blanket over Karen.

“For now...”

Behave. You're still weak. Take your medicine. And go to sleep.”

Chapter Two: Katomar, the Royal Capital

Part I — The Summons

An iron door was set into the rock. It appeared to be locked. The warped, sinister workmanship made one thing clear: no human hand had made it.

Garanka slammed his shoulder into the door.

It did not move.

“Ral! Your turn.”

The Hobbit crouched before the lock and got to work.

Hobbits were known for their agility and nimble hands. They were indispensable when it came to disarming traps and picking locks.

“Careful. There could be a trap.”

Garanka bent down to watch.

“No good.”

Ral gave up almost at once and stood. He was barely half Garanka’s height.

Garanka rolled his thick neck and looked back.

A human woman in her mid-twenties stood there with her arms crossed. Her fiery red hair fell in loose waves around a fair brow. Intelligence showed in her sharp eyes.

Freya.

Her work was to map the passages of caves and labyrinths and guide the party through them. She gave an exaggerated shrug.

“What could possibly be in a cave like this, Chief?”

Roald, the warrior, crouched against his great shield. His voice was hoarse.

“I heard Edgar Harton came here from Eldor. He must have found

something.”

“You worry too much about that Eldor chief. He's getting old. Maybe he's losing his wits.

We've come all this way and found nothing. The monsters are weak, too. They run from us. They aren't even worth killing.”

“Harton isn't senile. He doesn't age.”

Garanka folded his thick arms and fell silent for a moment. They would keep going.

At his signal, the adventurers moved deeper into the cave.

Adventurers formed groups of people with different skills. Five or six was the usual number. Enough to survive the unknown.

This group belonged to the King's Royal Guard. Garanka led them.

Eldor was a republican port city on the eastern edge of Lathazar, governed by a council of elders.

Reports had reached King Bruno of signs that the Demon King Arthur might be returning.

Bruno had ordered his Royal Guard to investigate. He had also asked Eldor for aid.

The Eldor Council of Elders had taken the matter seriously and decided to send the Harton siblings.

That old fox Bruno trusts Harton more than he trusts me.

The thought had soured Garanka's mood for days.

And then there was the woman Edgar had brought back yesterday. Karen.

A fine woman. She would be something once polished. Her straight black hair was thick and glossy, with a springy weight that felt good beneath his hand. It would make a magnificent style when dressed up.

Large breasts. A narrow waist. A beautiful face still touched by youth.

I want her.

I'll have her.

Yet Garanka feared Edgar's retaliation. It seemed impossible. But if Edgar had become attached to the woman...

Ral found something.

A crude helmet. A warrior's.

Nearby lay a piece of armor. Then came the bodies. Or what remained of them.

Scattered fragments.

Burned flesh.

Charred bones.

A ruin of a scene.

"Damn." Ral examined the remains.

"These are fresh."

"Almost everyone was wiped out."

"Looks like they were attacked by something that breathes fire. I don't know anything that dangerous living around here."

"Could it be a dragon?"

Garanka brought out a large shovel and began digging.

"We'll bury them. Take one personal belonging from each. Then we'll make graves aboveground."

"It couldn't have been a dragon."

Ikkyu, the priest, spoke quietly.

"Not with passages this size. Perhaps a Cerberus."

He clasped his fingers over his chest and murmured a burial prayer.

Adventurers lived beside death. They observed such rites carefully.
The dead could be dangerous.

They worked in silence. No one spoke more than necessary.

“There isn't much good in this.”

Garanka stared into the grave.

“Maybe the Demon King's power has reached this far.”

He had heard strange reports from caves across the kingdom.

Strange things were happening underground. The sealed door troubled him as well. Perhaps the rumors were true. Perhaps Arthur was returning.

Magic grew stronger the farther one traveled underground, away from the sun. Something might be changing beneath Lathazar.

They should gather more information aboveground before going deeper. Adventurers were supposed to be cautious.

Garanka searched through the belongings recovered from the dead. Then he stopped.

A small hand mirror.

Fine lettering had been engraved on its back.

To my beloved Karen Darc.

-Ben Schwarger

Shunra left the medicine on the table.

“Take it as directed.”

That was all she said before leaving. Karen was alone.

A young maid looked after her meals and daily needs.

Karen had never seen a maid before.

Unlike Shunra, the girl scarcely spoke. Karen watched her converse with the inn servants through signs and realized she

could not speak. She never learned the girl's name. She looked about thirteen. Red hair hung in two braids. Freckles covered her thin face. She looked painfully poor. Perhaps she had been sent from an impoverished village. Perhaps she had lost her parents. Karen had heard stories about children like her.

She could not shake her unease.

Garanka had said he would return.

She wanted the girl nearby for as long as possible. At least she was human. Not an elf.

The maid helped wash her, dressed her, and cared for everything. Each kindness was new to Karen.

Two days passed.

Her strength returned completely. She felt she could run again. Jump again. The room had begun to feel too small.

She wanted to explore the castle.

Could she? Or was she expected to wait until Shunra came for her?

She trusted the elf no more than before.

Karen changed into the clothes prepared for her. The silver emblem of an adventurer rested on her



breast.

The red-haired girl clapped her hands. She circled Karen with quiet delight. Karen found herself smiling.

A moment later, voices rose beyond the door.

A sharp knock. The door swung open.

A squad of fully armed guards stood outside. At their center was a richly dressed court official.

“Lady Karen Darc.

His Majesty has issued a summons. You are to accompany us at once.”

He stepped forward and unrolled a scroll. His manner was courteous. His face was not. Neither were the guards.

King Bruno Corterius remained seated upon an enormous throne at the far end of the audience hall.

Karen knelt in the deepest salute an adventurer could offer. Only the King was entitled to receive it. She had learned the form years ago. Her master had told her she might one day stand before the King.

She had never believed it.

Now the day had come.

It still felt unreal.

She understood nothing about how she had arrived here.

Bruno leaned toward one of his attendants and whispered. The man crossed the vast hall—nearly thirty yards—to Karen.

“Please. Come closer.”

Closer?

How close?

No one had ever taught her that. Perhaps her master had never known either.

Karen rose carefully. She advanced one step at a time. The long spears lining both sides of the hall caught her eye.

“Adventurer.”

Bruno's deep voice stopped her.

“I have yet to hear your name.”

“Karen Darc.”

The muscles in her face had gone stiff.

“Well then, Lady Karen Darc. You're much too far away. Come closer. You're a most pleasing sight. This rough old hall could use such beauty.

Come.”

The color of the carpet changed before the throne. Karen stopped there and knelt on one knee.

“Ordinarily I would begin with seasonal greetings. But we shall come straight to the matter.”

Bruno folded his hands.

“You know the traitor Arthur has returned. I asked Edgar Harton of Eldor for aid. As you know, he was the one who struck Arthur down.

I have every confidence he will do so again.

But Edgar Harton has yet to appear.

Instead, I hear that his companion, Lady Shunra Lisren, reached my capital... and then vanished, leaving only you behind.”

The King looked at Karen.

“And, if I may... you appear to be nothing more than a young girl.”

He cleared his throat.

“A slip of the tongue. Forget I said it.

In any case, that is the report placed before me.”

He leaned forward.

“So tell me, Lady Karen Darc. Help me. No... help this kingdom.

You must possess some secret for defeating Arthur.

Or did Edgar Harton entrust you with a message?”

Bruno reached inside his robe. His hand trembled. He withdrew an amulet.

“I have slept peacefully because this remained in my keeping.

Edgar Harton reclaimed it from Arthur long ago.

But if it should ever fall back into Arthur's hands...”

His voice faltered.

“I have known many sleepless nights.”

The amulet glowed in the old king's shaking hand with an ominous light. It was the legendary treasure known as **Tear of Calhan**.

Karen knew the name. This was the first time she had seen it.

“Needless to say,” Bruno went on, “Arthur's first targets will be this amulet... and my life.

After that, he will cast the whole world beneath the rule of darkness.

I am the one he seeks!

So where is Edgar Harton? What is he doing?”

The old king lurched to his feet. His attendants rushed to steady him.

Karen could only stare. Almost everything she had heard was new to her. If the Demon King Arthur had truly returned, the danger was obvious enough. Monsters would pour onto the surface again.

Villages without defenders would be slaughtered, just as they had been before.

But what did any of it have to do with her?

I'm nothing.

Edgar found me by chance. That's all.

She wanted to shout it. She couldn't.

Even Karen understood that an ordinary village girl would never be allowed to lay eyes on the legendary relic known as **Tear of Calhan**.

One careless word might cost her life.

Edgar saved me...

Then why does every disaster seem to follow him?

Who is Edgar Harton?

Shunra had whispered the rumor. Edgar was Arthur's nephew.

Of course. That was what Bruno truly feared.

Not Arthur alone—

Arthur and Edgar together.

Edgar's silence had begun to look like betrayal. Which meant Karen's position was even worse. She wasn't a guest. She was a hostage.

A disturbance erupted at the rear of the hall.

Karen turned.

The moment she saw the towering giant at its center, the color drained from her face.

Garanka brushed aside the guards restraining him and strode into the middle of the chamber.

“May Heaven continue to bless His Majesty with good health.”

His voice rolled through the hall like thunder.

“Garanka.”

Bruno settled back into his throne.

“Enough ceremony. What is it?”

“If I may speak, it concerns Lady Karen Darc. I believe Your Majesty has been misinformed. In truth, Lady Karen is no guest of Edgar Harton.

She is a distant kinswoman of mine. Though young, she excels in both learning and arms. As a priest, none in this kingdom can rival her.

I therefore invited her to the capital, intending to present her before Your Majesty.”

The lie came without the slightest hesitation.

Karen was speechless.

“I have received no such report.”

Bruno frowned.

“What I was told—”

“Then the report was mistaken.”

“Silence!”

Bruno's voice cracked across the hall.

“You interrupt your king? If this woman were truly as remarkable as you claim, I would surely have heard her name. There is an old saying. Even hidden inside a sack, the point of an awl gives itself away.”

“Then allow me to demonstrate.”

Garanka took a step forward.

“She is no awl. She is a sword. And not merely its point. The whole blade cuts through.”

Bruno narrowed his eyes.

“And yet I have already shown this precious amulet to a mere adventurer. What if she serves Arthur?”

The king hurriedly concealed Tear of Calhan beneath his robes.

The guards reacted at once. Spears lowered.

Karen found herself surrounded.

“She could never serve Arthur!”

Garanka's voice boomed across the hall.

“Would Your Majesty destroy a gifted soul on nothing more than suspicion? I beg you to be calm.

And there is one matter still unknown to you. She is not merely my kinswoman. She is my betrothed.”

If anyone lays a hand upon my fiancée...

Garanka Samie will not stand aside.”

He swept the ring of spears aside with his bare hands and stepped beside Karen. Even among the guards, his massive frame towered over everyone.

He lifted Karen effortlessly to her feet. Their eyes met.

A quick glance.

A warning.

Trust me.

“If proof is required...

I shall provide it.”

Garanka bent low. Before Karen could react, his lips met hers.

She froze.

His arms held her fast. She could not break free. The points of a dozen spears surrounded them. There was no escape.

She understood.

If she resisted now, both of them might die.

Slowly, awkwardly, she raised her hands and rested them against the broad muscles of his back.

The kiss lingered inside the circle of steel.

The guards hesitated. No weapon had been drawn. The king was in no danger. Nothing in their training had prepared them for this.

A kiss...

before the throne itself.

“At last.”

Bruno waved one weary hand.

“That is enough, Garanka.”

The guards withdrew at once, visibly relieved to return to their posts.

“If she is your betrothed, then no offense has been committed.”

He turned to Karen.

“Lady Karen Darc. You appear to be of marriageable age. Has a wedding date been chosen?”

Garanka bowed.

“It has, Your Majesty. The day, the hour, and even the direction has all been chosen under favorable signs. We intended to announce it once every arrangement had been completed.

I humbly ask Your Majesty's forgiveness for not reporting it sooner.”

Part II — The Wedding

Karen shoved Garanka's arm from her shoulder. They stood in the corridor leading from the audience hall. No one else was in sight.

“Thank you... for helping me.

But—”

She struggled violently, trying to wrench herself free from the giant's broad chest.

“Shh.”

Garanka clamped a hand over her mouth and pulled her behind a pillar where no one could easily see them.

Karen sank her teeth into his palm with all her strength. He barely reacted.

“I went to the inn. They told me you'd been summoned here. I had a feeling this would happen. I'm glad I made it in time.”

He pinned her gently—but firmly—against the stone wall, caging her between his arms.

“I was worried. Bruno's an old miser. Mean as a snake.”

Karen's face flushed.

“I'm grateful for what you did. But that's a different matter. I'm not your fiancée. I'm not your mistress. I'm not that kind of woman.”

Anger rose before she could hold it back.

“And you tried to force yourself on me while I was injured.

If it happened now...”

I'd kill you. Even if I died with you.

And there's already someone else.”

A kind man. Nothing like you.

So, move.

Or I'll scream. I'll die shouting that you're after Tear of Calhan.”

She pounded both fists against his chest. Once. Twice.

Tears blurred her vision.

For some reason, Ben's face came back to her. That uncertain smile. She had never missed it so much. Only now, when it was too

late, did she understand what he had meant to her.

He might already be dead.

“Ben is dead.”

Garanka said it quietly.

“You're lying! I don't believe you.

It's Ben. He must have escaped—”

She stopped.

“How do you know his name?”

She seized the front of Garanka's tunic with both hands and glared into his face.

Without resisting, Garanka gently loosened her grip. Then he placed a small hand mirror into her hands.

Karen stared at the inscription.

To my beloved Karen Darc.

—Ben Schwarger

“It was found yesterday. Among the belongings of the victims. The entire party was wiped out.”

She could not take her eyes off the mirror.

“You were there.” It was not a question.

She nodded. Silently.

“What killed them? Cerberus?”

“I don't know. It breathed fire. Its mouth was split all the way to its ears. It came at us without warning.”

“And Edgar found only you.”

Karen barely heard him.

“He said something strange...

The night before.

He wanted us to stay there. Open a little shop. He was never the

sort to say things like that.

He was careless. Always chasing impossible dreams. Always broke.

He must have struggled just to buy this mirror. And now...

If I'd only said yes..."

She collapsed against Garanka's chest.

The tears came again. This time she made no effort to stop them.

Garanka rested a careful hand on her back.

"I'm kinder than I look. I'm a gentleman. I didn't know what you'd been through.

You were beautiful. You still are.

You shone. You still do. Even more now.

Tears don't suit you."

He stroked her dark hair.

"I'm sorry I claimed you were my fiancée. But if you truly were...

I could give you an easy life. You'd never have to struggle again.

You could spend your days as you pleased.

Fine clothes.

Plays.

Tea parties.

Boating on the river.

I'd summon the finest bards in the kingdom.

Katomar is a beautiful city. And a beautiful city deserves a beautiful woman."

His hand lingered gently in her hair. At last, her sobs subsided.

"We can't stay here. Come."

"Where?"

"My house."

"No! Absolutely not!"

“You can't go back to the inn. If Edgar appears there now, people will draw the wrong conclusions. My house is the safest place.”

“I don't trust you.”

“Then trust my word. I won't touch you. Not even a finger. I swear it.

Or...”

He glanced back toward the audience hall.

“We can return and tell the king everything we just lied about.”

Karen lowered her swollen eyes. There was no answer left to give. She only shook her head.

Garanka's home was less a house than an estate.

It stood in one corner of the city beneath the royal castle. Servants moved constantly through its halls.

So, this was how the captain of the king's royal guard lived.

Karen was shown to a bedchamber. It was smaller than the room she had occupied at the inn, yet far grander. A marble washstand stood against one wall. The faucet looked to be worked in solid gold.

Wardrobes overflowed with women's clothes.

Every dress was finely tailored; cut from fabrics she had never touched before.

Every one fit her.

She wondered when he had prepared them.

Some were so revealing that she flushed before quickly putting them away. One scarcely deserved to be called clothing at all.

Transparent. Full of openings. Perhaps this was what people called a nightgown. She had heard the word before. Noblewomen wore them after dark. She could not imagine their purpose.

Nothing respectable, surely.

She folded the gauzy garment and hid it where she had found it.

Stones that caught the light glittered from the bedposts and door handles.

Jewels, perhaps.

The treasures adventurers chased in stories.

Ruby. Sapphire. Diamond.

She knew the names.

Not the stones.

A vast bed dominated the room, larger than any she had seen, veiled beneath a canopy of silk. A tapestry covered one wall. A knight on a white horse rode across it in colored thread.

She dined with Garanka that evening. They sat at opposite ends of a long table while servants filled their plates.

Nearly every dish was silver. The candlesticks were gold and silver. The tablecloth shimmered like silk.

“So?”

Garanka smiled across the table.

“Is it all that unusual?”

Karen realized she had been staring.

“A little.”

She lifted her chin, trying not to sound impressed.

Garanka laughed. The sound rolled through the hall.

The days passed quietly.

To Karen's surprise, Garanka kept his promise. He never laid a hand on her. Almost every evening he visited her room. They

exchanged only a few words before he left.

“If there's anything you want, tell me.”

It became his refrain.

He allowed her to walk freely through the city below the castle.

Whenever she returned, another dress had appeared in her room.

Each one fitted perfectly. Each more extravagant than the last.

She asked where they came from.

Garanka only smiled.

Soon it became her habit to wander the lively streets dressed in the clothes he had chosen, drawing glances wherever she went.

Spring settled gently over Katomar.

Peace.

Luxury.

Day after day they seeped quietly into her heart.

Katomar was a beautiful city.

Karen began helping with the household work. Living there without earning her keep weighed on her.

She swept floors. Worked in the kitchen. Helped with the washing.

It had been a long time since she had done such things.

Unknown adventurers owned no homes. Each looked after themselves. Among adventurers there was little distinction between man and woman. Only the role each could perform. No one waited on another. No one expected to be cared for.

The servants called her Madam. Each time she tried to correct them, they looked genuinely troubled. To them she was simply their master's honored guest. Eventually she stopped objecting.

She often thought of her mother. There was nothing she could do. She lived no differently from a caged bird. Worry changed nothing.

She wondered about the father she had never known. He had died before she was born.

All she had ever been told was that he had been a great adventurer granted an audience with the king. No one had ever said how he died. Perhaps a monster had killed him on the road.

Eighteen years ago, had been the height of Arthur's war. Perhaps he had fallen fighting the Demon King. Whenever that thought came, something stirred inside her.

The blood of an adventurer.

Now people whispered that Arthur had returned.

Could the dead truly come back?

The word resurrection still felt unreal.

Each night Garanka arrived carrying something unusual.

One evening he brought her a necklace. Small white beads gleamed in the candlelight.

"Pearls," he said. "Jewels from shellfish."

Karen knew the name. Nothing more. She had heard pearls were priceless.

She knew there was a sea somewhere beyond the world she knew. She had never seen it. The thought that a living shell could produce a jewel seemed almost impossible.

Their conversations grew longer.

Garanka knew countless things she did not. Most of all, he spoke

of the sea. He had visited Eldor several times on royal business.

Ships so vast they crossed the open ocean on the wind alone.

The tides, rising and falling twice each day.

White beaches where waves broke in endless lines.

Water that tasted of salt.

The stories never seemed to end.

At some point the candles burned away. Only moonlight remained.

Behind the silk canopy, two shadows lingered. Sometimes they seemed to become one. Perhaps it was only the moon playing tricks.

Edgar Harton removed his traveling coat and hung it on a nail in the wall. Brown stains spread across the plaster. Timber posts leaned out of true. Cracks split the whitewash.

It was a room in a village inn.

“This is my room.”

His voice still carried the clear edge of a boy not yet grown. It never rose. It never needed to.

“I can't sleep.”

Louis looked up from the desk. Candlelight brushed the blond hair across his brow.

“Whether you sleep is your concern. My desk being occupied is mine.”

“You're in a foul mood.”

“So are you.”

“What do you think became of her?”

Louis spoke toward the dark window.

The village had gone quiet. Every lamp beyond the glass had already gone out.

“Who?”

“The girl we found in the cave.”

He rested his head on folded arms.

“So that's what's bothering you.”

Edgar brushed the hair away from Louis's cheek.



The girl they had rescued several weeks earlier had vanished from the inn beneath Katomar Castle.

“I never even asked her name.”

Louis looked up.

“Karen.” Edgar answered at once. “Karen Darc.”

Louis straightened.

“You know?”

“It wasn't difficult.”

“And where is she?”

“I don't.” Edgar shook his head. “She's disappeared.”

The window opened without a sound. A man slipped inside. His clothing was entirely black, cut in the unmistakable style of a ninja.

They belonged to the darkness. They gathered information. They killed there as well. They preferred never to be seen.

“Lord Edgar.”

The ninja knelt where the candlelight could not reach. His voice belonged to a grown man.

“Sasuke.” Edgar turned. “How is the palace? Bruno?”

“The king awaits your arrival.”

“He’ll continue waiting.”

Edgar’s answer was flat.

“I’m occupied.”

He paused.

“And the Tear of Calhan?”

“King Bruno keeps it on his person.”

Edgar frowned.

“Bruno himself?”

He had expected Garanka to guard it.

Arthur.

Bruno.

The Tear of Calhan.

None of them fit together.

The amulet held a power of its own. It resonated with the darkness. No ordinary man could carry such a thing day and night.

Then why had Bruno summoned him from Eldor?

Edgar began pacing the room.

Had Arthur woven the invisible snare spread across Lathazar?

Had Bruno?

Or someone else entirely?

And Karen Darc—

had she simply stumbled into one strand of it?

Or had someone led her there?

Perhaps chance.

Perhaps design.

Either way...

his mouth curved into the faintest smile.

This promised to become interesting.

“I understand.”

He stopped.

“Get some rest.”

By then the ninja was already gone.

Lathazar stretched east of the Rune Mountains, a land of rolling hills and broad plains.

Its royal capital, Katomar, stood beside the Takeru River, with the Rune Mountains rising to the west and the peaks of the Saltera Range to the north. Few places matched its beauty.

King Bruno Corterius was no great ruler. Neither was he remembered as a tyrant. Madness lived inside him.

Fortunately for his people, it was directed outward. Not inward. For those under his rule, that distinction mattered.

Garanka and Karen were married before the summer ended. Several months had passed since Karen entered his household. Spring had given way to warm skies.

“There was that promise before the king.”

Garanka smiled.

“I suppose it's time.”

That was his proposal.

Karen answered with a single nod. Her hand drifted, almost unconsciously, to the slight curve beneath her white gown.

They rode together through Katomar in a small boat gliding along the canals that threaded the city.

Flowers rained down from the bridges.

Crowds called their blessings.

Summer light danced across the water drawn from the Takeru River.

Bright clothes.

Laughter.

The murmur of celebration.

Katomar was a beautiful city.

Moonlight lay across the forest. Only the wind disturbed the branches.

Halfway up Mount Kanna, highest peak of the Saltera Range, far beyond any village, a weathered temple roof disappeared beneath ancient trees.

Inside, a man with black hair knelt upon the wooden floor. He wore plain monk's robes.

Across from him sat a broad, bald old monk.

The room glowed with dozens of candles. Beyond them, several golden figures stood motionless in the flickering light.

"Master."

The younger monk lowered his head.

"The vampires have begun to move."

"So they have."

The old man's voice came deep from his chest.

"The question is how we answer."

He watched the flames.

"The time will come when we must choose."

He looked at the younger monk.

"What would you do?"

“I still cannot read their intent.”

“No.”

The old monk nodded slowly.

“No one can. They have lived for tens of thousands of years. They no longer live as men.”

He folded his hands.

“We will wait. For now.

But keep watching.”

His gaze settled somewhere beyond the walls.

“And never lose sight of Edgar. The God of Destruction.”



Thank you for reading the preview.

Resilient Echoes - THE EPIC OF THE SPRING WEAVER

Book 1: The Burning Capital

Kindle Edition is available on,

<https://a.co/d/01Yli0s5>

<https://studio-hirop.com/english.html>

The website features information about the book, a character relationship map, a gallery, and a scientific background discussion.