

YOU ARE NOT
WHAT YOU THINK YOU ARE

THE
Lightwatch
CHRONICLES

You instinctively know that there is more to this reality than you were told,
and you're looking for answers.

You feel that you're different from the rest, and you are called to create a
difference in the world.

You're tired of standing alone.

What readers are saying

“From the outset, this book had me hooked, I felt an instant rapport with the characters. The story is breathtaking; picture a thriller, sci-fi, romance, comedy, and a spiritual masterpiece all rolled into one. I was so engrossed that once finished, I was left so frustrated I actually re-read the book to get back to that world.”

- J.J., a reader from the UK

"This book captivates your imagination and you develop an almost instant personal relationship with the main characters. The story does not leave you, and you catch yourself thinking about it throughout your day, longing for time alone so you can read on..!"

- J.T., a reader from the USA

“You need to read this book. It uses an adventure story to break down the nature of reality so you can understand it. The teachings can drastically transform your life – they did mine! ”

- M.O., a reader from the UK

“Since finishing the book, I re-read it a few times and every time I found new gems that struck a chord deep within. My favourite quote is, “Find something worth dying for - and spend your life living for it”. As in, “Find what you stand for and be willing to sacrifice everything for what you believe in.” This book is for everyone on their path to becoming a warrior and finding their inner peace.”

- N.B., a reader from Bulgaria

“I recommend this book to anyone that still has the fire within, and the will to get up in the morning and fight! Whatever it is you're fighting for, whatever the cause, this book will encourage you to go further, dig deeper, and feel stronger about it!"

- H.P., a reader from the USA

“This book is designed to rewire your mind. It will do it gently and subtly, and only if you let it. But once you do, you won't look at the world the same way again. This is not an ordinary novel. If you let it, it will show you a different way of looking at the world. It doesn't describe or focus on what most novels do. The best analogy is The Matrix: if you were to describe it to someone living within it, you wouldn't focus on that which it shows you, instead you'd direct your reader

to the underlying code. Lightwatch is a book about the code that has always been there, at the edge of your perception.”

- *I.B., a reader from the UK*

“The Lightwatch Chronicles book is reminiscent of The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho, in its linking fantasy and ethereal mystery with the human psyche, finding our path, and our constant struggle to grasp and understand our own emotions... but with its own unique flair. I loved every bit of it.”

- *V.A., a reader from the USA*

“This book will be deeply appreciated by those who are striving for personal excellence. I know very few works of literature that convey so much practical wisdom and do so through such fantastic means of expression, in every sense of the word. Literally every chapter contains some very profound insight that made me think, “Holy, how cool is that?!”

- *I.P., a reader from Russia*

“I remember diving into the first chapter of the Lightwatch Chronicles and getting goosebumps everywhere. I just paused for having an ice-cream, started again and bamm – goosebumps. I couldn’t help it. And the story only went better and better. Crazy interesting!”

- *B.K., a reader from Germany*

“It’s hard to describe this book because there aren’t any mainstream references that do it justice. It’s like a piece from another world where the characters take you on an unforgettable journey into the mind. I was captivated by the plot, and it also felt like the book was communicating with me trying to teach me more about myself. A thoroughly enjoyable and enlightening experience I can recommend to everybody.”

- *J.B., a reader from Denmark*

“Do you like medieval fantasy or sci-fi type adventures? Here you have both mixed up wonderfully in a story based on mythologies very few people know about. I got trapped in the book by the story and the hidden message, and the more I was reading the more I wanted to read. Hopefully, part two will be available soon! I am waiting with all the patience I have to continue on the journey of the Lightwatch.”

- *J.O., a reader from Québec, Canada*

“Congratulations on picking up a copy of the Lightwatch Chronicles. But before you begin I would like to offer the following words of advice... “Forget everything that you think you know”. If you’re feeling lost in this world, this is a story for you, if you long for a deeper meaning, pick up this book. It will become your best companion!”

- *C.A., a reader from the USA*

“This book will take you on an incredible journey and if you read between the lines, you’ll never look at the World you think you know in the same way ever again.

Jane H Tepley, also known as The Ancient One, takes you on a fascinating journey which you will relate to in some shape or form. Storytelling mastery at its finest.”

- *H.B., a reader from the UK*

“The Lightwatch Chronicles is a thrilling tale that transports you to multiple worlds that literally spring to life off the page. It may be fiction but it contains great wisdom woven into the story that can be applied to real-world situations. Whilst following the main characters on their quest, you will feel like you are learning their lessons with them and will often find yourself looking deep into your own mind and questioning your inner self. I would highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to improve their mind whilst being entertained at the same time. This book would make a great film too!”

- *J.W., a reader from the UK*

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“I can’t stop thinking about this book! It’s filled with lifehack gems and you can’t help but ask yourself “what do I stand for?” From beginning to end you’re hooked. I recommend this book to anyone longing for meaning and purpose, this book has many answers, just read between the lines.”

- *V.T., a reader from the UK*

“To create great things and to have a life full of joy and health it’s necessary to believe in the unexpected power that we have within ourselves. The Lightwatch Chronicles will introduce you

to a wonderful world where you will remember that you can accomplish anything as long as you believe that. An amazing story of self-mastery, endurance, inspiration and wonderful treasures are waiting for you.”

- *C.C.R., a reader from Mexico*

“Awesome story full of thought, wit, and the characters you will grow close to. I love how it stimulates the imagination and at the same time makes you look deeper into yourself.”

- *B.B.H., a reader from the USA*

Books by J. H. Tepley

The Master of the Elements

The Mindgates Blueprint

Warrior Quotes for Meditation

The Lightwatch Chronicles

Book I: *The Guardians*

[upcoming]

Book II: *The Journey*

Book III: *The Awakening*

The Lightwatch Chronicles

Book I

The Guardians

By J. H. Tepley

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This is a work of fiction. All characters are invented and any resemblance to anyone living or dead is accidental.

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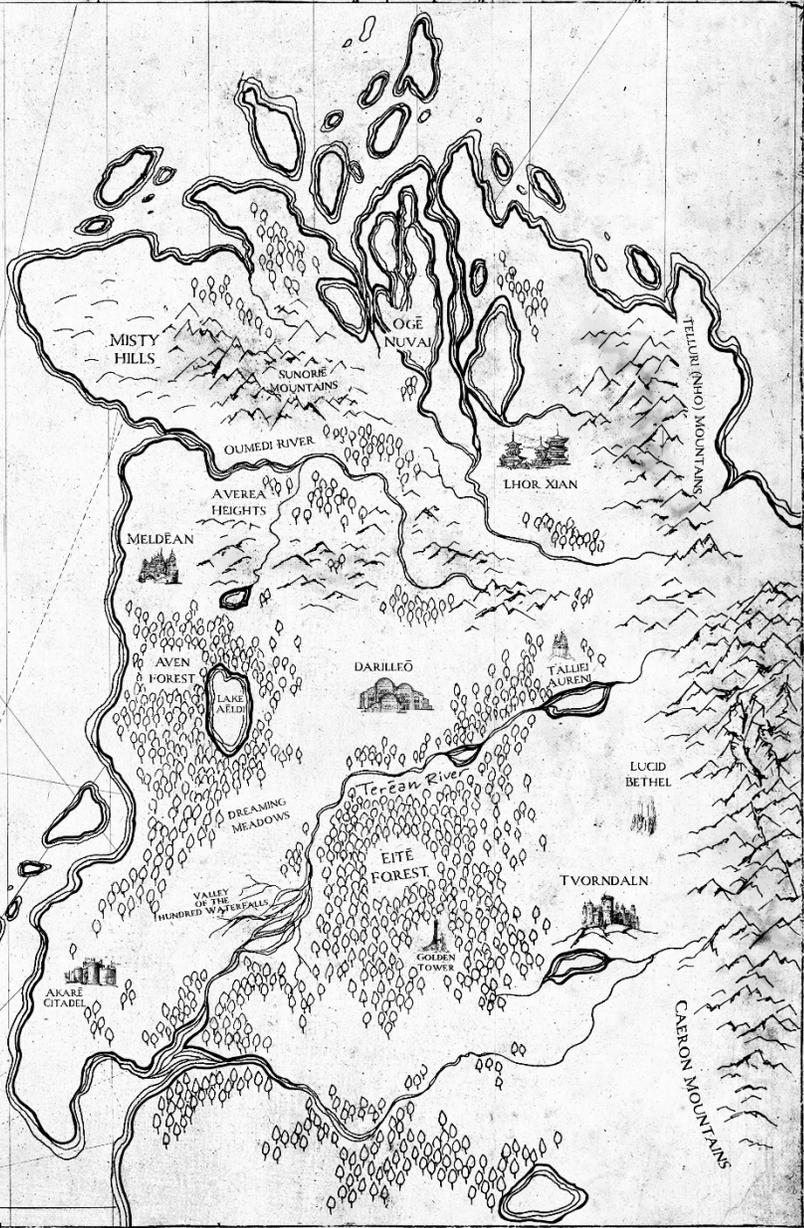
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This book is dedicated to all warriors in spirit.

SEPTENTRIO.



OCCIDENT.

ORIENS.

MERIDIES.



CONTENTS

From The Author	13
Prologue	14
Chapter I The Trapped Stars	16
Chapter II Hope Against Hope
Chapter III A Council On Sowilō
Chapter IV What You Seek Is Seeking You
Chapter V A Star Of The Septenary
Chapter VI Farien's Fate
Chapter VII Guests On Lagu
Chapter VIII The Mysteries Of Destiny.....	.
Chapter IX The Paths of Choice.....	.
Chapter X The Journey Calls
Chapter XI Light and Shadows.....	.
Chapter XII Facets of Reality.....	.
Chapter XIII Winged Company.....	.

FROM THE AUTHOR

“A time will come when people will forget. Many will lose the memory of all that made them strong, their Light within, integrity, loyalty, and honour. Many will stray from their path, tortured by their own fear and blinded by the Shadow. But we will return, remember this, we will return again to show the way, and to awaken the Sleeping Stars, and once more will the world herald the Tale of the Guardians.”

This is not an ordinary book. For almost as long as I can remember, I lived with it, by it, and through it – since this story appeared one day, forcefully demanding to write it down, it has become intertwined with my life in more ways than I can think of.

The book you’re holding in your hands is a rebel that stood up against all rules of novel writing. It didn’t let me follow the traditional path of gathering ideas and coming up with the story. The legend was already there, whole and complete, and I could do nothing but to write it down just as it was.

I often felt like a detective looking for the clues and connecting the facts. Hours on Google Maps and further hours spent studying the map of Lagu, learning the meaning of ancient words, solving mysteries and discovering new details was at times so fascinating that going to sleep seemed like an absurd chore.

This story is a glimmer of a legend that counts thousands of years; so old that it had been all but forgotten. It was first spoken over the sun-scorched sand of faraway lands, amongst the worshippers of fire. Now it has chosen to return in a new form, holding the answers you might have been blindly seeking, perhaps all your life. It calls to those who are ready to hear the message. And if you’re ready, after having read this book you’ll never be the same. This story can teach you how to use the power that you have always felt within. It is for you who have dedicated your life to bettering yourself, fighting against all odds. For you, who believe in miracles even though the whole world tells you otherwise. For you, who strives to be the Light that helps others see. Throughout this story are scattered the secret keys. I dare you to find them in the real world.

This book is a gateway. Step into the legend. The adventure awaits and the time has come.

PROLOGUE

“And as their courage began to fade, they grew more and more fearful of the Shadow...for they believed that nothing could stop it spreading and that their world was doomed to succumb to it, just as their faint hearts already did.

But there were Stars amongst them who knew the truth and whose spirit was free from fear. The Ariya warriors kept their watch, unseen and unknown, and even a handful of them was enough to hold the Shadow at bay. They faced it all - the dark poison of doubt, the cold of loneliness, and the pain of loss. Many had fallen in that battle; but those who remained, mournful of their comrades kept fighting even harder for they knew that the time was changing and a new dawn should be upon them before long.”

All comes from One that is Light, and unto One it shall return. Only the sleeping consciousness knows nothing of its nature and its true power. Those who have awakened the Light within are Stars – the silent warriors who turn their mind into their weapon against the Shadow. They take the hardest Path, so others can know peace.

While roving through the labyrinth of lives and rebirths, it happens that some lose the memory of their Higher Calling; yet even the Sleeping Stars never stop searching for it. Still, there are those who keep the inner flame alive and choose to dedicate their lives to following their mission – they are known as Ariyas, the noble spirits bound by the inner Code of integrity and truth. The greatest amongst them are the Guardians – the legendary seven Great Stars who protect the Gates of Time and Space, their quest as old as the existence itself.

Many songs and myths were coined about the Guardians throughout the millennia, not all of them remembered. Our world has all but lost its own, but the changing time shall reawaken the faded memories, and bring the flame back from the ashes.

This story is about four young Ariyas, a warrior team of Minor Stars, bound together by the power of the Crystal. The complex energy structure was created during their training on Siltarion by the High Adepts, with all the knowledge and magic they had. Many years took a special series of mental drills, which gradually changed the Stars energetically and mentally until one day it became part of their essence. The arcane masterwork looked like a lozenge-shaped gemstone when called upon, so they nicknamed it ‘Crystal’. The name stuck.

A while ago, the Quarta saw their homeland destroyed in a war with the Shadow. After that, all they had known were the feverish dreams, the pain of loss, and the coldness of foreign lands.

After the Fall, it was the Crystal that had saved their lives. It helped the Stars breathe the air of different worlds, and heal their wounds. Most importantly, it allowed them to travel, if only they

kept all four splinters together. And travel they did – when the enemies are on one’s trail, staying in one place for too long would be a mistake that could too easily prove lethal.

Were they lucky to survive? They could not tell. Life was tough, but it went on, and they tried to make the most of it. They were too young, and too well trained, to give up. All in all, “adventures are good”, as Tei often said.

The Quarta wasn’t short of them since the Fall. For that, they partly had themselves to blame. Not all their decisions were well thought through. Oftentimes, the Quarta were too brassy and too adventurous for their own good. Strange uncanny luck seemed to have followed the Stars, though, as welcome as it was undeserved. It offered the only sound reason why the four were still alive, through all the fights, the dangers, and the youthful nonsense.

But it had all changed a few months ago.

Chapter I

TSERI-MAI VERA

THE TRAPPED STARS

It had been raining since the very morning. Rain trickled down the window, splashed on the road and drummed on the umbrellas. Heavy clouds, ruffled and rushed by the cold wind, sealed the horizon.

“They have rotten springs here,” said Nesteri who stood by the window. His face was young but the strange weariness and fire in his eyes gave away a time tested warrior. Nesteri regarded the soaked city below with an absent stare. His ashen hair appeared even more greyish now.

The dwelling in Meguro was exhilaratingly close to the sky. When looking outside, Nesteri felt like a bird might feel, spreading its wings and gliding through the wind, high and higher, the city sparkling beneath. It made him think of Dragh – his pet raven and a true friend, the faithful companion of his younger years. Nesteri missed him.

Hagal nodded, engrossed in his book, pretending he wasn't there. His slender fingers fiddled with a bookmark. The dark green dressing gown over the white shirt made him look typically highborn somehow. Even in these foreign clothes.

The main room of their flat was bright and simple; and almost tidy, if not for the pile of crumpled paper on the desk – Tei's domain, one could easily tell.

“Yeah,” answered Tei, the only one with dark short hair, his blue eyes harbouring a faint glow of disquiet. His shirt was red, and half unbuttoned; half rolled-up sleeves showed brawny arms. The Star was strumming a guitar. “You don't want to know what their winters are like.”

“You're right, I don't.”

“Worry not, fun awaits ya, and soon. That should take your mind off the weather.”

“Fun, you say?” Nesteri scowled and turned away from the window. His style was ink and watercolours, a sleek black top paired with distressed charcoal jeans. “I hate parties. They are dull, and stupid. I wish there was a better way for us to find him.”

“So do I,” Tei shrugged. “And if you have any bright ideas, genius, do share.” He returned to strumming. The tune blended with the whisper of rain.

Nesteri didn't answer. There were no better ways of finding Farien that he could think of.

Of that fight, they did not remember much. A small moon...or perhaps, an asteroid? A plain of rocks and dust, cold, with the cold stars above. They stopped there merely to decide where to go

next. Hagal said he had a bad feeling about it. Rightly, albeit too late. The attack came fierce and sudden, as ruthless as the Shadow would have it. The Quarta looked death in the eye, again, escaping it merely by a hair's breadth. Three against four wasn't a bad score, but the demonoids weren't going to play fair. Their weapon... The Quarta had never seen its kind. The blast that had followed tore the team apart, swallowing everything into the fury of explosion. Burnt and wounded, when the warriors regained their senses, they were only three. As far as they could see, green hills of a foreign land stretched far and farther, peaceful. Farien was gone.

He was alive, the only thing they knew. Else, his splinter of the Crystal would return to reunite with theirs. "You could talk through the Crystal," their teacher said in passing a long time ago. Oh, how they wished that Master Alsvir could be with them now. Or that he could have taught them all he knew before the Fall.

"Why can't we be Great Stars?" Tei would jokingly lament on occasion. "I mean, imagine that," he would add feverishly, "travel at will, no artefacts, no nothing. Conjure things. How cool would that be?" his gaze would turn dreamy. The winged Guardians of Light, Great Stars were formidable, ancient and wise, and wielded astonishing powers if the legends could be believed.

But the Quarta weren't Great Stars. They were Minor Stars, and they were trapped. This planet had taught them what being captive really means.

Yet Farien's fate worried them most. If enemies tracked him down, alone he wouldn't stand a chance. And the inevitable aftermath was only a matter of time.

How does one find a missing comrade in a foreign world? A world he doesn't belong to? Many long evenings and a tumultuous storm of ideas yielded one answer. Music.

"Music travels as fast as a thought," Nesteri had said. "It could be our messenger."

"Perilous. I mean both demonoids and locals in equal measure. We could risk too much, drawing attention to ourselves like that," Hagal had objected cautiously.

"Better to risk than to be prisoners here," Tei had cut him off with the careless brazenness of youth. "Sounds simple enough. It could work. Let's do it."

It was easy indeed. Almost too easy. The last disciple of the legendary bard Demaré, Tei certainly knew his craft. And by the Light, could he sing! Nesteri added to it his spellbinding mastery over words, and a duo was born. Hagal, who shrank from anything public, had managed to get things arranged his way. Writing, his favourite pastime, became his shield. He did contribute with lyrics and volunteered – somewhat too eagerly – for the ungrateful task of admin work.

"Anything not to be heard singing, huh?" Tei chuckled.

Hagal casually ignored Tei's jest. He was sketching a layaremth in his notebook – a gold winged horse, his family crest – and pretended not to have heard.

The Quarta's music stirred souls. The magic of their tunes was storms and stardust, not of this world. The videos with the mysterious handsome singers swept across cyberspace like a forest fire.

A nomination for the Best New Band came within a few short months. Unexpected and flattering, it was swathed in a dark veil of danger. Those who shine too brightly attract all sorts of eyes; the Quarta knew that.

But there was no other choice.



The neon colossus of the city sprawled around the bay like a mythical hydra with its multiple heads. Tokyo was unlike anything the Quarta had ever seen before. It throbbed with a dazzling, forceful and alien vibe that contrasted sharply with the gentle and peaceful feel of the land itself.

And yet again, the Stars were lucky. They weren't the only strangers there. The quirky tapestry of types, the cosmic masquerade on the streets had readily embraced them as a sea swallows a drop. Nobody cared, nobody noticed. It was almost as good as being invisible.

Other than that, the city was far from kind. The Stars' extended perception was nothing short of a curse here. Subtle energy currents, toxic and suffocating like toxic smoke, plagued the place. They oozed from everywhere – wires in walls, countless generators, tangled snakes of electric lines looming overhead. The subterranean trains in their dark tunnels were the worst. The Quarta had to master driving.

Meditation or sleep amongst the electric noise became a real challenge. There wasn't much the Stars could do about it except sealing their flat with energy shields. Simple, but they did keep some of the harmful rays at bay. The shields were of no help against another pestilence, though – small electronic objects, omnipresent here. Hagal tentatively made peace with laptops but refused to handle phones. "They give me a headache," he had declared.

"Well, there's that, but I've been through worse," Tei's stance was less barbed, particularly since he had discovered that the small flat boxes, although they burnt his fingertips, could play music. "Check this out," he had said showing off his playlist. As if Hagal could be convinced.

Nesteri's view was different from both. *They didn't understand.* They didn't see it, what he could see. Behind the glimmering screens, there was an endless library there. Uncharted. It could readily tell him anything this planet had to share. Browsing through it made the Star think fondly of his Academy days spent in the vaulted chambers full of books. Nesteri had never imagined that gaining knowledge could be that easy. He eagerly learnt about the world they were trapped in. He found out what locals valued most, and how the social media worked. It was his efforts that had made the Quarta's message heard.

If someone said to Tei that Nesteri had a passion, of any sort, Tei would laugh him in the face. But the unyielding thirst for knowledge could perhaps come close.

Ding!

A phone screen lit up, startlingly bright in the gathering dusk. Nesteri walked across the room to the table. Tei threw him a questioning glance.

“Just an event reminder,” Nesteri said switching off the screen. He tossed the phone in his fingers as if it were a shuriken, pensive for a moment. Pale streaks of light ran up his hand. “I’m pretty sure they must be on our trail by now,” he remarked talking to no one in particular.

“That wouldn’t surprise me,” Tei’s mouth tightened. “Look up the floor plan and the exits while you’re at it. And send me a copy.”

“Aye, captain.”

Tei put his guitar aside, got to his feet and stretched. The clock on the wall was giving him an unambiguous hint. “Time for us, team, get ready.”

He rustled through the grey zipped covers on the sofa and picked one marked with his name. “Let’s see what we’ve got here,” he muttered. The sleeves of the rented suit were a bit too short, again, but the rest seemed fine. Tei took out the tie, the cufflinks, and the shirt – he had looked up earlier how to put it all together. The shoes were also there, in a canvas bag.

“Huh, check this out! It actually looks alright,” his voice soon came from the hallway.

“What?” Nesteri walked in to witness the preening scene. He scowled disapprovingly. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Well,” Tei’s smirk became slightly awkward. “I think it does look kind of fit.”

Nesteri grimaced. “Seriously? You know what we’re packing ourselves into, right?”

“I bloody well do.”

“It could be a trap!”

“Possibly. And what of it? It’s still an *adventure* of sorts,” Tei retorted, fumbling with his bow tie. “This neck ribbon is lame, though.”

Nesteri shrugged and went back to the main room. He returned wearing a jacket, jingling the car keys in his hand. Hagal was with him. “Ready?”

“Sure.” Tei ran fingers through his hair and winked to his reflection on the mirror. “And anyway,” he added, “since we’re stuck here, we could at least try and enjoy some of it.” He looked over at Nesteri. “What do you say? Nothing. Exactly. You know I’m right.”



By the time they reached Yokohama, the skies had cleared; sunset glow broke through the clouds and scattered gleam on wet streets. From the tall glass doors stretched a carpeted path, vividly red in the last of the daylight. A swelter of photographers bristled with cameras and ladders on both sides. Dense facial hair covered some faces, still a strange sight, even after all these months.

Otherworldly sharp in their black and white, the Stars headed towards the entrance. Three long shadows ran after them on the ground, thin and deep. Fans surrounded them, jostling and chirping, asking for autographs.

“It’s them! Tei, Nesteri! We love you!” they shouted, snapping photos. “Sign here!” Two girls in pink, a scrawny guy with green hair, a hooded group wearing rags and chains, young women in office uniform with their notebooks out – a whirlpool of hands, phones and eyes. “Please!” The fawning throng pressed close around them.

“We have to get out,” Nesteri muttered.

“Agreed,” Tei nodded. “Worse than fighting the bloody demonoids, this.” He took a deep breath and tried to push through.

“Tei, sign here! Here!” New fans barred his way and someone grabbed him by the sleeve. “I want a photo with you! Tei!”

“Alright, that’s enough, enough,” a gaunt man in his mid-thirties emerged from the crowd, gently but resolutely moving fans aside. He wore a black suit with a standing collar, which gave him the air of a security guard and a monk, both at once. “Please follow me.” He gestured to the Quarta.

All three exchanged glances.

“My name is Ito,” the man introduced himself with a light bow. “I’m here to care of you.” His glossy black hair was so perfect it appeared fake.

“Was anyone supposed to meet us?” Tei asked softly in Siltarionese.

“Not that I know,” Nesteri replied.

“Please come with me,” Ito insisted. “Everyone is waiting.”

He ushered the Quarta to the entrance.



The grand hall was dazzlingly white and gold, lit with cold white lamps. Perfume scents mingled in the air. The foyer buzzed with talks and whispers.

“Could you spare a moment to—” two journalists jumped up to the Quarta, recorders out and ready. People nearby turned their heads. “Just one question,” more reporters hurried close, but Ito waved them away. “One question—”

“Not now, please. There is no time right now,” he said, resolutely making his way through the congregation. “Our apologies.”

The Quarta breathed out a sigh of relief.

“I’m glad they’ve organised someone to meet us,” Hagal said. “Very thoughtful indeed.”

Ito cut through the hall to the double chrome door, wide open. He escorted the Quarta to their seats, showered them with courtesies, then bowed and merged into the crowd. The Stars were left to a dull spectacle of announcements, applauds and speeches, speeches and applauds, and more announcements, repetitive like a pendulum swing. Tei and Nesteri made quiet jokes; Hagal was silent, contemplating with idle curiosity the ridiculously sparkly suit of the presenter.

Then it was their time to come up on stage. Led by Tei, the Stars got up and stood there dutifully smiling, half-blinded by the hot spotlight glow.

“Aaaand...welcome, welcome, welcome!” the presenter roared with unfaded enthusiasm. “Congratulations!! You must be excited,” He added, offering the Quarta a crystal square with their band’s name engraved on it in gold. “This award must mean so much. Congratulations again, and here’s to the future! Now – your words!”

“Well, thank you,” Tei said simply, stepping towards the microphone. “We are honoured.” He handed the award over to Nesteri.

Nesteri turned the square around in his hand. Cut facets glimmered with rainbows. It somehow brought the memory of the Crystal Mountains. Tei nudged him in the elbow. “But of course,” Nesteri added hastily, leaning closer. “A great honour indeed.”

The audience cheered, invisible in the shadows. Of Farien there was no trace.

The afterparty was as boring as the ceremony itself. Nesteri had declared that he would drive, a neat excuse to refuse the inauspiciously looking drinks that were served there. Hagal and Tei had a quiet bother of watering theirs down. The Quarta couldn’t afford to lose their presence of mind. Not now. Not in a place like that. The slow torment of hours dragged and waned away. It was getting late.

“I can’t sense him,” Tei said curtly, as all three gathered in a corridor by the exit. Suppressed annoyance rang in his voice. “For Light’s sake. Haven’t we yet made enough—”

“I can’t sense him either,” Nesteri frowned, “still, shall we split and have another look?”

“We may just as well,” Hagal said. “Tiring as this is.”

A girl in white uniform floated by with a tray of champagne, but Nesteri shook his head. “We are good, thank you.”

If Farien were in the room, the Stars’ extended perception would let them know. They would recognise his presence, just as he would know of theirs. But all was deftly still. He did not come.

Meanwhile, the party raged on, shaking to the rhythm of convulsing lights and the cacophony of music.

“It truly is such a pleasure to meet you in person,” a willowy man in his forties said sipping his cocktail. He introduced himself as a music magazine editor. The thick red wooden frame of his glasses matched the colour of his watch. “I would like to arrange an interview at some point when it’s convenient.” A younger journalist by his side nodded readily at those words.

“My thoughts exactly,” a lady in a silver dress echoed. She waved to a waiter and had her empty champagne flute exchanged. A diamond ring sparkled on her finger. “Our listeners would love to hear from you. Such an achievement! Cheers!” she added, stretching her glass towards Nesteri’s for a toast. Nesteri clinked it with his orange juice.

“Thank you. We would be much obliged,” he answered politely, but his mind was somewhere else. Nesteri scanned the room, again, hoping... at this point, he wasn’t even sure what he was hoping for.

“So what are your plans for the future?” the man who asked was short and stubby, with a low voice and dark piercing eyes. “If you are looking for a new producer, I know someone who...”

Tei appeared from behind the backs, throwing a short knowing glance. He went past, swift like a shadow, and pushed a ball of paper into Nesteri’s hand.

Nesteri made excuses and left the company to their drinks and jokes. Once on his own, he smoothed out the napkin. The creased surface revealed a line in Siltarionese script, in Tei’s resolute handwriting:

*“Maeth averin. Tie-ni roendē.”*¹

Their walk to the car park led through the silent maze of night streets. The wind sighed,



¹ “Let’s go back. Meet you outside.”

welcomingly fresh. Tei opened the box in his hand, took the award out of its white silks and regarded it with a thoughtful stare. Gold letters glistened in the murky glow of streetlights.

“Hah, so it was actually real,” Tei muttered. He seemed oddly pleased, despite the worry darkening his face. “Demaré would be proud. A funny feeling, though. Bit weird.” He glanced over at Nesteri who was busy with his phone. “What are you doing?”

“Updating our pages.”

“What?”

“Posting some snaps from tonight. A little thing, but it helps to spread the word. People share photos and such, then more people join. That’s how it works.”

Tei looked at the screen and cringed. “I’ve never seen so many portraits of me in my whole life. Kinda creepy.”

“Decided then. I’ll print them, all of them. And stick them on the walls. You’re welcome.”

“Get off.”

“You just don’t get it. Photos are great. It’s like...catching the butterflies of time. You know? Any moment you want, you can make it stay forever. I like that.”

A vision from childhood floated through Hagal’s mind. The tinkling of the creek, the warmth of sunshine; his eyes, opened wide in wonder; blue butterflies fluttering past, fluttering past, sparkling like gemstones. The breeze whispered in the grass, and the entire world was just meadows and skies, skies and meadows, and flowers, and summer, never-ending. The butterflies of time...

“I wonder how you tolerate this thing burning your fingers”, Hagal said. “It’s rather vexing.”

Nesteri shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. I told myself to ignore that. It’s for a greater purpose.”

Tei breathed out through his clenched teeth. “Too long. Too bloody long!” He stuck the award back in the box and pressed down the lid. “Light and all gods,” he added more slowly, trying to squelch the exasperation bubbling in him. “If *all this noise* didn’t make him pay attention, I don’t know what would. The hell is wrong with him? Tonight...! I can’t believe he didn’t turn up. Lazy arse.”

“He must be looking for us, too,” Nesteri said. He switched off the phone and slid it in his back pocket. “Surely.”

“That worries me even more,” Tei frowned. “It would mean we are bloody useless, the whole lot. After all this time!”

They stopped outside of the parking block. Even in daylight, no one would call it pretty. Painted by shadows, its drab grey facade with a dimly lit entrance had something unsettling about it. Nesteri called the lift. “Be right back.”

A few moments later, the central platform wheezed and went down. The metal touched the ground with a soft clank. Nesteri drove out and stopped the car for Tei and Hagal to get in. His shirtsleeves were rolled up, his tie and jacket gone.

“Copying my style?” Tei smiled impishly. He threw his own jacket on the back seat next to Hagal and pulled off his bow tie with a sigh of outright relief. “This neck ribbon!” he scowled undoing his collar buttons. “It’s ridiculous. It’s something girls should wear...”

The night drive home was peaceful like a meditation. The full moon shone on the empty road, blessing its wet surface with scattered shimmer.

Nesteri looked in the rearview mirror. In the cold moonlight, Hagal’s face appeared drawn and tired.

“Hagal, you’re alright? You’re too quiet, even by your standards.”

Hagal wrinkled his forehead. His gaze was fixed on the darkness outside the window, dotted with lights flitting past. “I’ve never been known for excessive verbosity, as far as I’m aware,” he replied undoing his bow tie with the air of resignation. “And what to talk about? I’ve had enough. This planet drains me. I’m worried about Farien—”

“—aren’t we all.”

“—and I wouldn’t mind some sleep. I’m not a night owl like you are.”

“Or a night raven, rather,” Tei smirked nodding at Nesteri’s left wrist. Small silver raven, a distant memory of Dragh, twinkled on his strap leather bracelet.

“Night is when the stars come out...or go out,” Nesteri quipped. He tried to hide the stinging sense of danger that troubled him since earlier.

Tei chuckled at those words, recalling many a merry night out, back in his Academy days. “I can second that!”

“Very well, but without me. I’m going home,” a corner of Hagal’s lips twitched into a smile.

“Cheer up. I’m sure we’ll be out of here soon,” Tei said, “and this mess is a one-off. He’s alive. We will find a way.”

Just when he said that the road lights blinked. They flashed on and off again, like an old sea lantern in a stormy wind. One more flicker and they were all gone, plunging the highway into blackness. Only the moon shone lonely above, a single eye. Strange tension trembled in the air.

“Oh hello,” remarked Nesteri almost nonchalantly, dropping the speed. “That didn’t take long.”

“For the love of...!” Hagal rubbed his face. “The last thing we needed—”

A dazzling blast hit the road in front of them before he finished his sentence. Nesteri threw his arm up over his eyes and slammed on the brakes. The car skidded on the slippery road, tires screeching.

“Damn!!” Tei, with his seat belt loose as always, was thrust towards the windscreen. Even his trained reaction didn’t quite stop the close encounter. “For Mroodh’s sake!!” He rubbed his forehead and grumbled something about lame drivers.

“I wouldn’t mention the name of the God of Death right now,” Nesteri retorted coldly. “Next time, *you* drive.” He looked down at the space that separated them from hitting the divider. There was hardly a hand’s width. “Lucky,” he muttered under his breath. His door was blocked but there was no time to turn the car around; Tei and Hagal were already outside. Nesteri slung over Tei’s seat and jumped out. Tei nodded without a word – they all knew what to do. The Quarta spread apart, away from the car.

The night embraced them with coolness; the smell of rain still lingered in the air. The quiet was deceptive. Kekkai energy shields shimmered around dimply, a demonoids’ trick. Blasphemous runes oozed dark red against the night sky. The Quarta were locked in.

Next moment, a thunder of explosion shook the ground.

Molten asphalt and metal blasted into the air, thick with the stench of burning. A hole in the road gaped like a fresh wound, widening slowly, collapsing inwards.

When the wind cleared the dust, pale moonlight painted two demonoid figures – rangy, red-haired Phatiel and his comrade Nedros, cross-eyed and blotchy like a stray dog. Attackers nearly instantly divided; dark uniform merged with the shadows.

Their faces weren’t new. The demonoids had been on the Quarta’s trail for long enough to get their patience strained. Fight after fight yielded no results but humiliation and cohorts’ ridicule. Two warriors, unable to take down a bunch of kids! It was inconceivable how the four youngsters did it, and by what miracle the bastard Light Stars still remained alive, but it was time to bring this to an end.

“You missed – again – you blind fucking toad!” Phatiel cursed at Nedros in Dark Speech.

“Shut up, loser! You’re no better,” Nedros hissed back.

Tei attacked first; deadly streaks of amaranthine flashed across the road. Nedros dodged the blow and struck back at once, singeing Tei’s hair and his right ear.

Dazzling flames clashed and swirled through the gloom, shined in every raindrop shrouding all in a halo of glow, bewitching and deadly. Those who made combat their path of life should know enough about loss not to be swayed by it, but fighting without Farien felt odd. Now they were three against two; but what the Quarta gained in number they lacked in experience.

Phatiel fought both Nesteri and Hagal at once with the air of arrogant nonchalance. He was in no hurry. The demonoid was good and he knew it. The wound on Hagal’s leg proved it too well.

Hagal was slowing down. His next mistake could be lethal, Tei realised. As soon as that, he saw Hagal slipping in the puddle of blood and falling down, opening his back to Phatiel's blow.

“Hagal!!”

Tei started to run but Nesteri was faster. He leapt forward, shoving Hagal out of the line of attack. Both rolled on the road together and hit the divider with a thump.

Tei jerked aside to parry Nedros' blow. Phatiel joined him; the double force was slowly but mercifully crushing Tei's defence, pushing him to the ground.

“Think of something...! Think or something, quick!” Tei ordered himself feverishly. Time itself was his enemy now. ‘The Triangle attack,’ his teacher's words swam up in his head, ‘if one of you is missing or wounded, use the Triangle.’ Tei bit his lip. It might be too late now.

Suddenly Nedros let out a shrieking yell and sunk down, his convulsing hands trying to reach for the horrid burn on his face and chest. Nesteri appeared from the shadows and stood by Tei's side.

Phatiel glanced at his comrade, startled. That moment of distraction was enough. Tei gestured the sign of the Triangle. Hagal forced himself up, using the divider as support.

A heartbeat later, a threefold strong energy jolt crashed onto the demonoids in a blinding wave blasting them out of this dimension, back to where they came from. The portal collapsed, the sealing kekkai shields burst and disintegrated.

The battlefield was plunged into silence.

Tei took a deep breath, then smiled dryly. “Knocked out by such an old trick! Amateurs.” He dusted his sleeves and trousers, with little effect.

“These fancy clothes weren't made for this, that's for sure,” Nesteri muttered. “Hagal, you alright?”

“I'll live.” Hagal tore off the ragged bottom of his trousers and made an improvised bandage.

“I'll sort you out as soon as we're back,” Nesteri promised.

“That would be appreciated, thanks,” Hagal said, walking unsteadily towards the car.

Tei helped him in. “We must get out of here,” he urged.

“Aye, captain.” Nesteri walked around incinerating any traces of blood before returning to the driver's seat. “All clear.” He slammed his door shut and glanced at the wing mirror. It was miraculously intact. “A kingdom for a shower and sleep.”

“What about the hole?” Tei nodded at the road.

Nesteri popped his head out of the window and paused for a moment, contemplating. “We should be able to go over if we drive fast enough,” he finally replied. “It's not that big.”

“You’re crazy,” Tei stated with a weary grin. “And I guess sometimes it’s a good thing.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“Step forward. Live your truth. Be the light that helps others see. You never know whose darkest times can be lit up by your example.”

— J. H. Tepley



Jay H. Tepley is a teacher, writer, speaker, and the founder-acarya of ARIYA Creed – a powerful self-mastery philosophy for the warriors in spirit.

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For over 19 years, Tepley has been travelling the world teaching and researching mind-empowering techniques of the East and the West. Her work led to the creation of the ARIYA Mind Training – a unique system for profound personal transformation, which consists of meditation, extended perception and awareness exercises, mindfulness, callisthenics, and breathing techniques.

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THE ARIYA CODE

- Live in accordance with your Highest Purpose
- Follow the Path of the right thoughts, the right speech, and the right actions
- Cultivate mindfulness and compassion in everything you do
- Make every day your training ground
- Stay silent about your mission; let the results of your work speak for themselves
- Perceive what cannot be seen by the eye
- Treat your comrades as family
- Use your power to the benefit of others