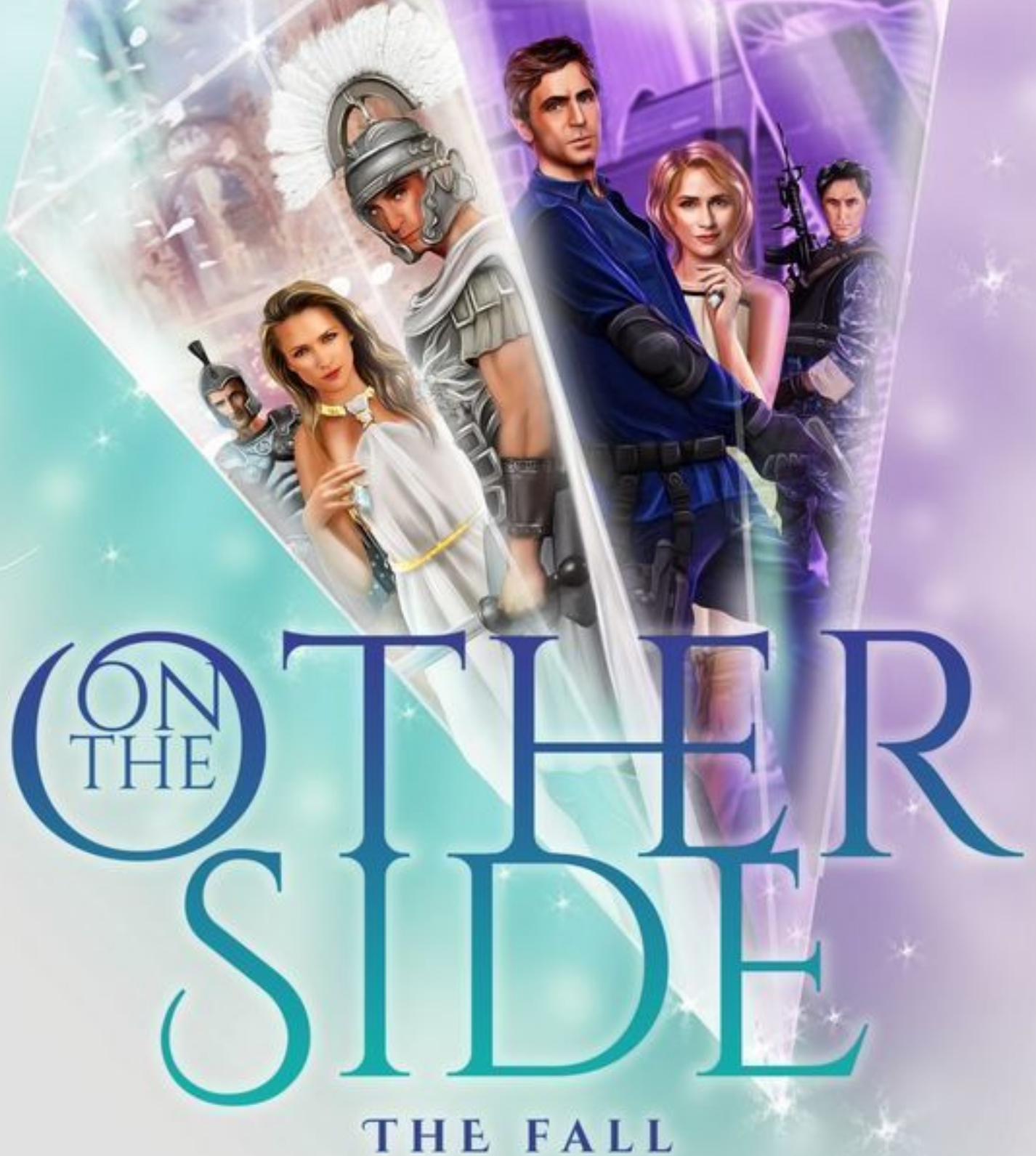


JANET NORTON



Janet Norton

**On the Other Side. The Fall**

«Издательские решения»

**Norton J.**

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The ancients believed that every person has an Idea of himself somewhere in another better world, and that he is only a mere Shadow of that idea, surrounded by the shadows of others. In the novel that world of ideas is the world of the Ena, winged eternal creations of Light. But now the Enas world is far from perfection just like the world of humans. The Last War has begun, and heroes have to face a choice between the Light and the Darkness. Read the first chapter to start your journey with us!

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# On the Other Side The Fall

**Janet Norton**

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*The Darkness dwelt around the world, uptight in sky from start  
of times  
Until just once the beam of Light shone out through solid  
blackness mass  
One star against the darkest night, relentless glow with light so torrid  
And then all other stars scorched bright through empty dusk  
of endless void  
Blaze in the deep dark, keep your Light, and if the darkness blinds  
your sight  
Your wings will guide you through the night and you will find the  
Light inside  
Along with lonely beam of Light the Light of Thousands stars flared  
bright  
Since then transformed, despite it gave up all its might,  
The First One thrived, it saved itself and shone outright,  
Likewise it was with first flame light, to ignite life  
Blaze in the deep dark, keep your Light, and if the darkness blinds  
your sight  
Your wings will guide you through the night and you will find the  
Light inside  
Don't let the life force fade away, may One Light guide you through  
your way  
Against cold Mist, defend it, guard among the clouds and on the  
ground  
In lasting war lights turning fey, but no matter how much Dark  
can slay  
It won't win over flames array*

## I

The Thunder Fort guards seldom left the frontiers of the mountains that hung in the air at the border of Basileya, kingdom of the Eferya people. The observation towers of the fortress overlooked the southern forest and overgrown fragments of the bridges that once connected the two Ena lands when they were a single whole. The Basileya border, guarded by Eferya from the Thunder Fort, ran along the mountains and ended in an abyss which, after the bridges were destroyed, could only be crossed by using wings. The abyss that hung over the cloudy barrier bed was not the only thing dividing the two territories and the Ena people who lived in them – centuries of internal war had also separated them from each other. In the southern forest on the other side of the abyss began the land of the Arya people, with whom the Eferya had only their fears and superstitions in common.

Almost equally they all revered the barrier, over which all the kingdoms and empires of the Ena spanned. The floating layers of earth hung above the grey barrier surface without touching it. The Ena were also afraid to touch the barrier because, despite their differences in language, the dangerous world of the Shadows on the other side had been described in the legends of all their people. For the Ena, the fate of being in the world of shadows and passing their so-called Trial was considered a terrible punishment, practically equal to death, because no one who crossed the barrier could ever come back. Leaving for the Light seemed preferable, despite the fact that since ancient times many of the Ena doubted whether the deceased really joined the single Source of Light as opposed to just disappearing from the living world once and forever. The cause of these painful doubts remained unchanged for centuries for all of the Ena people, it was the Mist.

No matter where the Ena lived or what Rulers they served, they were all afraid of the Mist. The Light of life perturbed the Mist in all its forms. Only when battling the black beasts, the Mist's creatures, did the Ena forget they were separate Eferya and Arya peoples, and could, therefore, join forces to battle these monsters. The monsters attacked their villages and cities with increasing frequency, destroying crops and farmlands. Unwilling to act like the monsters, the soldiers of the two armies tried to adhere to the rules of combat and the treatment of prisoners. In the event of an accidental conflict with the Mist's threats, they had to stand shoulder to shoulder against the black beasts and only then turn their weapons or magic against each other. Of course, there was always great risk of death from a stab in the back, because neither the Eferya nor the Arya considered each other the noble Enas. Therefore, none of the soldiers flew alone beyond the frontiers of the fortress without permission from the Thunder Fort commander, and any absence without notice was punished severely by labor in a mine located north of the mountain.

Commander Raniero did not go easy on his subordinates, following his own rules which were often stricter than those the statutes prescribed for Eferya soldiers. Alistar, his deputy, vigilantly ensured the commander himself observed the statutes, but often without any success. Alistar considered Raniero to be overly self-confident and questioned his commanding abilities, and, therefore, tried to assert his own opinions based on the rules. Despite his self-confident nature, Raniero always listened to Alistar's opinion, although he still got his own way in most situations, trusting his instincts and feelings. The friendship that had developed over the years of joint service helped them to find compromises for the sake of the Thunder Fort. But Alistar would continue to resent some of Raniero's decisions, even after it was too late to change something...

"I would like to see your report to the General after this sortie! It would be a different story if you were just a soldier who was sent to exchange a captive in the lands of the Arya! Has anyone ever heard of a commander voluntarily risking his own life and limb?" Alistar could not hold back, continuing his dispute with Raniero that had begun back in the fortress. The Eferya group left the fortress heading toward the southern forest. Alistar was angry with Raniero, who was flying

slightly ahead and had decided to personally lead the group despite all the dangers inherent in the mission. Raniero replied in a calm, confident tone.

*"I am* a simple soldier. Not much changes about this position in the service, just the burdens, for example, boring deputies," he added without hiding the smile in his voice, glancing at the displeased Alistar.

"Any other deputy would have reported you to the capital long ago!" Alistar began, when suddenly the silhouette of a majestic structure appeared among the dark mass of trees with tall columns and a huge dome. After surveying the area in front of the temple, Alistar continued fuming, but on another issue.

"I told you there would be more of them!" Alistar said angrily, examining the group of Aryas in front of the temple who clearly outnumbered them.

"I told you to stay at the fortress," Raniero replied, squinting his eyes while partly looking at the Arya. "If anything happens to me, you're supposed to run the fort, and yet you're here. This is not going according to the statutes, in fact..."

Alistar restrained his anger, but still silently raged over the reason that Raniero had picked for his sarcastic comment. Alistar had long promised to report Raniero to the capital, but over time this became nothing more than a comic threat. In addition, despite the statutes, Alistar did not want to wait for the bad news in the Thunder Fort, so he decided to tag along so that, if needed, he could protect the reckless commander, since reasonable arguments didn't seem to work on him.

Standing in front of the entrance to the temple, the Arya soldiers frowned at the approaching Eferyas, and kept a close eye on their every move. Armed and holding torches in their hands, they were tense and in a warlike mood. And some of them, as Raniero had guessed, were guarding someone who was inside the temple. Gesturing a command for the group to land, Raniero was the first to dive down to an open stretch of land in front of the Aryas and he stared at the captive with a gloomy look. Fear was frozen in the coloured eyes of the captive Ena, and his greying hair seemed to have further whitened. At the sight of Raniero, the plump Eferya became nervous and tried to get up from his knees, the position he was placed in anticipation of the group from the fortress, but the Aryas standing on either side prevented him from doing so.

Landing next to Raniero, Alistar looked angrily at the Aryas and then searchingly at Raniero, waiting for his reaction. It seemed that the Aryas were not going to be the first ones to speak about transferring the captive. But for some reason Raniero was silent, too. Alistar was surprised to see the unruffled calm in Raniero's green eyes, though Alistar himself was not so calm. Looking anxiously at the Aryas, Alistar also waited, not daring to utter a single word aloud until suddenly the temple guard parted, and the tallest Arya walked out into the open area in front of the temple.

He had no armour, as if this Arya wanted to show off his powerful physique and to demonstrate his fearlessness, given the number of scars on his dark skin. He wore a long red loincloth covered with a wide belt that was decorated with stones. In his hands the stranger held a heavy, curved sword. Raniero raised his chin proudly, took a few steps forward, and stopped at a respectful distance from the Aryas who had risen their weapons. The soldiers behind Raniero did the same, but they did not have to do anything. Raniero gestured, forbidding any aggressive reaction to the Aryas, and then defiantly and quietly laid his hands behind his back.

"I'm Commander Raniero. We brought what you asked for," he said in an Arya dialect. "Release the captive and you will get the elixirs."

"I did not expect to see the commander of the bats who hide in the mountains from us," the tall Arya warrior said in the Eferya language. The soldiers behind Raniero murmured and began to move in anger over the insult. But Raniero, after thinking for a while, grinned unexpectedly at his subordinates. He understood that he was speaking with one of the Arya military leaders and therefore could not allow too much light to be shed, nor could he make fool of himself in front of his opponents and his own soldiers.

“It’s better than commanding field mice,” Raniero continued with a sigh, mockingly glancing around at the Aryas. “It’s a blessing they are not in our mountain, no matter how hard they try to get in...”

The Arya warrior appreciated Raniero’s words and suddenly laughed loudly.

“My name is Abaur!” he introduced himself, stuck out his chest and then demanded in a powerful voice, “Put the elixirs here! We’ll release the captive once we see the medicines.”

Raniero slowly turned to Alistar and with a single glance requested the box with the elixirs of life and mana, which the guards had brought with them from the Thunder Fort. Alistar responded to the commander’s silent order with an angry glance, but he still obeyed, putting the box in front of the captive along with one of the soldiers. After opening the lid, Alistar took his place behind Raniero and found himself staring at the dark-haired female Arya warrior from Abaur’s group, who approached the box following his silent order. Upon checking the elixir containers, she nodded to Abaur and looked at Alistar, who had kept close watch on her. Straightening herself, the swarthy-skinned Arya stared threateningly at Alistar with her piercing dark brown eyes, and Alistar suddenly became embarrassed by the fact that he was admiring the stranger.

“Release the captive,” Raniero demanded sternly. Abaur nodded for his soldiers to release the grey-haired Eferya. The Arya lifted the prisoner to his feet and removed the magic fetters from his hands. Wiping his wrists, the released Ena ran to the Thunder Fort guards. Raniero planned to speak to him after returning to the fortress and so did not even smile in reply to his grateful babble.

“Thank you, Commander!” the rescued Ena exclaimed in a voice that was husky with excitement.

Raniero said nothing and did not even look at the released captive. Alistar’s displeased voice came from behind his back.

“You always cause problems, Todor!” Alistar growled quietly with an evil flicker in his cyan eyes and led Todor a little further from the Aryas towards the Eferya guards awaiting them.

“Return to the fort!” Raniero ordered, and as his subordinates began to show their wings behind their backs to take off with the ransomed Todor. Suddenly Abaur spoke again.

“So, it is you who defeated Izdubar?” Abaur asked, examining Raniero with an appraising look.

Raniero instinctively lingered on the spot, turning to Abaur. The battle near the Thunder Fort was a turning point in Raniero’s life. The Arya were led by chief Izdubar against the old Eferya commander Ferox, and had nearly captured the fortress. It was then he had taken up Ferox’s post and prevented the Aryas from crossing the Basileya border. Despite his victory in that battle and subsequent promotion, Raniero became more serious and even embittered when he heard the old name of his fallen opponent.

“I hope this will be our last meeting,” Raniero said coldly, nodding to Abaur before soaring up into the sky behind the Eferya soldiers.

Noticing that Raniero was behind the group, Alistar fell back with him in flight, keeping an eye on the Aryas who still guarded the temple. Abaur, looking after the Eferya soldiers, disappeared into the temple with his people including the female Arya warrior. After a moment of thought, Alistar shook his head slightly and looked attentively at Raniero.

“What did Abaur say?” Alistar asked.

“That the Arya have not forgotten their prior grievances and we may soon be attacked again,” Raniero replied without looking at Alistar and then flew to the head of the column to lead the procession.

After returning to the Thunder Fort, Raniero decided to deal with Todor first. The scientist-healer had caused them to risk their lives in the enemy’s territory, and he had nearly died by leaving the fort without permission. So as soon as Todor landed on the observation deck, Raniero went after him, grabbing his mantle by the collar.



“When I said I didn’t mind your experiments, that didn’t mean taking sallies into the southern forest!” Raniero fumed, shaking the terrified Todor so that the grey-haired healer nearly fell.

“Commander, I was looking for some rare herbs,” Todor tried to justify himself. “They are the basis for a new potion! I didn’t think I could be caught so close to the fort!”

“No special potions are needed to cure the soldiers! And I don’t need any extra problems!” Raniero pushed Todor and waved his hand, ordering the guards to grab the healer. “Working in the mine will help you gather your thoughts and remind you of your direct responsibilities! You can join those sentinels who let you go without my knowledge!”

Watching the guards take Todor away, flying towards the northern part of the fort, Raniero did not immediately notice that Alistar had stopped nearby.

“If there is a threat that the fort will be attacked, we must warn the General,” Alistar said confidently, but quietly, so that they would not be overheard by the soldiers heading to their posts.

Raniero gritted his teeth and headed through the exit from the take-off and landing tower inside the fortress, swiftly traversing the stairs and corridors that led deep into the fort. Alistar kept pace with him, following Raniero right through the massive doors which he himself closed as soon as Raniero had entered the spacious office. At the head of the office was a desk, lit with spyros. The perimeter of the room was lined with cluttered cabinets and chests with military trophies, maps and weapons. As soon as Raniero approached the desk, a small scroll appeared in the bright glow of the mailbox to his right side. Noticing the royal seal, Raniero rolled his eyes.

“You finally reported me, didn’t you?” he grumbled, throwing a displeased look at Alistar.

“If I had really reported you, I would have given you the document to sign before sending it,” Alistar smirked, removing his helmet from his head and straightening his short blond hair. “And to whom, Light in my eye, could I report you? To your friend General Vitelius, who appointed you?”

Taking the scroll in his hands, Raniero broke the seal and opened the message. While reading he walked slowly behind the desk. Suddenly Raniero’s face changed and he lowered the scroll.

“If any captains or soldiers reported you, I will send a letter to the castle to dispute their claims...” Alistar said cautiously after noticing the changes in Raniero’s mood and tensely anticipating what he would say next.

“They’ve called me to the Heart of Basileya,” Raniero said hesitatingly, still unsure what to think about the message. He removed his helmet from his head, ruffled his short dark ash-blond hair, and then added with a grin, “It looks like your dreams have come true, Alistar, you are the new commander of the Thunder Fort.”

\*\*\*

Linton had always been considered a model of urban infrastructure and social welfare for its citizens. No other city in the Alliance of Product and Energy Politics (APEP) was so generous in funding the needs of its citizens, despite the fact that living standards in all of the APEP cities was above average due to years of economic growth. APEP symbolized a unified management and a unified approach to solving many urgent issues, with the provision of housing, education and work always among them. Therefore, the refugees were quite eager to cross the Alliance border in order to be safe, comfortable and prosperous.

When the immigrant aid policy had first begun, most APEP residents hadn’t anticipated the scale of the war with terrorists who used any means and methods to seize power in the poorly protected cities of the south. Due to the war, new borders appeared wherever the armed forces of APEP and the scattered southern countries fought against terrorists on different sides of the barricades. But the cultural contradictions turned out to be more dangerous than the border clashes. The Alliance tried to treat newcomers with understanding, but traditions and national values

gradually morphed from a source of pride and mutual respect to a cause for street fights, serious crimes and rallies near the Parliament walls.

The changes in the laws were an example of the worsening public welfare and trust between citizens. When James Brent first prepared to become a policeman, law enforcement officers were given new dark blue police uniforms, which included an elongated jacket made of an impenetrable bullet-proof material, and were allowed to use weapons at their own discretion in extreme cases when the health and lives of law-abiding citizens were threatened. Since then, police officers were avoided like the plague, since under another law, only they had the right to carry arms within the APEP capital. Linton changed greatly, ceasing to be a place of dreams and real prosperity and turning, in fact, into a besieged city. Many Linton residents were so afraid that they would share the unenviable fate of the APEP border areas where the refugees settled, that they began to treat even those visitors whom they had known for years with indignity.

After entering the service, James eventually got used to the continuous flow of crime reports. He repeatedly broke up dangerous and escalating disputes between Linton citizens and immigrants, often risking his own health. And on lucky days, he managed to arrive on the scene before any useless fights or potential bloodshed occurred. The identification of regular people through electronic police glasses, and the detailed inquiries were enough for the citizens to come to their senses and feel the invisible hand of the law.

While James watched the appointed sector, the noticeable changes eventually and subconsciously saddened him. Children rarely played on the streets anymore, there were few passers-by in the public places, and holiday walks often turned into clashes. As the cloudy autumn began, the general mood became just as gloomy, and no one noticed the bright colours of the gardens and public parks, carefully tended by the city services.

Passing by one of the parks lit by the evening light of the street lamps, James saw a small group of teenagers who suddenly scattered in different directions upon seeing the police car. With a gloomy look on his face James parked at the curb, quickly got out of the car and saw a battered dark-skinned boy, no older than ten, lying at the entrance to the park. The older children had smashed his lip and cut his brow. While trying to help the boy stand back up, James withdrew his hand as the child abruptly recoiled in horror and pressed himself against the park fence. There were holes in his old worn clothes, and dirt had long ago morphed his white sneakers into a pitiful resemblance of shoes. But James was mostly touched by the adult gaze in his brown eyes. The boy was hurt, but he did not cry, and, despite his condition, was not going to simply trust the stranger, even one wearing a police uniform. Checking his identity through the scanner glasses could further scare the injured boy, and James opted for another approach, squatting down in front of him.

“What a spirit! You’ve withstood their blows pretty well,” James said confidently. “If any of them had been on the receiving end, they’d be crying like babies.”

The boy was still breathing heavily, but seemed to calm down as a lively spark flashed in his brown eyes. Noticing the changes in the child’s mood, James smiled shortly and again extended a hand to the boy to help him up.

“You’re bleeding, and I’ve got some first aid in my car so your wounds won’t get infected,” James said.

It took some time, but the boy eventually took the hand, got to his feet and followed James to his car, cautiously looking around. Some people stared disdainfully at them from the windows of nearby houses and one housewife, flashing threatening honey-coloured eyes, loudly complained when she realized the policeman was helping the boy instead of arresting him. Even the passers-by walking at a distance turned to them with curiosity and unconcealed contempt, and the boy felt uncomfortable. Meanwhile James ignored the malevolent glances, though he clearly felt them. He opened the car door and confidently pointed the child to the passenger seat. The boy jumped in and

settled himself facing James on the street. All at once he forgot about the unpleasant looks and began to study the control panel with great interest.

“What is your name?” James asked, pulling out a first-aid kit with a sparkling inscription *Innogen*.

“Farai,” the boy answered, looking closely at James and the antiseptic which he used to patch up his cut lip and bruised eyebrow.

“My name is James... Be patient, it will pass in a minute,” James said, worrying that the child would race off to avoid the pain.

“It’s not the first time I’ve fought,” Farai smiled.

“Well, since it’s not the first time, that means we’ll have something to talk about on your way back home,” James said in an instructive tone, putting the first-aid kit back in its place. “Buckle up!”

James closed the door, walked around the car and got behind the wheel.

“Where do you live?” James asked, watching the road as he pulled the car away.

“At the orphanage,” Farai said. “I wanted to raise money to buy food for myself and others in the park, but I didn’t get a chance.”

“Raise money?” James was surprised. “The orphanages have financing, so you should have plenty of food and clothes...”

“Our orphanage was supported by charity... But not anymore,” Farai said with a shrug, looking out the window at the city. James looked at the boy and shook his head slightly, continuing to follow the road.

“So are you hungry?” he asked in a neutral tone.

Farai nodded.

“I am. But I don’t have any money for food, I wasn’t able to raise anything because of those boys,” Farai admitted honestly, which made James grin.

“Well, I do. While I’m free, I hope we’ll have time to buy something for your friends at the orphanage. What do you think?” James asked, looking at Farai with a smile.

At first, it seemed like Farai could not believe what he had just heard, and then he smiled and nodded so hard that James could not help laughing.

“Great, then we’re going to the cafe,” he said, switching on the navigator in the control panel and choosing the nearest place.

When the Alchemist Cafe sign appeared outside the window, Farai looked at James again, as if waiting for permission to leave the car. With an approving nod, James got out of the car, carefully examining the street and leading Farai under the building’s porch.

As soon as he opened the doors, they were met by the sweet aromas of baking and coffee. Past the rows of tables was a counter, covered with a variety of culinary masterpieces from small cupcakes and donuts to cakes and a whole range of ice cream with different fillings. Farai ran to the counter and stared at the confections, completely forgetting about the café owner. A plump grey-haired man in an apron saw the child and immediately waved his hands at him.

“There’s nothing for you here! Get out! Shoo!” He screamed, but when he saw James, he turned to him with a sorrowful face. “Officer! Get this ragamuffin out of my cafe! He’ll scare away my customers!”

Farai stood disappointedly beside James and bowed his head with a guilty look.

“You seem to have scared them off successfully without his help,” James said, looking at the empty restaurant, surprised by the seller’s behaviour.

“I don’t serve the poor!” the grey-haired man shouted, adjusting his glasses on his nose. Unkindly snapping his differently-coloured eyes the man began to fiercely wipe the dirty marks from the glass counter left after Farai.

“Go find a seat...” James said softly without looking at Farai and pushing the boy lightly toward the tables.

“Hey! I told you! What are you doing?!” The seller was indignant. In response, James touched his glasses, quickly scanned the man’s face and smiled ironically.

“I must say, you’ve lost a bit of weight, Mr. Erol Wilfrid,” James said, examining his profile photo in the police database.

“Apparently, additional income reduced... drug distribution?” James asked rhetorically, turning off the data display on the glasses and mockingly smiling. “I think I smell something suspicious. You live one floor up, don’t you? Mind if I check out the premises?”

“What? How dare...” Wilfrid mumbled, staring at James with fear in his eyes. Then he hissed as he bent over the counter. “I haven’t traded for a long time!”

“Then it all depends on you. What do I smell, spices or drugs?” James said tranquilly.

“Sit d-down, please,” Wilfrid said taking the menu from the counter. James smiled and sat down at the table next to Farai. The boy still looked upset, but immediately forgot about the incident when he saw the menu. After placing their order, James leaned back in his chair and noticed the TV in the upper corner.

“Could you turn up the sound?” James asked pointing to the screen where the evening news had begun. Wilfrid turned the sound up using the remote and went back into the kitchen.

“...about politics,” the news anchor said. “The upcoming regular session for the General Assembly of the Alliance of Product and Energy Politics is the most anticipated event of the year for APEP, as many well-known world media headlines say. Such wide attention is due to the assumption, that for the first time since the year 2000, a fundamentally revised resolution, known as the ‘Millennium Declaration’, will be discussed at the congress, and it would change the APEP political environment...”

Returning with the tray of tea and rolls, Wilfrid laid all the saucers and plates on the table in front of Farai and James with a demonstrably displeased look.

Meanwhile, the television news program went to a reporter working at the Alliance’s border.

“...Yes, as you can see, the refugees live in inhuman conditions,” the reporter said standing against the backdrop of rows of tents and southerners crowded nearby, looking with caution at the media staff. “The camp formed on its own when the Alliance border troops blocked the checkpoint to prevent terrorists from entering APEP territory disguised among the civilian population...”

James did not pay attention to Wilfrid’s gloomy face and only nodded to him in gratitude while staring at the TV screen. Wilfrid snorted and returned to the counter to prepare the rest of the order. James continued to watch the news intently. He sympathized with the people affected by the war, but as soon as he got a glimpse of APEP military guarding the high fence that separated the refugee camp from the border point, James immediately changed expressions, turning noticeably gloomy.

“Many politicians have already made statements that given the current military conditions, special measures will be needed to achieve peace, which is desired by all the parties in this conflict, but which is also impossible with a disjointed approach to resolving the issue. Yesterday during the press conference, the Alliance participants agreed that mutual assistance is needed not only from governments, but also from international companies and organizations. Under the current military conditions with terrorist groups spreading their influence near APEP borders, the issue of humanitarian assistance to the affected population becomes first and foremost on the agenda. Strong criticism of the brutal military operations has the opposition and national...”

“My dad is somewhere out there,” Farai said sadly, holding a roll in his hand. Recalling something in his mind, the boy stopped eating. James pulled his attention away from the TV screen which showed a close-up of the Innogen Charity Fund leader at a press conference on the happenings in the south. The woman’s honey-coloured eyes were full of confidence and she spoke in an imperious tone, but James did not listen too carefully, glancing at Farai’s sorrowful face.

“He wasn’t allowed in, was he?” James asked.

Farai nodded.

"I wouldn't have been allowed in either, except I was sick and someone from the charity fund felt sorry for me," Farai said.

With a sympathetic smile James pushed a cup of hot chocolate toward Farai.

"Innogen Charity Fund. My sister works there," James said.

"Then you're both good," Farai said confidently, warming his hands on the cup. And then, raising a timid glance at the still grumpy café owner, he added, "It's too bad there aren't so many like you here."

After completing the entire order, Wilfrid put a bag of rolls and other sweets on the counter for James to take with him. James got up from the table and went to the counter to pay the bill. He then led Farai, who had eaten every last crumb, outside giving him the bag of sweets for the other children at the orphanage.

They got into the car. James pulled away from the café while punching up a short message about the suspicious seller on the control panel communicator display. Noticing the text of the message, Farai smiled in surprise. James winked at the boy and sent the message to the nearest police station.

"It can't hurt to check," James said with a smile. "Now it's time to share the sweets. Where do you live?"

Farai told James the address, and half an hour later they were in one of the most crowded immigrant quarters. Not surprised by the embittered reaction of the passing immigrants to the marked police car, James drove to the door indicated by Farai and opened the car door to let the child out. At the same time, a frightened-looking dark-skinned woman ran out of the house to meet them. Grabbing Farai, she spoke to him in her own language. But James could understand from her surprised brown eyes that she was asking about the policeman's visit, the scratches on the boy's face and the café bag. Deciding that the boy had been met by the mistress of the orphanage, James stood by and waited for her to make sure that the child was okay.

"Thank you!" Farai waved goodbye and ran into the house, but the woman remained standing.

"Thank you from me, too," the woman said putting her hand on her heart.

James nodded, and then pulled out a notebook from his pocket, quickly wrote his name and some phone numbers before handing the paper to the woman.

"If you ever need any help, or if Farai gets into another fight, let me know. And don't let him beg. I'm afraid it might end worse next time. The second number is a social service, maybe they will be interested in helping the orphanage and..."

The mistress of the orphanage smiled exhaustedly. James saw that she was grateful, although she did not want to say aloud that all hopes were in vain for social security amidst the war and the ill-will of citizens towards refugees and anyone who was not like the majority of the population. Realizing without any words what the mistress of the orphanage was smiling at, James looked down, gathered his courage and smiled goodbye. Then he sat down behind the wheel and drove on to return to his duty.

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Upon taking the road, Raniero wondered why he had been called to the capital. There was not a word in the order about the reason, there was no hint of the possible fate that awaited him in the royal castle. Alistar was right, believing that someone could have written to both the General and King Raanan about his tough management style at the Thunder Fort. Raniero was not afraid to accept responsibility for his deeds and decisions as commander, but he feared that the possible stigma of shame would hurt his sister Lucia. Lucia lived an easy life as Queen Zaria's first servant. And in no way possible did Raniero want to inflict trouble on her upon arriving home.

The Heart of Basileya had been his home for many years, until his military service began in the kingdom's frontier forts. After Raniero left the capital, he realized that he was tied not to the city at all, but only to the Ena who had been awaiting his return. Lucia often flew to see her elder brother, asking the Queen for permission, and in so doing she had brightened up the troubled war days. But during the past few years, they had connected only by letters. Raniero forbade Lucia to fly to the southern border, not knowing what the future might bring given the rough situation with the warlike Arya. Therefore, thinking about the upcoming meeting with Lucia, he was in a hurry to reach the Heart of Basileya as soon as possible, despite the gathering twilight and his gathering anxiety.

The city lights soon appeared ahead, and Raniero stopped in the air, gently flapping his wings to study the landscape. It seemed like the Heart of Basileya consisted of bright twinkling stars, outshining those that glowed in the sky. The spyros shone all around, the light poured from the windows of houses and the magic charms lit up the Rainbow Garden nearest to the city gates. The gates reaching the clouds also sparkled, though not with gold like the city behind it, but with the silver of the protective charms cast by the first Rulers of Basileya hundreds of years ago. None of the Enas could penetrate into the Heart of Basileya through the city guard, guarding four high passages to the capital, as well as the sky above the city walls and the lower tiers of flying islands near the barrier.

Upon approaching the southern gate, Raniero landed by the guards and showed the royal order. The guards did not know who the traveller in dark camp clothes was, and only after they read through the letter did they glance at each other in surprise and stand at rigid attention, respectfully opening the passage to Raniero. Spreading his wings, Raniero moved on, flying close to the ground to admire the ever-beautiful capital. He remembered the city, but after such a long absence and his service at the Thunder Fort, everything along the way fascinated him anew. Like gold lace, spyros-paved roads sped away from the city gate to the cliffs, lost in the cloudy haze. Ena houses and streets were situated on hundreds of islands flying high and low in the air. Like flocks of birds, Enas were running their errands. One went from the huge, castle-like Central Square to the main indoor Emporium Market, another to the outskirts by the farms and pastures, and another went to rest just before falling asleep in the blossoming parks, connected by rivers that fell from step to step in dozens of sparkling waterfalls. The tall trees were dotted with golden autumn leaves, and some were overgrown in impenetrable forests where sometimes strange, and usually dangerous animals and birds could be seen.

Most of the islands were connected by hanging bridges and stone bridges, while others continually hung and changed their position in the sky, succumbing to the power of the magical wind or the attraction of the castle, to which all the lands around the fortress gravitated. Then a clear lake, which was once called the Crystal Lake, shone under Raniero, and somewhere in the distance flashed the golden dome of the Observatory, the place where the studies of the sky and distant stars began. Looking at the Observatory, Raniero saw the nearby Light Temple, which had crystal walls that seemed to shine even in bad weather.

But, despite the beauty of the Heart of Basileya that rose into his view, Raniero could not even for a moment forget about those places outside the capital where he spent most of his long life. His gaze went even further to the west, beyond the clouds, where the Dark Lands began. The borderlands had long turned into battlefields, and the dark force was often far behind, forcing the Enas to defend the borders that had become shaky. The Mist had always been there, as long as Raniero could himself remember, but never before was it so strong. Merchants from the Heart of Basileya who arrived at the Thunder Fort had said that even General Vitelius himself had to go to the Sunset Fort in the west to sort out the situation with the black beasts.

Perhaps, Lucia exhorted in her numerous letters for a good reason. Raniero knew that most of the time in the service he spent on the dangerous edge between life and death, often voluntarily

in order to win a hard battle or to find out some necessary information. He was lucky. His experience accumulated over the years, but not every soldier who went to the kingdom's border to battle the Mist and the Aryas could ever tell about it. Too many Enas disappeared outside the fortifications. And too many horrors emerged in the Mist's trail of wreckage and debris through the marshes, which used to be blossoming forests and lakes no less beautiful than the Rainbow Garden or Crystal Lake protected by magic in the Heart of Basileya. There, outside, where the Light waned and melted, Enas often died in terrible agony, and the survivors reluctantly lost hope... That is why many soldiers like Raniero strongly doubted that after the last shining, their crystals became part of the Light, and not the dark that drove them gradually into a vice. It was hard to maintain an impeccable faith when the Mist was frozen in front of them all the time.

Thinking about how close the Mist had approached their settlements, Raniero was almost surprised by the light that lit up the airy-like walls of the royal castle. Landing in front of the fortress's tall and heavy gate, Raniero again showed the order to the sentries.

"Welcome home, radiant one!" one of the guards greeted Raniero, returning the order to him. Waving at the guards on the other side of the gate, he led Raniero into the castle's courtyard. "Nobody knew when you would arrive, so the radiant Lucia asked me to tell you that she would wait for you either in the garden or in her chambers."

"Thank you," Raniero smiled briefly with unexpected excitement as he stepped into the magically lit garden. There were often celebrations in the royal garden during the day, and in the evenings the castle inhabitants could walk, sing and dance here. By night, it was a rare Ena who stayed in the castle courtyard to gaze at the stars, so Raniero expected that his only company would be the bright fireflies. Raniero walked forward, admiring the well-groomed garden's beauty, when he suddenly heard his sister's voice. Lucia loved to rest among the flower beds and the tamed animals and birds. But this time she was not alone, and Raniero could not help but listen to the conversation.

"I have already told you why not," she said in a courteous tone to someone who, despite the refusal, still insisted on his own view.

"Radiant one, that's silly! Why do you give up any spark of sympathy?" an equally courteous, but more insistent male voice objected to her. Raniero squinted his eyes and took a confident step in the direction of the voices toward the tall sprawling oak tree in the centre of the garden. Noticing from a distance how a fragile-looking light blond Ena in a white tunic went around the tree followed by a persuasive suitor, Raniero shook his head and decided to intervene.

"Well, then I must repeat the sympathy spark will only shine when a brave man will fight my brother in a duel and defeat him in an honest battle," said Lucia confidently, continuing to walk around the tree so that the admirer could not see her and could not catch up. "That was my agreement with him, and I'm not going to break it even for the sake of such a gifted bard as you, radiant one!"

"These difficulties are the thorny stalks on the way to happiness, you have brought them up with your own hands and only you can destroy them! Besides, to fly to the outpost for the sake of a duel... It's... It's..."

Talking nonsense and looking at the oak crown, as if he was looking in the gilded foliage for the right word to end his sentence, the stranger suddenly crashed into a barrier on his way, and that barrier was Raniero. Being head and shoulders above Lucia's suitor, Raniero smiled contemptuously.

"You got lucky," Raniero said coldly, throwing a camp bag on the grass. "I flew here myself."

Hearing a familiar voice, Lucia ran around the oak tree and froze in place when she saw her elder brother.

"Nero!" she exclaimed, beaming with happiness.

The potential suitor could not share Lucia's joy over her protector's return. The bard, who had no skills besides the gift of eloquence, in a duel with an experienced warrior would not have landed a single blow. He vividly imagined it, and was frightened away.

"F-forgive me, radiant one!... Perhaps I should search for my sympathy spark in another place," he mumbled awkwardly, hurrying away from the garden. Taking an unkind look at Lucia's failed suitor, Raniero nearly fell from surprise.

"Nero! I missed you so much!" Lucia rushed to Raniero in flight and pressed firmly against him, wrapping them both up in her wings.

"Hello, Beam!" Raniero said with an awkward smile. He had become estranged from his shortened name, because only Lucia had ever called him "Nero," which eventually became her honourable right and indestructible tradition. Finally realizing that he had really come home, Raniero quietly laughed and clasped his arms, circling Lucia in place.

Lucia did not want to let Raniero go and kissed him on the cheek, smiling at the sight of the brightly shining trace that appeared on his skin where he had been kissed.

"I missed you too," Raniero said, staring at Lucia's bright grey eyes, suddenly glistening with tears.

"Oh, no-o-o, don't cry," Raniero said already knowing why Lucia was upset.

"There are two new scars and one of them is deep!" Lucia protested, hanging in Raniero's hug and puffing out her cheeks. "You don't let the healers cure you during battle! I would not have asked for permission!"

"That's why you're the Queen's servant, and not a frontline healer at the outpost," Raniero said, smoothly lowering Lucia to the ground. "It's easier for me to get a pair of wounds than to write to the deceased healer's family that he rushed to his death in attempt to save my face from the scars..."

"But I have only you!" Lucia was still indignant. "You wouldn't have to write!"

"And I have only you, so drop this silly idea," Raniero said gently, but confidently, and kissed his sister on the forehead. His touch left a shining curly halo that suddenly appeared to crown Lucia's head.

"Wouldn't it be better to tell me why I was called to the capital?" Raniero asked trying to smile at ease, despite his excitement. "There were no explanations in the order for why I was removed from my post as commander..."



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