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Grey Stone & Steel

Kate Coe



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In memory of the summer we spent sitting on the stern of the boat, drawing cities and cliffs in my notebook and discussing how we'd attack them.

And for my Grandma, because my characters really do have a life of their own!

Day 1

Attack

The morning was a faintly misty one, with a light drizzle of rain that soaked the steep streets of Aleric. Bad weather didn't particularly bother the inhabitants of the coastal town - they had lived through the worst of the winter storms already - but the rain did make the stone streets difficult to traverse, and so most of the population stayed inside. It also made the entrance of the harbour harder to see, and the ships coming in were cloaked in gloom.

When the lookout in the watchtower spotted the ship, he immediately came to attention. It was too close to the rocks at the harbour entrance, and its bearing was off. Was it in difficulty?

“Keeper, there's a ship approaching on the wrong bearing,” the lookout called, peering out the window into the rain. It had been a boring night so far, with the drizzle coating the sea in a faint haze. But the dawn light was just beginning to stain the sky, and this ship was the first of what would be a busy day for the harbour.

The keeper came over and leant out the window in turn. “Ziricon, by the looks of things.” She hesitated a moment

and then made a decision. "It's a very odd bearing. Send a warning to the Keep. I'd rather be safe than sorry."

The lookout headed over to the spark system and began to tap out a message.

"Ship coming in on the wrong heading!" the Keeper shouted down the stairs to the morning crew. "Warn the harbour."

"Right away, keeper!"

"It's still coming this way," the second lookout said from where he was leaning at the window, having taken over the post. He was beginning to feel the first tendrils of anxiety. "It's sailing straight, so I don't see how...?"

With barely a pause, the keeper spun and pulled a lever set into the wall. "Alarm!" she shouted down the stairs. "Ship heading for us! Prepare the tower for attack! Warn the harbour!"

The second keeper was still tapping out a message and nodded as the keeper turned to her. "I'm passing it on."

The lookout was still leaning at the window. "Heading for us, keeper," he reported. "No deviation."

"I don't know what they're hoping to accomplish by crashing a ship into us," the keeper said, puzzled. "Everyone, get your weapons. Akar, have they replied?"

"Yes, keeper," the first lookout said, getting up from the seat. "The General is being warned now."

"Good. Grab your weapons and we'll..."

The ship hit the base of the watchtower and the shrieking of timbers drowned out the rest of the sentence.

"...go down and..." the keeper repeated, heading for the stairs.

The watchtower vanished.

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The explosion was clearly visible from the Ziricon ships waiting outside the harbour, trusting to the mist to hide them from the watchtowers on the top of the cliff. The low Ziricon drigs were less visible due to their flat profile, and Commander Durrenmor had risked bringing them closer in that he normally would. As the fire faded, he turned, opening his mouth to give the signal to the rest of the armada.

A sound, deep-toned and rasping, tore through the air.

Commander Durrenmor ground his teeth. “The alarm. They've sounded it sooner than I hoped. Signal the fleet to approach!”

*

General Kiril had been awake when the warning came, brought by his second-in-command, Isha. He glanced at it and then nodded. “Get someone up to the alarm, and get the army alerted.”

He had just reached the main hall when a huge bang echoed through the city, and he abruptly changed direction towards the city walls. Ersa caught up with him as he was hurrying up the steps. “Attack?”

“We think so, Lady,” Kiril said to the Lady of the City, who was still managing to look composed in a hastily thrown on robe and cloak. “I wanted to see...”

They had reached the top of the wall and Ersa's face set as they looked out over the city. The watchtower was gone; stone was still raining down on the harbour, and a cloud of smoke was slowly drifting skywards. The leaning remains of the landward wall was all that remained of the imposing structure.

“Sound the alarm,” Ersa said grimly to Kiril, who turned and repeated the command in a voice that was almost as

loud as the explosion. Ten seconds later, the rasping tone of the horn rang out.

“Ziricon?” Ersa asked as the sound faded.

“It was their ship,” Kiril said. “I think they are aiming to capture the harbour. If you will excuse me, Lady?”

“I’ll be on the second level,” Ersa said with a nod. “I’ll take Isha.”

Kiril nodded in return and strode down the steps.

*

The fleet had docked with surprising ease, and Ziricon troops poured off the ships. Commander Durrenmor was directing his men with crisp efficiency and watched as they swept towards the harbour gate.

“They’re not holding the harbour, sir,” Second Nielin reported.

The Commander frowned, and then realised. If Aleric held the walls, they had no need to hold the harbour. “Take the harbour gate as a priority.”

“Yes, sir.”

*

The population was streaming in through the gates of the second and third levels, making its way up the hill as fast as possible. Anyone who lived near the cliff was on the walls, throwing rocks and helping man the small catapults that formed a major part of Aleric's arsenal.

“The citizens know what to do,” Isha said as she and Ersa hurried through the keep gates. The keep was already bustling, although the noise level had not risen beyond its normal buzz. “Will you direct the visitors? I’ll go down to the gate and direct our fighters.”

Ersa nodded and Isha ran down the main street towards

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the gate. After a few minutes, a steady stream of refugees were coming up the hill, clutching baggage. Many of the inhabitants of Aleric simply checked where she wanted them and immediately headed off to the walls. All Aleric citizens knew the price of their city and were determined to ensure it was paid in full by any attacking army. But some lingered, wanting to ensure their family was safe, entrusting the elderly and children to their Lady before heading to fight. Ersa sent as many as she could up to the keep and began to divert the remainder over to the reservoir at the side of the second level.

In amongst the focused chaos, Ersa ended up amongst the numerous small stallholders who had set up against the wall of the reservoir. Most were still there, guarding their stalls against the waves of people coming up from the lower levels, and some handed out their wares to the small groups that settled around them.

*

It wasn't a noise; it was more of a feeling, a deep thud that shook the stones of the second level. For a terrifying instant, nothing happened; everything was frozen, waiting. And then a crack spread upwards from the cluster of stalls at the base of the reservoir, spreading and spreading, tendrils gasping eagerly at the huge stones that made up the wall, splitting the mortar and loosening the blocks.

Everything happened very fast after that.

*

Mage Lau, Third level Water, was up on the keep walls looking out over the harbour when he heard the explosion. He glanced down, along with everyone else around him, and to his horror saw the waters of the reservoir below ripple. The wall was bending, and then...

He didn't think. He didn't wonder about the amount of effort that it would take. He simply saw the stones bending

under the weight of the water, the groups of people clustered around the base, the terrible weight of water and stone that was poised to crash down across the level.

He was too late to stop the stones tumbling; they began to fall outwards, peeling away from the hungry crack and crashing down on the groups below. The market stalls were gone, buried beneath the dust, people fleeing in all directions as the dust billowed outwards.

But the water, the gallons of water that kept Aleric alive, that would sweep down through the city if they were released; they held.

*

Kiril heard the thud but couldn't see anything untoward and dismissed it as a catapult stone, turning back to the battle. The Ziricon soldiers had taken the harbour but were obviously puzzled by Aleric's style of fighting. Houses were unimportant and abandoned. However, the steep, narrow streets of the city were ideal for hand-to-hand fighting, and the numerous small gateways and arches had all been fitted with collapsing beams so that they could be used as blockades. Ziricon's soldiers were beginning to find out how expensive it was to attack Aleric as they started towards the land gate.

Suddenly, there was an explosion, but it was a sound that wasn't a sound - more of a vibration, an echo that rippled through the stones of the houses and the streets. The noise threw most of the people in the city to the ground, and all fighting stopped for a few frozen seconds. Kiril spun around and to his horror, saw the wall of the lower reservoir begin to fall. The stones simply vanished from sight, crumbling downwards, and there was a boom as the water broke through the remaining barrier.

Rubble began to rain down as Kiril rapidly calculated the path of the water. It would likely take out the harbour

gate, although they'd lost that anyway...but it would destroy much of the fourth level as well. Better to stand on a firm base.

“Retreat to the third level!” Kiril shouted as loudly as he could and heard the message being taken up by the people around him, passing rapidly down the narrow streets as everyone began to climb towards the keep. “Retreat! Retreat!”

*

“Sky and Fire, I’m tired!” Toru said, flopping down in a chair next to Jan’s elegant wheeled one at the window of the library. Out of one window, the mist was still lingering down on the plains, and the mountains on the other side were almost permanently shrouded at this time of year. Sometimes it felt as if Meton, perched high on its ridge of dark rock, was simply floating on cloud.

“More tests?” Jan asked, looking up and shutting the book he was reading.

“Oh yes.” Toru ran a hand over his face and sighed. “S’ian’s only just got back from Ceane and they asked her to do another batch.”

“I presume they found that distance doesn’t matter for your bond,” Jan said mildly.

“Not at all, but we knew that.” Toru snorted contemptuously. “Meton to Ceane isn’t far. We had a link from here to Treloolir, after all.”

Jan nodded. “They’ll run out of ideas sooner or later.”

“It’s been six months.” Toru’s expression briefly clouded. Six months since Catter had left, and his grief still felt as fresh as the day the man had walked out of the gate. It was now eight months since he had touched the dying S’ian and accidentally formed a soulbond with her. Seven months since he had crashed with Catter in the mountains

during their search for the centre of magic, bringing the bond into bitter prominence. And then Catter had left...

S'ian voice briefly echoed in his head. *Stop thinking about it.*

I miss him.

I know you do. She sounded sympathetic, but then she could feel his grief as keenly as he could. *It doesn't help to dwell on it.*

He could feel her grief mixing with his, in the rare moments when either of them let an unguarded thought out of their hearts. *I know, S'ian. Just tired of all the fuss.*

I think that's the last of the tests for the moment. They've run out of ideas.

Good! Toru replied savagely, and then gave the watching Jan a rueful smile. "Sorry. S'ian said they have apparently run out of ideas, so I hope that's the last of the tests."

"You'll have more time to work on the Fliyer."

Toru's expression lit up. "I think I have a better design for the wing. Do you have time to come and look at it?"

"Always, Toru."

Toru pushed himself up from the chair and opened the door as Jan deftly wheeled himself over. "How are your exercises coming along?"

"Slowly." Jan tried to keep his voice level. For an active fighting man, the rockfall that had damaged his back had been devastating. Toru had made the elegant wheeled chair to help him get around, and Jan was slowly regaining the use of his legs. "Healer Duran says I am progressing well."

Toru thumped his shoulder. "You're getting there, and you know it."

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Toru pushed the switch down at the shed entrance and the blue-white lights in the shed walls flickered into life.

Jan wheeled himself in and smiled. “It looks almost finished.”

“It’s flyable,” Toru said sourly. “General Ziana insisted, mostly because of the threatening noises from Ziricon. She wants it useable if we do need it.”

“I presume that you are continuing to improve it,” Jan said mildly.

“I don’t think I’ll ever stop,” Toru grinned.

The newest Fliyer stood in the centre of the shed, an elegant sweep of wood and metal. It was Toru’s seventh, but the design continually changed and the Fliyer had been rebuilt continuously after numerous crashes. Toru pulled his latest plans out from the desk, and Jan put a heavy foot on one corner as Toru found his drawing equipment.

The shed engineer had seen the light go on and now stuck his head around the door. “Need anything, Toru?”

“Could you bring us a drink and then food at midday, Anold?” Toru asked. “We’re not changing anything today, but I might want help tomorrow for a new wing bracing.”

“You have a Council meeting this afternoon,” the shed engineer said. “I’ll let the staff know about tomorrow.”

“Thanks. And remind me about the meeting after lunch!” Toru called after the engineer’s retreating back before turning back to the plans.

*

It was S’ian who brought over the food and a flask of hot drink; the wooden box looking far too large for her to carry. Jan quickly wheeled himself towards her. “Let me take that..”

“It’s all right, Jan. I’ve got it.” She deposited it on Toru’s desk and began to take things out. “Bread, some fruit, I think there’s cheese in here somewhere...”

Toru leant on the Fliyer’s wing and watched his partner and Jan as they sorted through the food. S’ian, tiny and slight, was only a little taller than Jan in his chair, and Toru liked the way they talked to each other. Jan was so formal most of the time, but S’ian was the one person that he could feel equal to and often turned to for advice.

“Toru, come and eat,” S’ian said, turning her head with a smile. They tried to observe the courtesy of speaking out loud when others were around, despite the swiftness of their communications by thought.

Toru ducked under the wing and wandered over, snagging the desk chair with a foot and taking a chunk of bread. “How was your Healer’s shift?”

“All right, actually,” S’ian said, sitting on the desk. “No broken arms recently. How are you getting on here?”

Although Toru could have given her their morning’s work in a brief flash of thoughts, he outlined what had been done out loud, letting Jan interject comments. That filled up the rest of lunchtime, followed by a brief walk around the Fliyer to show S’ian the potential improvements.

You have a Council meeting, remember! was her parting shot as she headed back across the courtyard with the empty box, giving the shed engineer a wave with her free hand.

Thanks, I forgot that! Toru shot back guiltily. “Council Meeting, Jan. Are you coming to this one?”

“General Ziana asked me to,” Jan said, falling in beside Toru.

*

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They reached the council room, on the ground floor out of deference to Jan's chair although he was able to walk short distances. Ziana, Meton's General, was there along with two of her Seconds, Rus and Akia. She nodded politely to them both and then to Aiden, who entered just after them.

"How's the rebuild?" the Mage asked, sitting down next to Toru.

"It's flyable. I'm working on a new wing design. I think I can get it more flexible," Toru said. "Jan suggested some improvements, so I'm going to build a small model and see how that works out."

Aiden nodded. "Have you thought about...?"

Lord Idalin entered at that point, and everyone around the table rose.

"Thank you. The Council is in session," Lord Idalin said, sitting down at the head of the table. "What have we got to discuss?"

The Council had been going on for an hour, and the topic of trader's rates was under discussion when there was a knock on the door. It opened without waiting for an answer and the entire room turned to see who was so discourteous.

The messenger gave the briefest of bows, panting from her run. "My Lord Idalin! Aleric is under attack."

"How? Who?" Lord Idalin asked.

"Ziricon, my Lord. Two messages got through before the apparatus was cut off. They have significant damage, and Ziricon has got inside the city. We have no further details."

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Day 1

Toru

Toru stood, as usual the first to react, looking every inch the Lord. “Lord Idalin, I would like to take my Fliyer and see what they’re doing.”

To his credit, Lord Idalin considered it. “Will they be able to shoot you down?”

“I doubt it. They won’t expect me, and won’t expect someone who can manoeuvre as fast. I can evade anything they do try.”

“How long would it take?”

“I can fly fast...maybe an hour.” He anticipated the next question and said, “S’ian can report immediately. Give her paper and pens, and she can draw everything I see without interrupting your conference. I’ll try to focus on anything you need to know. I’ll let her know.” His eyes unfocused for a moment, then refocused on the Council.

“Aiden? Ziana?” Lord Idalin said, turning to the Mage and the General.

“I see no issues, as long as Toru is sure that he can evade any magic they may throw,” Ziana said.

Toru nodded, and then turned. “Jan, will you come with me? You know something about battles. I need someone who’s got good eyes.”

The Paladin looked startled, and then nodded. “As you wish, Lord Heir.” He backed his chair away from the table as Lord Idalin instructed someone to find the map and Ziana instructed Akia to begin mobilisation and warn the Dirrs. Their voices cut off abruptly as the door shut, and Toru thoughtfully kept his pace easy to allow Jan to keep up. They strode through halls in silence, and it was only when they reached the courtyard and were heading for the open gate that Toru said, “It bothers me that we didn’t have any warning.”

“It may have been a surprise attack.”

“That concerns me even more.”

Jan nodded. “So what are we looking for?”

“What they are up to. What weapons they have. Where they are going next. What we’ll need to do to help.”

They reached the cliff-side shed and Toru opened the door to find the shed engineer and two of his staff inside, checking the Fliyer over and cleaning.

“Just a jolly, Toru?” Anold asked.

“Aleric’s been attacked. We’re going scouting.”

The engineer’s eyes widened. “Go and grab the box of weapons,” he said to one of the staff. “What do you think you’ll want, Toru?”

“The flash bombs, probably. Not much else.” Toru grinned. “Let’s get going. Jan, I’ll boost you in.”

Jan pulled himself out of his chair by holding the Fliyer, and with Toru boosting his legs, painfully hauled himself into the seat. “Do you have supplies?”

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Toru passed up a warm jacket, gloves and a hat. “Yes, under the seat. Catter persuaded me to equip the Fliyer properly. I think he knew something was brewing. Or he wanted me to be prepared next time I crashed.”

“I think that is more likely,” Jan commented with a straight face as he pulled the coat on and took the goggles that Toru passed to him.

The Lord laughed, vaulted into the front seat and began pulling his own coat on as the shed engineer directed his staff to loosen the ropes and prepare the Fliyer for launch. “We’ll be flying very fast to start with, so hunker down as much as you can. I’ll redirect some of the wind, but I can’t stop all of it. Ready?” he added to the shed staff.

The runner reappeared with a sack of weapons and passed it up. Toru flicked through it, removed a few items from the sack and passed back down. “Not too much weight. Right, ready for launch.”

The staff gathered around the back of the wings, and with Toru’s rising vortexes spiralling breezes around their clothes, ran the Fliyer towards the cliff edge. A few paces back they stopped, but the Fliyer had enough momentum that it shot towards the edge and over it. Jan was barely aware of falling as Toru’s long practise with his mode of flight let him catch the air at just the right moment. The Fliyer swooped and rose, and then Toru sent them round in the half-circle to set the Fliyer’s nose to Aleric.

*

“Hello, Anold,” S’ian said ten minutes after Toru had left, coming into the now empty Fliyer shed.

The engineer looked up. “Healer. What can we do for you?”

S’ian inclined her head slightly. “You don’t need to be so formal, Anold. Toru’s asked me to start building another

Fliyer, and I'll need your help.”

Anold looked around at the empty workshop. “Same design?”

“With the usual amount of modifications. He'll take over once he gets back, but he wants the frame started. Can we do that?”

Anold nodded, his mind obviously elsewhere. “We can start. Arve! Get the wood from the back! Sik, get in here and start finding the tools!”

S'ian felt Toru's grin in her mind and set to work.

*

The conference had been going on for over two hours with various participants arriving and leaving, and messengers going in all directions. The castle and city were both full of movement, people preparing their weapons and supplies. The Council had remained in the same room, with most of its participants vanishing at various points to pass on instructions or check preparations. But Lord Idalin and Ziana remained, flowing from one issue to the next with barely a break and summoning people as needed to help.

S'ian had come into the council room almost two hours after Toru had left and had taken a seat at the end of the table. Ziana had nodded to her and then continued the conversation, the discussion continuing around the hot drinks and small plates of food that occasionally got touched in the rare pauses. It was a little past the second hour when S'ian stood. The conversation between Ziana and Second Rus tailed off, and Lord Idalin looked up.

“My Lord, Toru has reached Aleric,” S'ian said.

“Report in whatever way is easiest,” Ziana said.

S'ian nodded and tilted her head slightly, listening to a

voice that they could not hear. Her brow furrowed for a moment, and then she spoke, but in a different voice. Lord Idalin jumped as Toru's voice rang out into the room and Rus stared at the woman in shock. Ziana's face was expressionless as she listened.

"It's worse than we thought," Toru said through his partner. "They've got into the city. I can see the flames from here, something's burning. We're going to get closer and get over the city."

S'ian was pale and touched the table with one hand as Toru finished speaking through her. Lord Idalin gestured for her to sit, and she gratefully sank down. They waited in silence, watching the slender woman as she waited, looking into space as she watched something beyond their vision. Her face became grim and her mouth straightened out, lips pressed together in some violent emotion. And then she spoke again.

"The lower reservoir is empty. There's a huge hole in one side of it, and the rubble's knocked a huge swathe out of the lowest tier...there's debris going all the way down to the outer wall. The keep's intact, and...the second level reservoir is full, but it looks like it was damaged as well. One side's bowed outwards, and there's a lot of people working on it. I'm just going over the keep, and it all looks intact, there's a lot of people there. Some of them are waving to me, but I can't tell if they're trying to get a message."

S'ian had almost forgotten the small group breathlessly waiting in the council room. Toru swooped lower, almost clipping the walls of the keep, circling to try to hear the shouts. Figures raced out of the hall, and he spotted armour. "Isha! What's happening?" he yelled as loud as he could.

She was racing up the wall steps two at a time. "We're holding! Can you..." It sounded like send reinforcements.

“What do you need?”

“We have food and water. Attack them from the land side!”

There was the thunk of a catapult string, and Toru shot upwards as a stone smashed into the keep courtyard. Ziricon was trying to knock him out of the air. Jan gripped the seat as the Fliyer shot downwards again and past the walls where Isha was. “We’ll come! Keep holding!” Toru yelled.

Isha was waving him off as more catapult balls sailed over. Toru waved in farewell and gained height.

“S’ian?” Ziana said, recalling her to Meton.

“Sorry. Isha wants us to attack from the landward side. They have food and water.”

She could hear the discussion that her words provoked but was still with Toru, circling over the city. There were a lot of ships in the harbour, and the Fliyer swooped over to assess the damage.

“Ziricon’s holding the harbour gate,” Jan said, pointing over Toru’s shoulder.

“I’d guess they took that when the lower reservoir went,” Toru said, turning the Fliyer slightly to go over it. “The water must have taken out most of the gate.”

The land gate is down, S’ian said in his head. The pile of rubble and broken fragments spoke of the struggle that had taken place. But the far side of fourth looks intact.

“I’d guess Ziricon aren’t bothering about it,” Toru said out loud. “They’d want to disable the keep.”

“S’ian?” Ziana prompted again.

“We’re heading up over the city towards the keep,” S’ian managed. “The third gate’s still held, but they’ve got a ram

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in place, and I...” She broke off and flinched, seeing something that no one else in the room could. “They...they’ve blown up the third gate. The smoke’s billowing out and I can’t see how much has been destroyed. It’s coming up to us now, we’re going through it...”

There was a tense silence, and S’ian’s eyes screwed up, despite Toru’s wind glasses. There was a long moment of worried silence as the Fliyer came out of the smoke column.

“The third level gate is gone,” Toru said harshly. “There’s a lot of Ziricon troops on the fourth level, and I think they’ll take the third now the gate’s gone. I’d guess that everyone on third will retreat up the hill and bring the smaller gates down as they go.” S’ian’s fists were clenched in what was obviously Toru’s rage. “He’s so angry,” she managed to say, breaking away from Toru’s vision for a moment.

“Tell him to come back here!” Lord Idalin snapped. But S’ian was staring at nothing again, a blank look that looked straight through them, serene and emotionless. They all waited, watching the motionless woman with concern.

“There’s nothing we can do,” S’ian murmured after a long moment. “He can’t land. We need him here.”

“He must **not** land!” Ziana said, leaning forward. “Don’t let him stay there!”

S’ian’s face set as if arguing with someone. Then she slumped back into the chair, her eyes refocusing on the room in Meton. “He’s coming back.” She let out a long breath, echoed by everyone in the room who had unconsciously been holding theirs.

“Have we had any news of Ceane?” Lord Idalin asked.

“Ten minutes ago. Everything’s clear. They’re sending

scouts out to check in case Ziricon is heading for them,” one of Ziana’s Seconds said. “We have requested updates regularly.”

“I would suggest sending a small party through the pass to check,” Aiden said. “We can’t rule out false reporting.”

Everyone stared at him and then Ziana gestured to Rus. “See to it. If Ceane is attacked, we have to respond – they are less well defended than Aleric. Will they aim for Meton?”

“It depends on the overall plan,” Lord Idalin said wearily. “I’d guess that if they can take and hold Aleric, as that will be enough of a prize. It allows them a base to attack us later. We should do all we can to assist the defence of Aleric, but we need a land force sent out as soon as possible. It will either be driving Ziricon back across the plains if they come for Meton or attacking Aleric if Ziricon gains a firm hold. If neither of those happen, they will assist Aleric in driving Ziricon out of the city.”

Ziana nodded. “I’ll put plans in motion. S’ian, where is Toru?”

“Heading back across the plains,” S’ian said. “There are a lot of refugees on the road, but no soldiers or equipment yet.” She hesitated as if listening to something. “There were a lot of cargo drigs at the river end of the harbour. They may not have unloaded yet. They would need at least the fourth level to ensure the safety of the ships. Toru thinks they will be fighting for the rest of the day at least to take the third level.”

“I am concerned with the use of flame powder to explode a solid wall,” Lord Idalin said. “They must have found a way to make it more effective.”

“It’s worrying,” Aiden said. “Aleric won’t hold for long if its walls can be breached.”

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“We must assume that the third level will be taken today,” Ziana said, “and potentially, if the walls can be breached, the second level could be taken tomorrow.”

“They will hold the keep at least,” Aiden said.

“They may have nothing to hold,” Lord Idalin said grimly. “It is hard to hold a pile of rubble.”

“We have to assume worst case.” Ziana tapped her fingers on the table. “Aleric may fall. We need to get Meton's army roused, and prepare to defend ourselves. If Aleric falls in the next four days, we cannot get there to help them.”

Everyone was silent for a moment. Aleric had always held; its system of walls and gates would hold even the strongest attacker. But if those walls were being breached wherever the enemy wished...

“Let us prepare here,” Lord Idalin said, and then stood up. “Aiden, gather all your Mages and get word to Oare. Someone warn the Durr centre and send the Leader to me. I want a full Council here in an hour. Ziana, get your Seconds together and speak to the citizen leaders.” He turned to S'ian. “When will Toru return?”

“It will take him at least an hour to fly back to Meton.”

“Can you relay things to him? I want him to know what is happening.”

“I can be back for the Council.”

Lord Idalin nodded a dismissal, and S'ian stood to leave the room. As she stepped through the door, she found Aiden at her elbow. “Backlash?”

She nodded. “Toru's already been flying a long time. I'll have to take it for him to get back.”

“You can share...” he started, astonished.

“Transfer. Yes.”

Aiden put a hand under her elbow. “This way. There’s a room that you can rest in.”

She was already shaking slightly under his hand and let him lead her through the castle’s wide halls without really seeing them. The green sky from Toru’s vision was superimposing on the rock, and she felt Aiden put an arm round her, steering her through a doorway.

“You can lie down here,” he said from a long way away, and her knees buckled as Toru’s pain washed over her.

*

Toru had landed the Fliyer two hours after leaving Aleric, and apologised to the staff as he vaulted down into the courtyard, shedding his jacket and goggles. “No, I’m fine. I have to go and report. Are you happy putting it away?”

“We’ll have to strap it down out here, Toru,” Anold said.

“No problem. I’ll come and help with the new one when I’ve finished.”

“Go and report,” Anold told him with a nod. “Paladin, can we get you a hot drink? You must be half frozen.” Jan was helped out of the Fliyer by a dozen hands as Toru grinned and strode off.

The Council, albeit in reduced form, was still in session in Lord Idalin’s rooms when Toru came in, still with wind-burned cheeks and ruffled hair. “I apologise for the delay. I checked on the refugees as I came over.”

“Have you checked on...?” Aiden started.

“She’s still out. She’ll be recovered by tomorrow.” Toru looked guilty, and then shook it off and flopped into a chair. “Was the report comprehensible?”

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“Aleric was. Anything else as you flew over?” Ziana asked.

“Nothing besides the refugees. They’re still close to Aleric, but they’ll need help. Can you organise that?”

Ziana nodded. “Rus, get runners and packs ready. Set out as soon as possible. They’ll need blankets, food, and transport.”

“Weapons, General?” Rus asked.

“No. If Ziricon are harrying them at the Aleric end, we can't get a force there fast enough. Just help them and get them closer to Meton. If opposed, we'll have to withdraw.”

Rus saluted and left.

“What’s the situation in Ceane?” Toru asked.

“Not under attack yet, and there’s no sign of ships or troops coming from Ziricon. I sent a small team through and they’re reporting back independently of Ceane’s reports, so we should hear of trouble from both sources if it happens,” the General said briskly. “I've put out a message that anyone needing to leave Meton should do so via Ceane. So far, there has been no panic.”

“Ceane’s inhabitants will defend the city if they do get attacked,” Lord Idalin said. “The most likely scenario is that Ziricon will simply bypass Ceane if they do come from that direction. Can we block the pass?”

“Lord Toru, didn’t you mention a net...?” Ziana asked.

“A copper net with spark in it. It will burn anyone who touches it,” Toru said. “We’ve got enough wire in storage. I’ll talk to the engineers, and we should be able to put that in very soon. It would block the pass entirely if it was switched on.”

“Install it and keep me updated,” Ziana said. “What are the Council’s thoughts of the likelihood of attack from the

mountains?”

“They’d be mad,” Toru said bluntly. “They’d lose half their men. You’d never get an army through, even using the passes.”

“We can’t rule it out,” Jan said thoughtfully. “May I suggest scouts at intervals to give a warning if it does happen?”

Ziana noted it down on her sheet. “How about the Fliyer?” she asked. “They would be very good scouts.”

“At the moment, I’m the only one that can fly it. Another Mage may be able to, with practise,” Toru said.

“Can you make the design any more stable? I need more, and I don’t want to risk Mages if I don’t have to.”

“I won’t be able to build one without a Mage at the helm. Not in the time we have,” Toru said, shaking his head. “It took me long enough to get that design working.”

“My Mages won’t want to be left out,” Aiden added. “If you can build more then we’ll fly them, Toru.”

The Lord Heir drummed his fingers on the table, thinking. “What do you need them for, Ziana? Recon or offence?”

“Both, preferably. Recon’s the most important. But if they can drop things, I’ll use them for offence.”

Toru nodded. “When I first started, I built a simple set of wings. I can modify that for recon, and it would take a single Mage. It will take me longer to build more of the two-person Fliyers.”

“Build me the single-person ones,” Ziana said briskly. “And then once we’ve got them in the air, work on the Fliyer. Simplify the design as much as possible, but I’d like to have two people available. The benefit of Fliyers is that

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we can drop things on them, and they have nothing they can throw back at us.”

*

As soon as S'ian woke from the backlash, she checked in with Toru. He was in the shed, talking through the second Fliyer skeleton with Anold.

How's it looking?

Really good, Toru said cheerfully. You did really well.

“...and we thought that...” Anold said, and then realised that he had lost his audience.

I want to go to Aleric, S'ian said.

A rolling mixture of surprise, shock, worry and loss swamped Toru's mind and were cleared out within seconds. *You're as much a Mage as I am. Wings?*

If you can fly, I can.

I'll build a prototype.

Toru abruptly returned his attention to Anold. “Sorry, Anold. I was miles away. Are you happy with this? I've got another project I need to start work on.”

S'ian grinned as her partner's mind snapped into focus and went to find Ziana as Toru started pulling out tools and materials, his mind swirling with designs.

She bumped into Aiden first, who enquired about her health.

“I'm recovered. Aiden, I want to go to Aleric,” she said abruptly.

He blinked. “The city's going to fall.”

“You don't know that,” S'ian said, suddenly angry.

He swallowed, and tilted his head in an apology. “Why?”

“You need someone in the city. Toru’s overflights can only do so much.”

“How would...”

“Toru can build me a set of wings.”

He was staring at her. “Is this Toru’s idea?”

“No, it was mine. Truly, Aiden. Toru hasn’t talked me into anything.”

“My biggest concern is your safety,” Aiden said, worried.

“If I can borrow Toru’s power, I have more protection than most people. Aiden, you are one of the few people who know how strong he is now. I can use most of that. We haven’t found a limit yet.”

Toru had spoken to Aiden about his augmented power and his reduced backlash, the effect of the soulbond. The amount of power he now commanded was scaring both of them, and they hadn’t yet found a limit. If S’ian could draw on that, it made her as powerful as Toru. The Mage nodded slowly. “I suppose that if the war comes here, you won’t be safe here either. If you can fly, you’d be put to use here. And if you can fly in, you can fly out.” He sighed. “You’ll need to pass it with Ziana.”

“Will you back me, though?”

“For what it’s worth, yes. To have instant communication with Aleric and a powerful Mage there will be a huge bonus. Ziana wants to turn them back from Meton, so they’d have to go back to Aleric. We can hit them from both sides.”

“We don’t know how badly the city is damaged.”

“True.” Aiden thumped her shoulder. “Go see Ziana.”

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S'ian found Ziana in the council room, looking over a map with Akia. Seeing S'ian, the woman saluted and left.

"I want to go to Aleric," S'ian said, taking a chair at the end of the table.

"No," Ziana said abruptly, not looking up from the map.

"I can fly in and stay. I can communicate with Toru here, and I can organise the defence. You need someone there."

Ziana straightened and eyed the woman sitting upright in the chair. "The city could fall."

"And it could not," S'ian's eyes hardened. "I can fly, and I can get there. I can do any of the magic that Toru can. Aleric needs someone now, and you can't reach it."

Ziana gave her a long look, and then nodded. "What do you need?"

"Toru will build me wings. But I need you to listen to him."

Ziana gave her a stern look, and then understood what S'ian was trying to say. "I will ensure that he is fully included in everything, and I'll write you authorisation to give to General Kiril so that you are included there as well. Any communication needs to be effective."

S'ian nodded. "Thank you, General."

"Don't take risks, S'ian," Ziana said, almost gently for her. "We can't afford to lose both of you. If the city falls, get back here." Then she was all business again. "Let us know when you get there."

*

Come and test these, Toru said three hours later. S'ian, sitting in the library studying maps, put her selection down

and headed for the shed.

She arrived just as dusk was falling to find an elegant wooden frame, the top covered with canvas. Toru picked it up using a bar fastened underneath, spinning up a slight breeze to allow him to manoeuvre it in the shed.

“The wings are light, so it should only need a gentle vortex under each wing,” he said and brought the bar down in front of him. “You hang off the centre in a harness, and hold onto the bar. It should help with steering.”

S’ian took it from him, and they spent a few minutes mentally going through the various ideas and processes that Toru had for flying. Eventually, S’ian nodded. “You reckon this is a good enough design?”

Toru nodded. “If it works, I should only need minor amendments.”

“What are you calling it?”

“A Glider, I think. As opposed to my Flyer.”

And then S’ian gave him the mischievous grin that made him like her so much. “Can I go and test it?”

Together, they carried the wings out of the shed, with Toru’s staff following them. Jan and Aiden were just walking down from the castle with Second Rus. Toru clipped S’ian into the harness, and she turned her head to him, smiling.

Both Aiden and Rus let out a startled cry and leapt forward. Jan was more comfortable with Toru’s flying, and watched without any outward sign of unease as S’ian ran for the cliff edge.

But she didn’t fall; the Glider simply floated out into the air, soaring away from the cliff in almost a straight line. S’ian whooped, the sound coming back to them across the

air, and then abruptly sent the Glider into a steep dive. Jan managed not to cry out as she fell, and then saw her pull the craft up, twisting it into a steep rise that brought her up higher than she had first taken off. A few more acrobatics and a stall and tumble that made Aiden's heart catch in his throat, she swooped back up and brought the craft back in towards them, touching down lightly in the evening light and running the few steps it took for the Glider to stop above her.

The grin on her face said everything as she struggled with the harness, Toru ducking under the wings and helping with an answering smile on his face. "It works! It's stable, but I can pull enough tricks with it to be useful. The Mages will be able to fly that as long as they have a finger's worth of skill."

"Most of us do," Aiden said dryly.

She grinned at him. "Toru, it needs more support..." and she flashed over to him exactly what the problems had been.

The man frowned and started to rummage in his pockets. "Paper, my drawings...oh, thanks, Jan. So something for your feet?"

Jan wheeled himself over as Toru crouched down, and S'ian flopped herself down to lean on the chair's broad wheel, looking over as Toru spread the plans on the ground, and the shed engineer and a few staff came to look over his shoulder. "Maybe just another bar? It needs to be stable."

"That would help with storage when they're on the ground," the shed engineer pointed out. "Easier to get into it as well."

Toru sketched a few lines. "I'd put the pilot at a slight angle, so the foot bar would be larger. Was the harness all right?"

“Fine for me, but it probably needs to be adjustable if you’ve got more than one person flying the same Glider,” S’ian said.

“Would something like a sleep sack work better?”

“Harder to get in and out of though. How about the cold?”

“Flying clothes would solve that.”

“Warm gloves, definitely.”

“More of my goggles,” Toru said, and made a note. “Leather works well for wind protection and line that with something warm. Plus feet will get cold.”

“How about a hat..”

“Look, let’s get the Glider into the shed and put the sparks on before we carry on,” the shed engineer said loudly. “Otherwise you lot will be out here tomorrow morning!”

*

The Glider was ready the next morning, with Toru staying up all night to ensure that the amendments were made correctly. S’ian found him asleep on the mattress in the corner of the shed at dawn, and he woke with her fond amusement in his mind. “Is it ready?” she asked as he rubbed sleep out of his eyes.

“Completely.” He took the roll and hot drink she handed him and ate as she dressed in the leather jacket, heavy trousers and gloves that they had found to fit her.

Rus arrived as they were doing a final check. “We haven't got any more news,” he said sombrely. “You could arrive to a defeated city.”

S'ian nodded. “I'll scout first. Toru will give you a report, and I won't land until you agree.”

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He patted her shoulder. "Don't risk yourself."

"I'm going to a besieged city, Rus," S'ian told him acerbically, and the soldier had the grace to look embarrassed.

The engineering staff, looking hollow-eyed from their long night, helped S'ian and Toru carry the Glider out of the shed. They got it onto the clifftop, and Jan and Aiden arrived at the front of the growing crowd.

S'ian ran over to them. "Keep safe, Jan," she said, hugging him fiercely.

"You too, S'ian."

She swallowed. "I'll try. Let Toru know if you want to talk to me, and I'll come and see you."

He nodded. Aiden gave her a hug, and then they watched as she walked back to the Glider and clipped herself into the harness, the engineers fussing around her. Toru checked everything, then nodded and smiled at her as she slid his goggles over her eyes. "Let me know what improvements need to be made."

"Always." She turned her head and waved to Aiden and Jan, and then the Glider lifted effortlessly from the ground, swooping off the clifftop and rising into the endless green sky as the sunlight spilled across the land.

Kate Coe