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The Hidden Kingdom

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PROLOGUE

. . . As the long arc of time passes over us envious eyes and the lost and bitter souls of the damned look on in agonized fury... and remember.

They remember the small joys of our green and mortal world. They remember the sunlight that plays through the leaves on a summer afternoon. They remember the slope of a beautiful neck and the turn of a smiling face. They remember the laughter of a child and the dappled pattern on the skin of a leopard. They remember a cool patch of light under cherry trees in blossom near running water. They remember the moon and the stars, they remember and rage at all they have lost and remember too how much they would like to take it all back from us. This is a hunger which gnaws at them and which never goes away

Our world edges against theirs in many places, the depths of dark mountains full of fire, and the deepest caverns beneath the sea. The paths and the destinies of time cross one another continually, and every so often a tiny crack opens between them. When that happens, a demon soul wriggles out, like a smudge, a flicker of poisonous smoke, and it comes forth from the darkness to raise a mortal army and try to take it all back for themselves.

It is rare for this to happen, perhaps only once in many thousands of years. It is of course always remembered by some but such an event is never expected, and there are

few now that still believe in the possibility, except of course for the Hidden Kingdom, the network that waits within every generation. Like sleepers in a cave they wait and are watchful for the summons of the light. They are the scattered sentinels, the guards of our mortal freedom and they know that only one soul in that whole vast place may summon the light, and for that to happen the sword and the helm must be brought together and raised up by only that one pair of hands…

….Among the dark souls of the damned, down in the heat and darkness of Hades among the seven principle Demons there was once one other. It was she who sought to sustain and defend our world and The Hidden Kingdom. She was exiled by the seven remaining demons and she is free now, a bride of snow and ice. She is the white bride, and hers is a beauty like no other. When she rises up into the sky and begins her annual dance among her whirling flakes and ice crystals she is both winter and vigilance. She can love a mortal man but must not be spoken of. Her love, when won, will be an ecstatic dance for all eternity…

From The Seventh Scroll

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Our world edges against theirs in many places: the depths of dark mountains full of fire, and the deepest caverns beneath the sea. Destiny and the paths of time cross one another continually, and every so often a tiny crack opens between them. When that happens, a demon soul wriggles out, like a smudge, a flicker of poisonous smoke, and it comes forth from the darkness to raise a mortal army and try to take it all back for themselves.

It is rare for this to happen, perhaps only once in many thousands of years. It is always remembered by some, but such an event is never expected, and there are few now that still believe in the possibility—except, of course, for the Hidden Kingdom, the network that waits within every generation. Like sleepers in a cave they wait and are watchful for the summons of the light. They are the scattered sentinels, the guards of our mortal freedom, and they know that only one soul in that whole vast place may summon the light, and for that to happen the sword and the helm must be brought together and raised up by only that one pair of hands . . .

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From The Seventh Scroll

Chapter One

Osamu, the Prince

Prince Osamu woke suddenly to the howling of wolves. He stirred, and sat up just a little in the darkness, bleary-eyed. The wolves howled again. He slumped back, then sighed, and lazily stretched out his arm.

'What?' he said, his voice slurred with sleep.

Ayah shook him again and then she stood back with her head bowed.

The cloud of soft pillows around his head crackled. The pillows had been woven from fine linen. They looked as coarse as rough canvas, but were as soft as fine silk to touch. They released a delicate scent as his head moved. This was matched by lingering traces of the precious oil which had been carefully rubbed into his fine skin the night before; skin that had rarely been touched by direct sunlight.

He opened his eyes, looked up and saw his servant, Ayah. She was standing by his bed and she looked ridiculous. She was holding up an elaborate old-fashioned bronze storm lantern, and she had his hardly-worn outdoor hooded cloak, all edged and lined with wolf fur,

draped across her own narrow shoulders. He was aware then of vivid blue-and-white sparks of snow, spinning past the dark windows. It was long before dawn, but she had already wrenched aside the heavy curtain.

Ayah, with her head still bowed, pushed at him again, prodded him at arm's length, her face averted, as if he were something fearful and dangerous, a bombard of blasting powder that might explode in her face.

'Must dress *now*,' she said, 'there is no time.'

'What on earth—' he mumbled, but Ayah put down the lantern and dashed forward before he could finish. She pulled him roughly by his arm from the bed with surprising strength. Their shadows leapt together across the fine gold mosaics on the wall, and he tumbled pale and naked into the lantern light on the floor.

She bowed again, and her voice was half bullying, and half respectful.

'Dress, now.'

She knelt quickly, grabbed his wrist and the lantern, then straightened up and pulled him. She walked backwards, with her feet straddled on either side of him. His protesting feet pushed through the furs and animal skins scattered across the cold marble floor. He felt humiliated and ridiculous as she tugged him along. She quickly stood the lantern on a richly-lacquered cabinet next to a line of his favourite ceramic pots. The edge of the lantern hit one of the pots and sent it tumbling to the floor where it smashed into pieces. She didn't

apologize, but tore the cabinet drawers open, pulling each drawer further out than the last. She scattered clothes from the drawers in their silken wrappings, and threw them at him.

'Dress *now*,' she repeated, her eyes averted.

'Ayah!' he shouted finally, in a fury. 'What on earth is going on? Look at what you have done! That pot is smashed!'

Another figure swam into view in the golden nimbus of the storm lantern. Her head was not bowed. It was Ayah's daughter, Lissa, a rough girl of his own age. Her black hair was tied tightly in a long practical plait, and her face was as pale as the moon. She was dressed in tight hunting clothes, coarsely-sewn buckskins and furs, and she looked down at him, appraising him frankly. If he had not known better he would have sworn that there was real contempt in her look.

'I will have you both killed for this this . . . insult,' he whined.

Lissa pulled him roughly to his feet. He rushed to cover himself as best he could, feeling embarrassed in front of his servant and her daughter, who both seemed to be so mysteriously intent on signing their own death warrants.

'Dress,' Lissa said firmly. 'There is no time.' She grabbed a pair of quilted winter trousers, shook them free of their gold wrapping, and thrust them at him. Then she took some boots and slammed them on the

floor. 'There is no time to explain,' she said, 'you must dress and come with me now. Here!' She took his cloak from around her mother's shoulders and held it out for him as if he were a little child, fresh from the bath, ready to step into a warmed towel.

He stuffed himself as fast as he could into the trousers; anything to hide himself, to put himself on an equal footing with the women. Ayah knelt, quickly coaxed his pale feet into thick socks, and then pulled the soft leather hunting boots over them. He saw now that she was crying. Big tears rolled down her face. She straightened and pulled first a thick silk singlet, and then a quilted tunic over his head, and tugged it firmly in place, her eyes still streaming.

Lissa wrapped the hunting cloak about his shoulders and then pushed him forward and out through the half-open mirrored door which concealed Ayah's own discreet doorway to his chambers.

He looked back with one last hurried glance at the chaos of his normally calm and ordered room, and the deep cobalt fragments of the pot scattered across the floor. He was pushed out of the door and pulled along the narrow corridor that led behind the glass. Lissa walked in front of him and Ayah behind, as they snaked in secret parallel to the grand public corridor that he knew and used daily. Here the walls were dull, rough-cast, and gloomy, and only the wobbling amber light of the lantern picking out Lissa's boots showed the

way through. He had never been in this space in all his eighteen years.

They paused at what he realized must be Ayah's own private bedchamber. A simple bed was tucked neatly into an alcove. It was draped over with heavy blankets and a thin, gaudily-patterned cheap fabric. A pair of worn leather slippers lay side by side next to the bed. This was the cramped dark space where Ayah had slept every night for most of his life. A single golden icon, an image of the prince, hung over the bed on the rough wall. Ayah took it down. She held his shoulders firmly and turned him to face her. He looked into her wet eyes, which were solemn and dark. His anger had faded now to a muddled confusion and rising fear.

'Lissa will take you now,' she said quietly. 'The time has come for you to obey her in all things—no one else can save you, only her. No one else can save us, only you. You must trust her in everything. You will never see me again. I have tended you since your birth, now all of that has ended. There is no time now to explain, you have trusted me all these years and now the time has come and you must trust her.' She pulled his neck down so that his head was level with hers. She kissed him twice, once on each cheek, her eyes streaming. 'Nice boy's beard,' she added with a fond half-smile, stroking his smooth cheek.

'Ayah,' he said, quietly, 'what the hell is all of this?'

'Go,' she said, shaking her head, 'now.'