

No Present Like Time

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CHAPTER 1

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On this soft night I followed the Moren River valley, flying back to the Castle, hearing the chimes of clock towers in the Plainslands villages as I passed high above.

The night air was shapeless, I couldn't sense any current. I concentrated, flapping steadily on, marking distance by time, marking time by going through all the songs I know. I lay horizontally, looking down around me, cruising with stiff, shallow beats. I felt the air rushing between my feathers on the upstroke. Then I pulled my wings down again, the feathers flattened, the tight muscles moved around my waist.

Thermals were dissipating as the sun set. I was dropping altitude to find them and the work was getting harder. Fog was forming, low in the pasture and along the river bank. The tops of the valley sides were dark shapes rising from the mist like islands. Beyond, I could see parallel hills all the way out to the beginning of Donaise. Hedges and dry stone walls looked like black seams separating fields of clean, lapping white mist. There was no sound, just the skeleton zip of my wings peeling back the air.

I spotted a point of light in the distance, like a city, and checked my compass – bearings dead on for the Castle and hopefully there would be some supper left. The speck resolved into a cluster of lights, then each cluster separated again, and distances between them seemed to grow as I got closer. Lights slipped from the horizon down towards me, until I was over Demesne village. Streetlights shone up, picking the mist out in flat beams. Denser wisps blew past, curling, and the fog began to take on a shape of its own.

The fog changed everything. Fog covered the river's reflective surface, meandered to the water meadows. Fog poured between the cultivar yew plantations and spiky poplar coppices where tomorrow's bows and arrows were painstakingly being grown. Fog drifted over the roofs of the village where most of the Castle's staff live. It pooled on the carp ponds, stole into the tax barns and settled on the market's thatched roof. It cloaked the watermill, the aqueduct's dark arches, Hobson's stable and the Blacksmith's yard. Fog overran the Castle's outermost boundaries. It

advanced through the archery fields, lay in the tilting lists, rolled over the tennis courts. It muffled the concert hall and the bath-house complex.

One of the Castle's spires was silhouetted against a white light, which suffused into the mist in an immense grisaille sphere. The floodlights were on in the amphitheatre. They only illuminated the sharp Northeast Tower, its black sarcen stone striking in the whiteout. Features became visible as I closed the distance. The Castle's vast bulk was obscured, occasionally angular roofs and the crenellated tops of walls appeared, fragmentary, through the mist. The square base of the round tower was submerged two metres deep into a sea of fog. I flew through thicker patches – then it looked as if it was receding on the plains. On a whim, three hundred years ago, the Architect had encrusted her studio in the turret with sculptures. Eagles, storks and eels loomed out of the mist, with her company's logo and the tools of her trade in stonework blackened by kitchen smoke. The windows bristled with deep, tangled marble ivy so realistic that birds were nesting in it.

Fog cold in my eyes and throat like clouds. A smell from the kitchens of wood smoke, roast beef and dishwater had caught in it. A faint cream-scent of chestnut blossom from the avenue tainted it. Burnt whale oil from the floodlights saturated it, turning the fog into smog.

Storeys and gable roofs and towers rose behind towers. The spaces under the buttresses were filled with tracery. The Carillon Courtyard had a lawn mowed in wide stripes and a roof that had been covered in scaffolding for eight decades. On the steeplejack's walkway was a wooden treadmill twice as tall as a man, used to raise loads of Ladygrace stone. Its basket hung from the rope wound on its axle.

Two centuries ago, I thought the North Façade was a cliff face formed by the power of nature. I had tilted my head until I thought I would fall over backwards, but I still couldn't see the top of its spire. I had crouched on the hard grass a few hundred metres away, looked up and realised – all the crevices are carvings. The cliff-ledges are parapets. Statues of idealised immortals, pinnaform spires embroidered with vertical lace. The glory of the Emperor, god's governor of the Fourlands. It had made my neck ache.

I flew an assured path around walls flaking masonry, mottled with moss. I passed pinnacles decorated with ball flowers. The Finials, a memorial sculpture, was a row of scalloped arches resting on free-standing black marble shafts. It carried the signatures of Eszai, people who through their peerless talents have won immortality, a

place in the Circle and reside here. Graffiti scarred the arches, the names of immortals past and present; I had incised CJS & TW 1892 in a love heart on the highest topstone.

Now invisible in the mist, the gravel courtyard at the foot of the Finials encircled a statue of Dunlin, recently the King of Awia. I had ordered it to be placed there with the statues of other great warriors so that he would always be remembered.

The tall Aigret Tower seemed to drift in the mist and I sheared through it. It was the Slake Cross Battle cenotaph, square openwork, completely hollowed out to a lantern of air. At every level its pillars were thicker at the top than at the bottom, so they looked like they were dripping down – melting. It had no walls, its pillars were backed by those of a second and third tower nested inside; through its worn bird-boned latticework I flew without breaking pace.

Small, indistinct groups of people were heading along the avenue in the direction of the duelling ground. Some carried oil lamps, their golden light-points bounced away into the distance. Next to the floodlights' white glare, a whole crowd of lanterns was gathering. I must take a look and see what's happening. Standing on one wing I bent my knees and turned. The ground tilted sharply as I dropped onto the Castle's roof-forest, like a wasp into a very ornate flower. I swept in so low over the barbican that my wingtips touched, made a sharp right, narrowly missing the lightning rod. Airstream roared in my ears as I dived towards the duelling ground, wondering if I could see well enough to land safely.

Fog drifted with me over the low roof of the adjoining gymnasium, and a second later poured from the open mouths of a dozen gargoyles carved in the shape of serene kings like chess pieces, which leaned out, face down, over ornamental gardens. I flew through one of the streams, taking a shower in the damp fog. As I glided in on fixed wings, vortices curled off my wingtips so I left two spiral trails.

The duelling ground is inside a large amphitheatre with high, half-timbered walls topped by flagpoles. The fog had not yet smothered them but it rose up the outside like water climbing around a sinking ship – the oval building looked as if it was sliding down into the invisible earth.

Four floodlights stood at the edges of the amphitheatre, on ten-metre high iron scaffolds. I circled the nearest floodlight, feet dangling, and settled onto its metal housing. I shook wisps of fog from my wings and pulled them around me, stood cloaked in long feathers.

The shade was very hot. I shuffled to the front and perched on the edge. The only noise was the oil lamps' hissing. Above and around, all was dark – but the pitch below was bathed in light. Two figures in the centre were swiping at each other with rapier and dagger.

There was Gio Serein, the Circle's Swordsman. When I was growing up in Hacilith, he was the immortal with the biggest fan club. Every child who wielded a stick pretended to be Serein and plenty of teenagers had aspirations to fight him. This could only be a Challenge. I peered closer to see who could possibly go a round with him. It was a young Awian lad, who held his stubby dark wings half spread. His flight feathers were clipped in zigzags, the current fashion, making them lighter. Short brown hair was shaved at the sides and stuck up in sweaty spikes on top. For agility, he only wore a shirt and breeches. His sweat-patched shirt was fyrd-issue, dark blue of the Tanager Select infantry. He wore a glove on his left hand, grasping the rapier hilt. He moved as if he was made of springs.

Serein had his knuckles upwards and thumb on his rapier blade to make strong wrist blows. The stranger caught one on his dagger, thrust it wide, went in underneath with dagger and rapier. Serein struck back, low, with a cry.

The newcomer swept it aside, made a feint to the face, jabbing twice and again Serein gave ground, keenly aware of his body's position. He ran in again and scuffed up some sawdust with his leather pump. The Awian was wise to that trick; he parried the thrust. Metal slid over metal with a grinding swish.

I glanced up and the size of the crowd held my attention. The twenty-tier-high banked stands were crammed to capacity and more people arrived every minute, blowing out their lanterns, shoving a path down the walkways to sit on the steps and lean against the posts. Gazing around, I couldn't see any space where I could join them.

Directly opposite was a canopied box with the best view of the ground. The Emperor San was seated on a chair in the centre, watching the two fighters impassively and completely without expression. One thin hand rested on his knees, the other was curled on the armrest. His face was shadowed by the gold awning, thin magisterial features framed by white hair that hung loose to his shoulders. If San was out of the Throne Room this must be really important. I folded my wings neatly so the tips crossed at my back, and bowed my head in case he was watching.

On the Emperor's left, Tornado, the Castle's Strongman, was so big he filled that side of the box, peering out with his head somewhere in the cover. On his right, Mist, the Sailor, stood with a great big grin on her face, her hands on wide hips under a white cashmere jumper. Rayne, the Doctor, sat with her assistants on a bench at the side of the ground, ready to intervene if anything went wrong. I recognised many of my fellow immortals scattered through the crowd, all intent on the duellists. Well, I thought, it wouldn't be a new year if Serein didn't have another Challenger, but usually his supporters in the crowd bellowed and cheered and hissed. This time there was a breathlessness in the air.

The duellists walked in a circle, marshalling their strength. Watching tensely. Both had their sword-tips horizontal in third guard, daggers in their right hands held out straight to the right side. Footprints turned the sand dark in a ring where they trod. They must have been at it for ages; their clothes were wet and the sand was damp with sweat.

Serein thrust, knees flexed. The Awian traversed sideways and Serein's swept hilt nearly caught on his tightly taped sleeve. They never lost eye contact; I knew what that was like. Head up and body in balance, keep all the moves in your peripheral vision no matter how bright the steel is, cutting round your head.

Serein made his slicing arc too wide. The Awian jabbed at his stomach. Serein was forced back. The Awian jumped forward, thrust sword arm and leg out, aimed for the hamstring behind Serein's knee. Serein parried but his blade sloped. The Awian's rapier glanced off, he directed it to Serein's calf. Serein moved away fast. Top move! Yes! Eat your heart out, Serein! I bounced up and down on the floodlight housing until the whole thing shuddered.

Sorry.

They set to circling again, obviously exhausted but trying to see what chinks it might open in each other's guard. They tried to spot any recurring foibles, to predict and use them. They were perfectly synchronised, reading the timing from each other's eyes. Seeing through the feints. Every time Serein sought a way to break out, the newcomer was with him, close like a shadow through every strategy.

Serein shifted into second guard, spun the dagger so the blade was below his hand, took a swipe across the Awian's face. Crash, crash! They moved apart. Serein has spent his life studying the art of killing. Why hasn't he won yet? His footprints on

the sand traced out one of his geometrical charts. He was using every trick he knew and he was getting nowhere.

Some people climbed up on the roof and lit the last floodlight. If the duellists registered the white glare intensify, they didn't react. They concentrated on thrust and parry, leant in with both hands at once, dagger blocking rapier. A spray of sweat drops flew from Serein's fair hair as he flicked it back.

My floodlight was a good vantage point. Moreover, being half Rhydanne I could see movements faster than the flatlanders can, so I saw Serein's cuts; to the other spectators they must be a blur. This was Serein slowed by fatigue, I knew how impossibly fast he moves when fresh, because he's beaten me black and blue with a buttoned rapier before now.

Serein was two metres tall, his substantial arms were hard with tired muscle. He bared teeth in a snarl as he screamed at himself inwardly: concentrate! Even at this distance I could read the frustration in his pale eyes: why won't you yield? Why can't I hit you? He kept turning hatred into big, angry slashes that his opponent just leafed aside with dagger, his rapier in front narrowing the angle of attack. They were both as good as it was physically possible to be. The outcome depended on who would slip up first, or simply stop, ground down by exhaustion. Perhaps Serein was slightly more cautious than the boy, because he had more to lose.

Serein made two crown cuts to the boy's head, lunged for his feet. The boy tried to catch the blade in his dagger quillions, missed.

This kid has been around, I decided. He fights like an immortal. I had been flying on my own for days and my whole body was alert to their moves. I had been in remote Darkling, which made me conscious of the crowd.

There was the Archer. Lightning stood closest to the duellists, leaning on the crush barrier staring rapt at them. A wide Micawater-blue scarf was draped around his shoulders and a quiver of white-flighted arrows at his hip. He has the physique of a cast-bronze statue. The willpower of one, too, and to be honest their sense of humour as well. This century he is less glacial than usual, because he has been enlivened by another hopeless love affair. It was easy to see him; the surrounding crowd kept a respectful distance. Though they all stood shoulder-to-shoulder, Lightning was on his own.

I swept off my perch with my wings held right back, down to the edge of the pitch and landed neatly next to him. ‘Who’s the Challenger?’

Lightning smiled without turning, ‘Welcome back, Jant. How was the road from Scree?’

‘Very foggy. Who is he?’

‘That young man is Wrenn, a career soldier from Summerday. He left the Queen’s guard and made his formal Challenge to Serein last week.’

‘Is that why the Emperor called me back?’

Lightning looked at me for the first time, ‘No. Don’t mention it in public – San has work for us. I was also recalled, and I am not at all happy about it, since I had to leave my betrothèd’s side.’

(Lightning is the only person I know who still puts the è in betrothèd.)

‘Wrenn looks like a fyrd captain.’

‘He is. He made a name for himself in the town. He’s working his way up through the ranks, and I think being such a fantastic swordsman has made him quite unpopular. Courtiers scent rumours and seek him out to prove themselves, but Wrenn refuses to know when to lose. He gave Veery Carniss more of a flaying than a duelling scar. If he was nobility, he could have been promoted higher. It’s a shame; I suppose he was frustrated by the cut-glass ceiling which is why he’s trying a Challenge.’

‘They both look tired.’

‘Jant, they started at six o’clock.’

‘Shit!’

Lightning gestured at the crowd, ‘Long enough for the Eszai and the whole of Demesne village to join us. Hush now. He’s such a short boy, I don’t know how he keeps going.’

There was no blood on the sawdust, ‘Four hours and they haven’t touched each other?’

‘They’ve broken a sword each, though. Sh!’

Wrenn had obviously trained in broadsword techniques as well as the ideal figures of fencing. An overhead blow down to the face, a thrust to the belly, adapted to the duellist’s weapons designed by humans for settling disputes between themselves in their city.

Winning is all. The Castle's constitution is simple; two men on a field and by the end of the day one of them will be immortal, and the other may as well be down among the dead men.

They used identical rapiers, damascene blades with the same length and heft, issued by the Castle to ensure the Challenge is fair. The Challenger is allowed to set the time of the competition, but the challenged immortal decrees the type of contest. Serein was formerly a fencing master; he had popularised the art across the Plainslands and Morenzia. Four centuries ago, he won his place in the Circle by broadsword combat but since then he usually stipulated that Challengers use his accustomed rapier and poniard.

Wrenn was so thickset that I could tell the long blade hadn't been chosen to favour him, but he had no problems wielding it. He cut straight at Serein's chest.

Serein flung both hands up and bounded back. He landed in high guard, with both blades pointing at Wrenn's face. Wrenn ducked below them to attack – he flattened himself to the floor, one leg out behind, lunged forward with the rapier at arm's length.

Serein got low to thrust, but Wrenn was quick to his feet. Serein stood still, parried with dagger, thrust with sword. Wrenn pulled his cut to keep out of distance. He thrust under Serein's arm.

'That's three from the left,' muttered Lightning. 'He'll change now.'

That's what Wrenn wanted us to think. He attacked from the left. He traversed to the opposite leg and changed dagger grip, so the blade was down. He leant in, back straight, made a wide sweep, but too close and almost ran onto Serein's rapier. The crowd inhaled, expecting a double kill, but Wrenn, off balance, gave ground and the two began to circle again.

Wrenn launched a heavy cut to Serein's shoulder.

If this was me, I would –

Serein jumped and stopped it with just his dagger before it gained momentum.

– Well, I wouldn't do that.

Then he tried to kick Wrenn in the balls.

Wrenn leapt away, threw his weight back and returned a reverse thrust at the same time.

I gasped. I'd never seen a fencer move that accurately before.

Serein couldn't turn inside the thrust, and retreated, face sallow. He allowed his rapier point to drop from guard for the first time. It gave Wrenn time to rally, he tried a cleaving blow. Serein beat it aside, turned his sword and cut at Wrenn's exposed hand. Wrenn backed off just fast enough to keep his hand. He parried, the dagger coming up beneath his rapier for support. He lifted Serein's blade, but Serein snatched it free. Wrenn faced Serein squarely, his whole body curved into a hollow, his middle held away and his left foot down securely.

They found new strength, remembering that they're fighting for immortality. San forbids his immortals to kill their Challengers, although genuine accidents happen now and again. Serein looked furious at how long this was taking, he was channelling all his brilliance at getting first blood from the young man.

Of course, no money Serein's novices could offer him would lead him to reveal his finest moves. He never taught his students enough for them to Challenge him. But it seemed that Wrenn had reinvented all Serein's techniques from scratch, and added his own innovations.

Serein deliberately made an out-of-distance attack, trying to draw Wrenn in. Wrenn was having none of it, he kept his body well away. Serein tried a better angle, this time Wrenn's dagger parried low. Serein's rapier drove straight at it. The blades shunted together. Serein punched his swept hilt at Wrenn's fist. The dagger shot from Wrenn's stunned hand like a dart.

Wrenn did not look for it but changed his rapier to his right hand, wringing his fingers. He was at a serious disadvantage. Serein's eyes tracked Wrenn's expression as he designed a smile.

'It's only a matter of time –' Lightning said.

Wrenn knocked Serein's rapier up with his sword's forte, sliced. Serein kept out of the way. His confidence peaked; he could just wait.

'– Serein will stick him like a pig.'

Wrenn made a straight thrust in quarte, Serein turned it easily. Everyone watched Serein beating Wrenn back across the releager, step by step until they were right underneath the Emperor's box. Wrenn was beginning to look from Serein's rapier to dagger, and I could see his mouth was open.

Serein was lining up a way to end this. He feinted with the dagger, swung his rapier round in an outside moulinet for force, straight down at Wrenn's head.

And Wrenn stepped into the blow.

He caught the inside of Serein's hand on the grip with his own wrist, forced it aside. His rapier arrested Serein's dagger and he stretched that arm fully to the other side. He tilted his blade; the tip lowered to Serein's throat. Serein struggled, stopped. Face to face they were so close their chests nearly touched. Wrenn looked Serein straight in the eyes, made an almost imperceptible movement of the point and a red trickle ran down below the Swordsman's larynx, between his collar bones into the front of his shirt. First blood.

Wrenn punched both arms into the air. 'Yes!' he yelled. 'I did it! I really fucking did it!'