

DEBT COLLECTOR

A story of the Spiralchain

Jeremiah L. Schwennen

Onus

Shayra closed her eyes as Narred's mouth roamed along the contours of her neck and up to the sensitive skin just behind her ears. Her height was no impediment to his movements, nor was the dark. They were of one mind when they were together like this—not through any act of magic, but through the profound intimacy of their union. They held one another in their shared quarters at the highest level of the Flesh, the communal tower where all the permanent residents of Kem Nought lived, but none would dare disturb them. Of all the Kem who dwelt at the academy, only Shayra was entitled to the illusion of privacy at the peak of the tower. Only she was permitted to blot out the chaos unfolding all around her.

The worlds were burning all around them—Oblivates and other, more powerful Rotkin were rampaging across the faces of Onus and Murrod. But instead of serving to unite the peoples of the two worlds, the mayhem provided convenient distraction for the opportunistic. The simplest example of that callous foolishness was the way that the few viable Gatemakers in training at Gar Stes had been swiftly snatched up by the former nobility of Onus in ill-advised power-plays against the fractured, fractious authority of the new Council.

Out there, things were tumbling to ruin... but here, in this room, she could push that all aside. They could, for a few hours at a time, pretend that she was not the Collectress of the Kem and he was not the highest-ranking member of the command cabinet of the now-shattered Army of the Line. Here they were just husband and wife, just man and woman...

But the one thing they were not was alone.

They had never once been *truly* alone... for such was the burden of the Collectress.

At the beginning of the Kem, in the earliest days of their order when the people of Onus still feared the existence of those with such talents, the strongest of the minds among the order had taken it upon herself—it was always a woman—to gather the

minds of those who perished into her own, to hold them safely and await the right body into which to reinvest them.

In that way, there were rarely novice Mindshapers, for once a body was found with the talent, a wiser, more experienced mind would be given custody of that body. As their numbers grew, and as turmoil across Onus grew, the number of minds awaiting reinvestment outpaced the ability of the Collectress and her successors to contain. They built an entire tower in Kem Nought, the Soul, to hold those minds. But the most powerful and the most precious refused to live exclusively in that disembodied confinement. They instead flitted back and forth between the Soul and the specially prepared vaults within the mind of the Collectress.

And so it was for several generations, until the Wyr convinced the mystic orders to go into hiding. When the edict of isolation came down, it brought with it horrible danger. The Mindshapers of the Kem were creatures of connection—they drew strength and, in many cases, sanity from their mind-to-mind contact with others. To be cut off from the outside world was very nearly a death sentence to the few hundred Mindshapers of the order. After much deliberation, the eldest minds among the Kem decided that the best way to wait out the period of isolation was for the whole of the order to part ways with their bodies and live on only as disembodied minds. Shayra had been named Collectress then, and the ruling body of their order took up residence in the vaults of her mind exclusively, for the number of minds held within the Soul at once already overtaxed its magic.

Never again would she be truly alone as Collectress... at least not until she had successfully returned each and every one of the score of minds inside of her own to a body. But unlike the eager, anxious minds in the Soul, the minds within her were... finicky. Particular. As her agents sought out prospective candidates for investiture across the two continents of Onus, and even in the far-off Starlight Islands, she parted ways with many of the hitchhiking personalities that she had slowly grown to resent. But not all. Still seven would not leave. Still seven would not settle for anything less than the perfect host, of the perfect age and height and weight and skin color and gender and more. The brief and shining dream Shayra had carried in the guarded places of her mind—the idea that one day she would be free—was being proven daily to be little more than fantasy.

The work of the Collectress was never done.

But that was, of course, not entirely true. There was one way that the work would end. One way out.

The burden could be passed to another.

As that single thought entered her mind, the voices of her remaining charges rose up in a chorus of conflicting opinions and urgencies. Shayra erected the powerful walls of thought that her magic enabled, sealing the voices off for a short while so that she could enjoy the exquisite ministrations of her husband.

In the morning, the time for walls of thought would be over and the time for true deliberation would begin. A candidate—a willing candidate—had come forward to take up the mantle of Collectress. And if it was the decision of the wise voices that lingered inside of her crowded mind to accept this new Collectress, Shayra's life would never be the same again.

She and Narred made love with more passion and less reservation than ever before. Tomorrow, the world would change.

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Narred woke before Shayra, and with the utmost care, he slipped free of her long, delicate limbs to stand and stretch before the single window of their chamber. The sun had not yet breasted the horizon, and of the twin moons, only one could be seen—a pale sliver of blue-white light in the swiftly lightening sky.

The sounds of activity from the courtyard below were unmistakable—the many retainers that the order had hired to attend to the daily tasks of the academy were hard at work earning their generous pay. Most were denizens of Mendul Holc, lured out to the remote academy with its crystal architecture by the promise of wealth and the chance to enjoy the protection of one of the mystic orders.

That last enticement had been of less value a few years ago... but now that reports of Obliviate or Weidory attacks were coming in almost daily from the Mindshaper attached to the Hall of Emissaries at Mendul Holc, Narred feared the number of people who wished to seek shelter in his wife's domain would soon outgrow the available space within their walls. With a quiet sigh, he dressed and slipped down the polished stairs of the Flesh to engage in his morning ritual, touring the academy grounds and collecting his thoughts before the business of the day, of this *particular* day, tore all sense of control from him.

Kem Nought was a changed place. Its four shorter crystal towers were all pockmarked with dark patches where the crystal structure had been scavenged and

replaced with cold, lifeless stone. All of those changes—each and every one a sacrifice of generations of pride and craftsmanship—had been to convert the Source, the tower whose magic was specially designed to amplify the energies of a Mindshaper and extend their range beyond the otherwise paltry limitations of miles, into an inescapable prison for the ephemeral Obliviates.

Then Jara had insisted the Army of the Line join forces with the Army of Worlds, and suddenly Hyrak was Narred's commander once more. It was not a turn of events that had left a good taste in his mouth. But he followed along, for Shayra followed along. She wanted to be of aid in the war without being personally drawn in, and the sacrifices of the traditions of Kem Nought were only the beginning of what was asked of her. She sent dozens of Kem to the battlefield... many of whom had died in the fatal assault on the Absence when all contact with the combined army had been lost.

Only a few weeks before that, Narred had personally overseen the transport of the Obliviate prisoners from the Source to a weaponsmithing operation directed by one of Hyrak's lieutenants, a fiendish inventor named Kayleen. He had watched her work at Fort Ashblack on Murrod, using complex machinery to distill the creatures of darkness into a curious essence from which she then crafted powerful weapons. In a different time, in another life, he would have dearly loved to apprentice to such a woman and learn her secrets.

But he was, for perhaps the only time in his life, content. His ambition had mellowed greatly through his union with the magnificent Shayra, and his short time in command of the Army of the Line during Steven's absence had served merely to remind him that his days at the center of the action were behind him.

He had done so much harm to Onus in his younger days. Now, he wanted only one thing: to protect the woman he loved from harm. That was what drove his actions now, and that was what drove him to stop his wandering route through the grounds before the Source tower. It was no longer guarded night and day by Kem, now that its burden had been discharged. After being the center of all their attention for so long, it was still disquieting to see the place so still, so quiet.

He paced over to stand within a few inches of the dark crystal that ran the entire height of the Source—a spine of magical mineral that formed the tower's axis. While it had played host to the Obliviates, the merest touch of the crystal had been fatal to anyone that did not possess a Mindshaper's arts. But now, it was quiet, inert, and lifeless. All of the magic that had once coursed within—magic that had once been powerful enough to project complex mindshapings across the gulf of worlds—was exhausted. Not even the Jovs who had helped to build it in the first place could say if it would rejuvenate on its

own or if its wonders were lost forever.

It was the problem that he had set out to fix while Shayra and the voices in her mind argued away the day. She did not believe that they would reach consensus anytime soon, so he had time... but he hated being away from her while those elder minds nagged and berated her. She needed his strength, and though they were never far from one another thanks to the permanent mind link between them, it was not the same as being there to hold her hand.

He pulled off the gloves he wore and touched one finger gingerly to the crystal, feeling it with his sense of touch and also the inborn senses of a skilled Boltsender. There was energy within—not much, but some. He doubted it could be coaxed to life with a simple application of electricity, but he wondered at the consequences of such an experiment. Shayra had faith that he could find a way to stir the Source to usefulness. That had to mean that somewhere, deep in her mind—or the memories of the minds that she held inside her—there was some inkling of how it could be done. Her faith was rarely blind, and her wisdom never simply a hunch. It was the sole blessing of her condition as Collectress amid a boundless accounting of curses.

“Don’t do that,” a plain female voice said from behind him.

Narred closed his eyes and suppressed a grumble of displeasure. Without turning, he said, “Leyassa, shouldn’t you be tending to the child?”

The voice replied, “The child is more self-sufficient than you give it credit for. My place is here, preventing you from making a grave mistake from which the Kem will never recover.”

He turned to glower at the woman. Leyassa was an elder Kem—one of those who had dwelt in Shayra’s mind for so very long. She had taken residence in the body before him only a few weeks ago. The body was a young woman—perhaps twenty-five summers old—with light brown hair and ample freckles across her round cheeks. Her eyes were hazel and big, and her build was otherwise quite plain. When she stood next to Shayra’s nearly seven-foot height, she looked quite comical, but by herself, she had a certain gravitas that Narred could not deny. Some of that was because of her stature as the epitome of a new philosophy among the Kem.

Leyassa had assumed the body in a process Shayra called a ‘polite merge’—a collaborative investiture where Leyassa’s mind did not overwrite that of the body, but instead *shared* custody of the body. Their arrangement was somewhat arcane, having something to do with the phases of the moons, but what mattered was that the elder was proving that even among the aged and exceptionally powerful of their order, the polite

merge was a valid possibility.

It was a move that heralded a seismic shift in the landscape of Kem tradition. Always before, they had taken what they wanted—they had crushed the mind of the body to leave adequate room for their inhabitation. But the curious nature of the two Kem Children of the Line, Tatyana and Rebecca, had opened Shayra's eyes to this other possibility.

"So, pouring lightning into it isn't a good idea?" Narred asked. "Do you have a better one?"

Leyassa nodded once. "This is not the first time that the Source has gone dark."

Narred arched an eyebrow and rubbed his finger along his crooked nose. "Shayra's said nothing of this."

"She doesn't know. The others hoard some of their secrets from her, and while she is more powerful than any single mind of our order, their coordinated efforts dwarf her ability," Leyassa explained. She wandered past Narred and put her own hand upon the crystal. "I have touched the smooth surface of the Source with eight different hands, Vol. No other Kem has led so many lives as I. I have been a part of our greatest victories and our greatest deceptions. I remember the day we obliterated the memory of the children that the Wyr ordered slain."

Narred winced. The most heinous crime in the Order of Kem was to destroy a memory... and the revelation that the order had conspired with the Wyr to do just that to the whole of Onus had nearly resulted in the complete destruction of their order. "An entire generation of children erased from the memory of their parents," he said softly. "An evil greater by far than anything Hyrak did on this world."

"Do not stand in judgment of me, boy," Leyassa said in a voice suddenly icy with contempt. "We did what was necessary. And it nearly destroyed us—not just in the modern day, but then. We were eradicating a generation of prospective hosts, after all. Even this body that I now share... had she been born a summer or two later, she too would have perished in that purge."

"What does this have to do with the Source?" Narred asked, trying to steer the conversation away from guilt and blame. He knew all too well that there were plenty of dark deeds that Leyassa could lay at his feet if they fell into a real argument.

She ran her fingers along the crystal again, this time leaving a trail of glimmering blue sparks just beneath the polished surface as she went. "We exhausted the Source in that working. Every Kem in the order working together, including those whose own children

were being lost or taken, is a mighty force. But all of us together were not enough to commit the great taboo upon every mind in the world. For that, we needed the Source... and we drained it dry in the doing."

Narred found his eyes drawn to the dark crystal column. "Yet it was fully restored within less than twenty years."

"It wants to exist," Leyassa said. "It greedily laps at the magic given to it, storing it away without loss, without leakage. In that regard, however, it is no different than the crystal core of the Soul. They are identical batteries, made for the storing of Kem magic—the only difference is that we chose to use one for one thing, and the other for another. The Collectress before your wife understood this better than most, and she ordered many of the minds from the Soul turned over to the Source."

"Is that why it was so easy to use the Source to trap the Obliviates?" Narred wondered aloud. "Because it had already been used to house intelligences before?"

"That is all it has ever done," Leyassa said softly. She drew her hands away from the surface, and the pale blue sparks that had danced within the crystal under her fingers faded. "It is just that we have used those minds inside the Source as fuel. It was a punishment for the wicked, or for those too tired or despondent to be invested into a new host. It is the noble sacrifice of two centuries of Kem that brought the Source back to life before... and it will be that same sacrifice that does so again."

"What if we just left it dark?" Narred asked. "Perhaps it is better to have no more murder on the conscience of your order."

"Then your wife will never be free of her title and its burdens, Vol. It is beyond the power of any mind to move the Vault of Personality from one host to another—it requires the collective power of a charged Source tower to facilitate that working." Leyassa fixed her penetrating gaze on Narred and added, "Shayra has sacrificed much of what made us special in service to the war. She could still make the decision to not ask the collective to restore the Source... none would fault her for it."

"That's not true," Narred said. "I would. I would fault her for turning her back on our only chance to move on from the duties that wear her away to nothing every day."

Leyassa inclined her head. "Then it is true? A new Collectress has been found?"

"A volunteer exists," Narred said carefully. "Even now, Shayra tries to convince the elders to accept her. I'm surprised you are not a part of those discussions."

The ancient Mindshaper smiled and shook her head. "I am Seventhost. None are

particularly interested in my wisdom. They would have sooner seen me fed to the Source, I think. I represent a flaw in the grand design of our order—though if Shayra has chosen not to share this with you, I will not be the one to bring you into that particular confidence.” She moved towards the door and then stopped just as she came within reach of Narred. Somewhat hesitantly, she added, “You do know that if your wife chooses prematurely, if she chooses a poor candidate for the title and responsibilities, the transfer will fail and the candidate will die while in direct mind-to-mind contact with Shayra. It is a special kind of death, a special kind of agony. I would not wish it upon the worst of us.”

“What about Forek?” Narred asked sharply. “Would you wish it upon him? Because it is his betrayal that has made Shayra believe that she must take extraordinary measures in what remains of this war. She thinks that all of you, your entire order, must atone for his misdeeds.”

“I do not need you to tell me of the crimes my son has committed,” Leyassa said solemnly. “Know that, should ever again his mind come into the custody of the crystal towers of Kem Nought, he will be fed immediately to the Source. It is the gravest punishment we possess, and he has earned it. Compassion and sympathy prompted me to advocate for his reinvestiture... and I have learned from that mistake. See to it that Shayra does as well. Reason must rule the day in the academy of the Mindshapers, not passion.”

She left the tower then, and Narred stood there watching her walk away. Her final words resonated with him. Was Shayra considering setting her duties aside out of logic and reason, or out of emotion and passion? Was it truly best to transition the leadership of the order in these tumultuous times, or was that simply the wish of a woman who longed to be free of such responsibilities? And how much had he influenced those feelings over their years together?

He took off towards the Soul tower at a sprint, hoping he could stop her before she told the elders about the candidate.

He couldn't allow her to do this.

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Shayra stood erect, looming over him as a radiant whirlwind of blue light spun around her body. Her eyes flared as her thoughts slammed into Narred's mind.

"You won't allow me?" she demanded. "Who do you think you are? You are my husband, not my keeper—not my master! It is I who rules in this place. It is I who decides what I may or may not do!" she intoned in hard, iron thoughts.

The moment Narred had burst into the tower, she had read his mind plainly and sequestered the two of them away inside her shields to talk without the intrusion of the elders. In the physical world, they stood silently, eyes locked, in the otherwise empty first floor of the Soul tower. But in the featureless plain of thoughtspace, she raged at him.

"Am I too late?" he asked, his voice steady in spite of the savage thrashing she had just given his mind.

"No," she said. "I told them that a candidate has come forward, but not yet who it is." Her anger was swiftly abating—she could feel the genuine regret and authentic concern radiating from his wounded mind. With a flicker of will she soothed those injuries and reached out her hand to him. He took it, and they embraced.

He whispered, "They will not let you stay your hand once they know."

"I have no wish to stay my hand," she replied. "This is our chance, beloved. And more—it is the chance for the Kem to finally become something new. To leave the darkness of our past behind us."

"Leyassa told me how the Source can be rekindled," Narred said. "She thinks it a secret from you, but I know you better than that. You already discovered the method?"

She nodded.

"Then the first step in forging a new way forward for the Kem is to murder a score or more of them to reignite the Source? That sounds no different than the paths taken by all those who have walked your road before, Shayra," he insisted.

She closed her eyes. She could feel the elders, the seven who lived in the vault of her mind and the few others of their stature that dwelt still in the Soul, probing at her mental shields. They hated secrets almost as much as she had grown to hate their incessant curiosity.

"Do you trust me?" she asked breathlessly. It was taking more of her magic to maintain her mental shields than she had expected.

"Of course. Always."

"Then let me do what must be done. I would not take this path had she not come to

me, willing and eager. She represents everything I have tried to bring about in the newest generation of investitures, beloved. She *is* what I can only play at being. She was born for this, and I will not be the one that stands between her and her destiny."

Narred hugged her more tightly and then kissed her. In those gestures, she had his assent. She willed them back to their bodies, dissolving the walls of thought that kept her active mind free of the elders of her order.

"Who is this candidate?" one of the disembodied demanded. "What game do you play at with your secrets, Collectress?"

Another voice added, "You care overmuch for secrets, and always have. Never before has a Collectress so relished in shutting out the wisdom of those who linger in the vaults of her mind."

"Your disappointment in me is well known by all assembled," Shayra retorted flippantly. "But I believe you are correct—the time to introduce you to the candidate is at hand." She sent out a swift thought to Leyassa, signaling to bring the would-be new Collectress to the tower. "We have to wait only a few minutes more to have your curiosity sated."

"This candidate is already within the walls of Kem Nought?" a third voice asked. "You concealed her from us? Why?"

"I wanted first to understand what it was she wanted in coming here. I did not want any of you attempting to unduly influence her."

A small chorus of defensive retorts rose up, but Shayra silenced them with a swift gesture and a flicker of her mystic power. "Enough! We all know it is so—you have tried before when others have come to this place. Your willingness to tamper and twist to accomplish your aims has never faltered."

They could not disagree with that fact, and so the assembly fell silent for a several minutes. Shayra kept her eyes fixed on the door, awaiting the arrival of her potential replacement. As she did so, Narred took her hand in his and squeezed it reassuringly. He said nothing, and he did not need to.

When the wait seemed unbearable, the simple door of the tower—made of wood, as the crystal that had previously been used was among the hundreds of pounds of the stuff that had been repurposed to aid in Obliviate containment—swung open. A small figure stepped through on confident, if slow, steps.

Anna Stein stood in the doorway of the Soul tower, her little hands clasped in front

of her. She wore a simple white gown, and her dark hair was combed back and shined with a few little gemstone barrettes that Leyassa had tucked into it.

The uproar in Shayra's mind was intense.

"Impossible! She is a child, too young to endure the transfer!"

"She has no magic—only a practitioner can serve as Collectress!"

"Only a mind still dwelling within its first body is suitable—is this child not a Secondhost?"

"Her father served Hyrak and the Rot—how do we know she does not share his sympathies?"

And more and more and more. There were many reasons to say no... and only one reason to say yes. None of the elders were seeing that reason, so Shayra would *make* them see.

"Listen!" she shouted, amplifying the word with her magic to still the babbling roar of thoughts filling the tower. "When you look upon her, you see a tiny child—you see Anna Stein, daughter of two Coreborn non-mystics who both, in spite of generations of evidence to the contrary, possess mystic abilities. This makes her an oddity, I suppose—but not our salvation. But you do not see what I see. I see Tatyana Harper, Child of the Line. I see a Kem of such latent skill that, untrained and unaided, she sheltered her dying mind in a completely unsuitable host body. She segmented her personality to protect that host mind from being overwhelmed. She arranged to transfer into the newly born body of this child, sustaining herself as a separate, whole entity all the while beneath the notice of even the most talented of our order. Don't you see? She is a Mindshaper who naturally, natively, possesses the abilities that we built an entire academy to support. And yes, her magic has been stripped away from her by the base arts of a Wyr—well we all know their treachery—but that changes nothing. The talent, the unique composition of her mind... that remains. All that she lacks is power. Power that will come to her alongside the Vault of Personality if we honor her request to take up the mantle of Collectress."

The voices stirred again, but this time they did so in deliberation. They asked questions of one another and of Shayra. She answered them calmly... but all the while, she kept her eyes on Anna's. After a few minutes, she knelt down before the girl and asked, aloud, "Do you wish to hear what they are thinking?"

Anna shook her head and said, "Just you."

Shayra inclined her head and opened a mental link between herself and the girl. "What is it?" she asked.

Anna explained, "Will you tell them one more thing for me?"

"Of course."

Anna drew in a deep breath and squeezed her hands into tight little fists. Then her thoughts flowed swiftly as she said, "Before I was reborn, the most terrifying thing in the world to me was the idea of being connected to others—all I wanted from my life was solitude. But the magic kept forcing me together with people—it *made* me connect. It made me reach out. And now... now, I am asking to never be alone again. I want that, because I know that there is another way. That we are better as a species when we work together. I want to lead the Kem into a new way of being, Shayra. I want to use our powers to build bridges, to unite and support and sustain one another, not to control and manipulate."

"I understand that," Shayra replied softly. "But you must realize that these are not the sorts of minds that tolerate change. They see nothing wrong with the way we have always done things. They see no need to grow."

"Then why do they get to vote?" Anna asked.

"What?"

"If we are making a decision about the future of the Order of Kem, why should those who care only to look to its past even get a say at all?" the little girl demanded.

"Because it is..." Shayra began... but her thoughts trailed off.

"The fact that it is how we did it before is exactly why we cannot do it that way any longer," Anna said. "Our pasts should inform our decisions... not dictate them. This is our chance to free the whole of the order from the burden of the traumas of our past."

"How?" Shayra asked. "I won't—I won't kill them."

"Of course not!" Anna replied in her mind, her little mouth falling open. "They are our history. That's important. I promise, I won't hurt them. But I need you to connect me to them."

"I can bring you into the thought channel with all of them," Shayra said. "So you can explain—"

"No," Anna said aloud. In her mind, she elaborated, "Connect me to them, please."

Direct mind links. To all of them."

Shayra's eyes opened wide. "So many links at once, without arts of your own—there will be fusion. Permanent links will form."

"I know," Anna said. "I promise you, it will be OK."

"You'll be lost—your personality will be swarmed under by theirs. They are elders, with collective centuries of life experience and marshaled power that rivals your mother's. Don't ask me to do this."

"You promised me that you had a way to give me back my magic—that if I took another mind into mine, their magic would come with it. I countered that I would be willing to take them all, to become Collectress. This is how I intend to do it, Shayra. I don't need the vault. I learned how to do that myself. I won't be lost in them... but they will be lost in me."

"I don't see how that is possible," Shayra muttered aloud.

"I am the Kem Child of the Line," Anna explained. "No matter what my mother may think, it is me, not her. I can do things that no other Kem can do. I put myself back together from the brink of death, from a hundred pieces scattered across two worlds. I can do this, too."

Closing her eyes, Shayra reached out with her magic and began the working. She set aside the normally delicate arts required to form a safe mental link, for the desired link here was not safe at all. She worked swiftly and without caution, and the working was done before any of the elder minds even knew what it was she was doing.

As she finished, Anna collapsed to the ground, her entire body convulsing and a piercing scream flying from her little lips. It was a cry so loud, so horrible, that it drowned out every other sound and every other thought.

Leyassa burst in through the door and scooped up the girl. She fixed hard eyes on Shayra and asked, "What did you do?"

"I either changed everything we know about mindshaping," Shayra said softly, "or I drove a little girl irrevocably insane."

"How will we know which it was?" Narred asked.

As if on cue, Anna's screaming stopped.

That was when Shayra noticed that the background babble of minds and thoughts in

the Soul had gone quiet as well. She cast a quick, probing thought out to the crystalline core of the tower... and found it empty.

Heart racing, she investigated her own mind—plumbing the depths of the vault in her mind. It too was empty.

Cautiously, she brushed her thoughts against Anna's mind...

There was nothing there.

No thoughts.

No emotions.

Nothing.