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Green Sky & Sparks

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In memory of all the mornings that I spent walking
to school, watching the clouds drifting across the sky
above and dreaming of flying.

And for Chris, whose influence changed the entire
course of the story.

*Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth, and danced the
skies on laughter-silvered wings . . .*

- High Flight, John Magee

Chapter 1

Arrival

“**H**ey, watch it!” Anoé had to stop abruptly to prevent herself from running into Catter’s back. The man had just stopped in the middle of the road, oblivious to the traveller who now stepped to one side of him. Anoé followed his gaze and smiled.

“Get over to the side,” she said kindly, aware of other travellers coming up behind them. Catter slowly walked over to the side of the dusty road, still staring at the view ahead.

It was an amazing view. Although the mountains had been in view from the time they left Aleric, the Drek ridge had continuously appeared and disappeared behind the next ridge in the gently rolling landscape. And now, finally, they had crested a higher rise, and the farmland ahead of them spilled down towards the ridge. The road was stretching ahead of

them, and Catter followed its slow curve. It branched, one fork heading to the jagged gap in the dark rock of the ridge and then vanishing through to the Drek pass. The second fork turned, snaking up the ridge into the city of Meton.

Catter let his eyes travel up towards the city, following the road. The dark rocks of the buildings blended in with the ridge, and he could see the winding road as an absence in the buildings. And then the castle rose, sitting on the edge of the pass, looming over the road below. The huge spikes, five of them around the walls, rose even higher. He found his eyes going between the city, seeming to loom over the land below, and then to the white-capped mountains behind; they dwarfed the city in turn, shrinking the castle and its spikes to insignificance.

"The spikes are the spark towers," Anoé said. "I'll see if we can get a tour."

"That would be interesting," Catter said, staring in awe. "Why are they shining?"

"They've got copper wrapped up the outsides."

"It's a beautiful city."

"It's one of my favourites. Not as beautiful as Belmont, but then that's beyond belief."

Catter smiled and tore his eyes away from Meton. "I want to go there. Anyway, shall we get going? Otherwise I'll spend all night here."

"Sure."

*

Catter eyed the city walls as they approached the main gate. The entrance was busy, and a few stalls had set up amongst the grave markers that stretched either side of the road. Anoé led him off to one side, where a

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woman sat in a small wooden booth at the entrance to the gate, watching the incoming and outgoing people.

Anoé paused to speak to the gatekeeper. "Dirr Meerla. Update?"

"All quiet," the gatekeeper said. "You'll want to report in?"

"I'm on assignment."

"There's ongoing trouble."

Anoé's face was still for a moment, and then she nodded. "Thank you."

Catter fell back into step as they began to walk through the gate, following a creaking cart loaded with boxes. "Trouble?"

"I don't know yet," Anoé said, frowning. "It could be Ziricon."

"Are they a problem here?"

The Dirr glanced at him, and then smiled. "Ah, scholars do tend to be out of touch. We have to keep up with what everyone wants," she glanced up at the spark towers, "and Ziricon wants power."

Catter followed her gaze. Here in Meton, the towers really did loom. He swept his gaze up the main road as it zig-zagged up the cliff, visible by the gap in the rooflines, and ended at the castle walls. The towers shot upwards from the dark base, wrapped in that shining copper. "They want spark?"

"What can you do with spark, Archivist?" Anoé asked lightly.

Catter looked around the wide street that they were walking along, and found one of the glass globes hanging just above their heads. They were as clear as the globes in Aleric, and he could see the tight coil of metal inside it. "Well, light?"

"Light for the darkest of mines, Archivist. Communication systems across the land. Heat and

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light for your people. And spark's easy to collect if you know how."

"Zircon don't know how."

"Which is why they are here," Anoé said flatly. "There's been trouble brewing in Meton for a long time. Lord Idalin almost locked the city down last year."

"I didn't know that," Catter said, wishing he had kept up to date on the news.

"You're in Taderah, Archivist. You have other concerns," Anoé said with a shrug. "The Council have their own politics to step around. But Meton has secrets that it wants to keep." Then she smiled. "But this won't concern you, Archivist. My duty is to you until you have finished your assignment."

Catter nodded and glanced around. "Where are we going to?"

"I will call in at the Centre tomorrow, so we can either take rooms in the city, or see if there is space up in the castle, as that is where you will be studying."

"We'll try the castle," Catter decided, glancing up again at the stone walls looming over the town, crowned by their gleaming towers.

*

As they reached the castle gateway, Anoé fell in behind Catter in her role as protector. The Archivist glanced up at the huge gates and then down at the two guards standing in the entrance, and joined the short queue waiting to one side. It moved quickly, with most of the applicants being waved through, and then it was Catter's turn.

"Archivist Catter Jeck. I would like to visit the library."

The steward glanced at him, at Anoé, and then nodded. "We have been expecting you. If you could

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wait for a moment, Archivist, Dirr, and I will summon your escort."

"Expecting us?" Catter murmured to Anoé as they stepped aside, and the steward sent a small girl sprinting into the castle.

"Wyverex," Anoé said simply, although he noted that her face had a slightly set expression, as if she was expecting trouble.

Catter watched as two travelling merchants, their packs trundling behind them on low carts, were turned away and asked to set up in one of Meton's numerous tiny market squares. The next in the queue was a runner with spiked shoes and a knife in his sleeve, who was waved through the Gate on the heels of a cart full of crates of vegetables. They were followed by two servants and a richly-dressed woman, all talking cheerfully together.

"Anoé?" a deep voice said, sounding surprised.

Catter turned back towards the steward and found a Mage facing them. He was a head taller than either of them, and his deep green robes swirled around his bulky form. The standard padded headgear was pushed back on his forehead, and he was frowning.

"Aiden," Anoé said neutrally, and Catter caught her bow out of the corner of his eye. The Mage bowed back and then hesitated as if he wanted to say something else. But it passed, and he turned to Catter.

"I am Mage Aiden, Fourth level Earth," he said, and bowed with the formal flourish that brought his robe sleeves up his arms, exposing his tattoos. "I am honoured to meet you."

"Archivist Catter Jeck," Catter said, bowing back. "I am honoured to meet you, Mage."

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Aiden straightened up and gave a grin that made his face relax. "You're here to look at the archives, aren't you? Wyverex warned us."

"I am," Catter said, once again astonished by how much help he was receiving – or how easily Wyverex's name opened doors for him. But then a Mage of the Council was an important person, and every Mage would know him.

"Let's go, then," Aiden said cheerfully and led the way through the gate. "Are you staying here?"

"If it's possible."

"How long do you think you'll be?" Aiden raised a cheerful hand to someone on the far side of the courtyard, and Catter took the opportunity for a quick glance around. The courtyard was wide, with the castle proper covering one end and the city side, and what looked like storerooms on the mountain side. There were a fair amount of people around, with a mixture of working clothes and the beautiful fabrics that Meton favoured, and Catter suddenly realised that the air was clean – there was no soot, no tar, no fire-smell. With the sparklights that he could see dotted around the buildings, of course they had no need for firelight. The breeze smelled cold and fresh, and he could just see the tops of the mountains over the castle wall.

"Um, I don't really know," he said, dragging his attention back to Aiden. "It could be half a day or could be several weeks."

"I'll get you unneeded rooms, then. Anoé, are you staying here?"

"If that is acceptable," the Dirr said neutrally.

Aiden led them up the wide stairs of the castle, and they entered the hall. Catter glanced around in fascination, and then glanced up. A cluster of ornate glass hung from the ceiling, blazing with tiny pinpricks

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of light. It changed as he looked at it; one moment he could see jagged edges, and then it twisted in the breeze and seemed to meld, curving and swaying. The light somehow remained constant even though the source shifted, and he glanced up at the white-lit ceiling, feeling awed at the power.

"Archivist Catter Jeck and Dirr Anoé Meerla to stay for two weeks to start," Aiden was saying to someone. Catter tore his attention back down from the light and glanced around. The hall was large, built with the same dark stone as the ridge itself. A wide staircase led up from one side, and the hall widened into a huge room on the far side, hung with colourful patchwork and lit by the same sparkling clusters as the hallway. There were people around; one group was overlapping beautiful fabrics and light chatter as they passed through the hall, and the next cluster was striding on their way to somewhere, talking in low tones. Two small children shot through, laughing, and were followed a few seconds later by a small toddler, her legs determinedly pumping as she tried to keep up.

"This way," Aiden said, turning around from speaking to the castle steward. "I've put you in the North Wing, so you've got mountains to look at. I know you prefer mountains to farmland."

"You're so thoughtful," Anoé said dryly, but she was trying not to smile.

Aiden managed to engage the Dirr in conversation about their journey as they climbed the wide staircase, going up three flights. On the second landing, Aiden stopped for a second and pointed. "The library's down there, Archivist. I'll get someone to show you when you want to start studying."

Catter caught a glimpse of a long corridor, lit by the same sparklights, and nodded.

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"And your rooms are here," Aiden said as they reached the top, leading the way along a narrow corridor and opening two doors. "I am your guide here, so can I escort you to dinner later?"

Catter glanced at Anoé, but when she didn't say anything, nodded. "We would be grateful, Mage."

"Aiden, please," the Mage said with a grin and turned to go. "I'll be back in an hour then."

Catter stepped through the door and shut it behind him, looking forward to putting his pack down. But as he turned, he felt himself gape, and his feet took him straight towards the window.

The Drek Mountains stretched out before him; their dark flanks starting at the base of the castle and rising to snow-tipped peaks that tumbled off into the distance, stacking into the green sky with an almost blinding brilliance. Catter followed them up and then back down, and leaned his forehead against the so-clear glass of the window to look down. Far below, he could see tiny figures crossing the river before they started on their journey through the pass. But their scale was dwarfed by the mountains above them, and Catter wrapped his arms around himself with a shiver. If his calculations were correct, the point he was searching for was somewhere in amongst those indifferent, beautiful peaks.

*

Aiden knocked at his door an hour later. "We don't stand on ceremony, Archivist," he said when he saw Catter's attempt to smooth the travel creases out of his jerkin. "Please don't worry."

Anoé opened her door at the knock, and Catter saw Aiden's face crease with some hastily-concealed emotion. "Beautiful as always, Dirr."

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"We don't stand on ceremony?" Catter muttered.

Anoé inclined her head to the comment from Aiden, and smiled at Catter, touching the folds of her flowing tunic. "I like to take the opportunity to get out of my working clothes, Catter."

"When was the last time you were here?" Aiden asked as the Dirr and Catter took the lead to walk towards the stairs. His shoulders were so broad that he almost filled the corridor.

"I stayed in the castle last time," was Anoé's simple response.

"Have you visited before, Archivist?" Aiden asked after a brief hesitation.

"I haven't," Catter said, following Anoé down the stairs. Aiden seemed relieved to be able to walk a little more freely, although he had to keep stepping behind Catter to allow other inhabitants up the stairs. "I admit that I haven't travelled much at all."

"You're from Taderah originally?"

"Yes. I grew up in Arden originally, but I've spent most of my working life in Oare."

"And you've always studied?"

"I worked in Arden's library, and just fell into it. You studied at the Centre, I presume?"

"I did. I'm from Zircon originally, but came through here on work and loved it," Aiden smiled up at the sparkling glass as they got down to the hallway. Anoé fell in behind Catter again as Aiden led them through to the main hall, clustered with groups of chattering people, and then on through a wide doorway on the far side.

The room was filled with benches and tables, noise and colour and smells. Catter's flicking eyes took in every type of profession and person; Mages and tradesmen and travellers in worn clothing, rich cloth

mingling with more sturdy clothing. The room smelled of perfume, and sweat, and food – but not of the soot and dirt and flame that many other places did. The sparklights hanging from the ceiling were collections of glass balls, all individually lit, and they cast a beautiful white light across the hall. Catter decided that he liked Meton.

Aiden was looking around for someone and raised a hand when he spotted them. He turned to Catter. “Archivist, will you allow me to introduce you?”

“Of course,” Catter said, bewildered.

“It’s a courtesy here,” Anoé murmured quietly as Aiden led them across the hall. “Many people prefer to introduce themselves, or sit with others.”

Catter spotted one or two Dirrs amongst the diners, noticeable by their shaven or cropped hair, and there were a lot of padded Mages’ hats scattered through the ornate hairstyles. Servants moved between the tables, carrying trays of plates and platters of food, and he heard a wide mixture of accents as he followed Aiden’s broad shoulders, although Quorl’s smooth drawl did dominate.

Anoé touched Catter’s shoulder as they neared the table and murmured, “Lord Idalin is up there. Toru’s not here yet, but he’s the Heir, and you’ll probably meet him while you’re here.”

Catter glanced over and spotted the old man at one of the far tables, listening seriously to the woman next to him. She had the cropped and braided hair of a fighter, and he wondered who she was.

“General Ziana,” Anoé said with respect in her voice when he asked. “Commander of Quorl’s armies.”

“They’re that worried about . . .” Catter started to ask, but Aiden had reached the table and was gesturing

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at a young woman who had stood up to meet them.
“Archivist Catter Jeck, this is Archivist Ini Sitt.”

Catter shook hands, enjoying Ini’s firm grip. “I’m honoured to meet you, Archivist.”

“Ini, please, Archivist.”

“Catter,” the man corrected with a smile and sat down as Anoé was introduced. Ini bowed politely, and then sat down again.

“So you’re here to study the lines?” the Archivist asked.

Catter nodded, taking the plate that Aiden passed, and dug into the dishes in front of him as Aiden snagged one from further down the table. “Yes, I’ve just been through Huish to check their library.”

Ini leaned forward and opened her mouth, her eyes shining, and then caught Aiden’s eye and smiled ruefully, subsiding. “We’ll go through your research tomorrow, Archivist. It sounds fascinating.”

“Not to the rest of us,” Aiden grumbled good-naturedly.

“So how long have you worked as an Archivist?” Anoé asked Ini.

“Oh, I worked in the castle when I was younger and gravitated to the library. I’ve been there ever since,” Ini said, smiling. “I love working with everyone who comes, and our scrolls are fascinating. I’m currently working on deciphering some of the oldest castle records . . .”

Ini’s project and then talk of travel filled the rest of the evening, but Catter found himself swallowing yawns as the hall began to empty. Aiden noticed. “Let me escort you back to your room, Catter.”

Anoé half-rose, but the Mage waved a hand. “I am more than capable of countering any threats, I assure you, Dirr. I will take on your duty for the evening.”

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Anoé gave him a long look, but sat down again and resumed her conversation with Ini and another castle inhabitant as Catter followed Aiden away from the table.

"How do you know Anoé?" he asked the Mage as they reached the hall.

"She's visited previously. Did you know her before the assignment?"

"Not at all," Catter said ruefully. "I admit I don't have a lot to do with the Dirrs."

"Mages don't tend to," Aiden said, managing a light tone. "I presume she will be staying with you during the assignment?"

"Her brief was to bring me here and return with me," Catter said. "Although it will depend on what I find."

"I see." They had reached the top of the stairs, and Aiden bowed slightly. "Well, sleep well, and I will see you tomorrow."