

Chapter Twenty One

The walk to the castle, which had felt so pleasant in the warm sunshine on Kevin's previous visit, seemed to go on for ever. As he and Tanji approached the castle, the rain appeared to get heavier, as if each drop itself contained more and harder water than before. There were disturbing noises just audible over the howl of the wind and the hiss of the rain on the grass, which made both Kevin and Tanji jump on several occasions. Kevin managed to convince himself that the sounds were just those of the waves on the rocks, or made by seabirds, or maybe just sheep.

In the dark, the castle loomed ahead of them suddenly, emerging from the rain-swept night like an oil-tanker from a fog-bank. Kevin could remember something of the layout of the place from his previous visit. He pulled Tanji closer, placing his mouth at the opening of her hood and speaking into her ear.

"Have you ever been here before?" he asked.

"What did you say?"

Kevin repeated himself, speaking louder than he really wanted, in order to be heard above the noise of the rain.

"No," she admitted, almost shouting the word into Kevin's ear in return.

"Ok, well, I think it's this way to the gatehouse. There's a slope up here, if we follow the path."

They made their way into the castle, sensing the shelter from the elements provided by the lower archways and gatehouse. Gravel crunching underfoot, they cautiously made their way out of the rain. Mercifully there was no portcullis or drawbridge, thought Kevin, as last of the water ran down his face, completing the task of thoroughly soaking the sweater underneath his now-ineffective hi-tech jacket.

"This way," whispered Kevin, tugging Tanji's arm, "I think there's somewhere we can shelter down here."

They felt their way down worn stone steps made slippery with rain, and into a dark opening in the stonework. Kevin had spotted this entrance on his previous visit, but had been unable to explore it. He thought again about the uncharacteristic behaviour of old frog-face Ricard when he tried to come down this way. He really did not want me to look in here, he thought.

Anyone around would have heard them arrive, from the crunch of their footsteps on the gravel path and stone flags, if it was not for the downpour. But there had been no signs of pursuit, no shouts and no lights, nothing to indicate that they had been followed. I may be speaking too soon, thought Kevin, but we may just have given them the slip.

Tanji pulled back her hood and shook her head, and water started dripping onto the stone flags beneath their feet. She twitched her cloak with her left hand, and made a series of gestures with her right. The sudden increase in the drops falling to the floor told Kevin that the magic was working here. He sagged to the floor, the sense of relief momentarily overwhelming him. Tanji squatted beside him, leaning herself against him. He enjoyed the sensation, but he was unsure whether it was for support or companionship.

“I think we’ve lost them”, he whispered.

“I think you’re right. But what are we to do now?”

“Let’s catch our breath”, he suggested, adding, “I mean, let’s rest for a short while,” when he sensed, rather than saw, Tanji’s confusion.

“OK”, she replied, wearily, “But we will have to think of something really soon.”

Out of the wind and the rain, and already feeling much warmer, he wiped the water from his eyes. He could begin to make out the familiar orange lights in the stone forming the walls on either side. The magic sparkles did not emit very much light, but at least the sprites provided enough illumination to make out the boundaries of room they were in. In fact, he realised as he looked around, it was not so much a room as a short narrow corridor, with what looked like a junction ahead.

Tanji had pulled her magic slate from her bag, the surface of which glowed slightly in the dark, and was rapidly penning a short note. In English, Kevin noticed, and to her regular correspondent. She finished writing, then gestured rapidly and the words faded. She then started a second note, this time one which he could not understand. This was completed just as quickly, and was dispatched with, Kevin noted, a slightly different command.

He stood and, gripping Tanji lightly by the arm, he moved forward as quietly as he could. On reaching the T-junction, he peered cautiously in each direction, but could see nothing except empty hallways, although with no visible doors or openings. On a whim, he turned into the corridor on the left, and set off, moving as quickly and as quietly as he could.

Tanji, who was following closely behind him, pulled him up short.

“Where are we going?” she demanded in a whisper.

“I don’t know. But it must go somewhere, and it’s out of the weather.”

Tanji had noticed that the sound of the wind and rain was much more subdued here, even though the entrance was only a few paces behind them.

“It feels like we are underground,” she whispered.

“Yes,” replied Kevin, “It’s more like a tunnel than a corridor.”

The tunnel was not quite as dark as Kevin had expected, and he noticed a soft glow emanating from around the bend ahead. He squeezed Tanji’s hand to attract her attention, and gestured to her for silence. Moving extremely carefully, he edged his way towards the corner. He listened for a full minute, which always seems like an age when nothing is happening, standing completely motionless and breathing through his open mouth. He could hear nothing, except for the sound of his own heartbeat. Eventually, he slid along the wall to the corner, and looked around the doorframe.

The room inside was deserted, and brightly illuminated, but Kevin could not make out the source of the light. This source-less lighting was by now familiar to him, having seen it in operation almost everywhere on Lyndesfarne. He beckoned to Tanji, who joined him at the entrance. They looked around, blinking in the unaccustomed light. He could see nothing but rough stone walls, and a single archway which had clearly been walled up long ago.

“So why is this area lit up?” Kevin asked Tanji, in a whisper.

“I am not sure”, she responded, “but I have an idea.”

She moved to the side of the blocked arch, where she closely inspected something on the wall. Kevin thought he could make out a few of the Lyndesfarne symbols, which appeared almost invisible against the stonework. In fact, he thought, the writing looks like it’s floating just in front of the wall.

“What is it?” he asked softly.

“It’s a portal. It is dormant at the moment, though.”

“One of those travel things?” Kevin asked.

“Yes. You have heard of them?”

“Well, yes. Professor Alan said something about them, in one of my orientation briefings. He didn’t say much though, as if it wasn’t very important.”

“Portals, not important?” Tanji practically squeaked in indignation. Kevin flapped his hands at her urgently, to remind her to keep her voice down.

“They are used everywhere here,” she continued, more quietly, “But these level-five portals are infrequently needed, so let me try and awaken it.”

Standing back from the archway, she embarked on a complex sequence of gestures. Kevin thought he could make out the signs for ‘open’ and ‘alarm’, but could not follow the entire structure of the command.

Looking at the differences in the stonework inside the archway, Kevin suddenly realised he had seen this kind of thing before, in the garden of the hostel he had frequented in the past. With a flash of insight, he realised that the hostel courtyard did indeed contain a portal, and that people frequently travelled to and fro from inside the walled garden. Well, thought Kevin, that explained the number of people passing through the courtyard.

“Aha!” Tanji exclaimed.

Kevin became aware of a gentle ticking noise, quite slow and slightly irregular at first. The ticks speeded up, becoming more even, and began to sound rather like a louder version of the mechanism of the old pocket watch Kevin had been given by his Grandfather.

“Is it working?” he asked.

“Yes, I think so” she replied.

“How can you tell?”

“Here, let me show you.”

Tanji took his hand and pressed it on the stones of the wall. Kevin had not noticed any visible change to the wall in front of him, but his fingers encountered something very slightly warm, very soft and completely yielding. Just like, he thought, sliding my hand into a warm bubble-bath, inexplicably held vertically.

“But where does it go?” he asked, warily.

“I really don’t know. There are no signs anywhere, at least that I can see. But it’s probably a short hop to a local junction. We can get our bearings there.”

“I’ve not been through one of these before,” Kevin replied, unable to keep the nervousness out of his voice, “What’s it like?”

Tanji laughed. “It’s just a big step, really. You won’t feel a thing.”

She saw that Kevin was not entirely reassured by her explanation. She smiled, and reached out to him.

“Here, let me hold your hand. Come on, let’s go!”

Hand in hand, they stepped into the archway and were gone.

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*My dearest Kithyn,
Excuse my haste, but I really do not know what is going on. It is so
confusing. No time to explain now.
Kevin and I are back in Lyndesfarne. I am not sure where we will
end up, but I would like to talk to you in person. I need some
advice, badly. You are the only person I feel I can trust.
I will write again soon, when I can. Your old friend, Tanji.*