

Fire Logic

Elemental Logic: Book One

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Chapter 1

In the border regions of northern Shaftal, the peaks of the mountains loom over hardscrabble farmholds. The farmers there build with stone and grow in stone, and they might even be made of stone themselves, they are so sturdy in the face of the long, bitter winter that comes howling down at them from the mountains.

The stone town of Kisha would have been as insignificant as all the northern towns, if not for the fact that Makapee, the first G'deon, had lived and died there. His successor, Lilter, had discovered the manuscript of the book in which were laid out the principles that were to shape Shaftal. During the next two hundred years, the library built to house the Makapee manuscript had transformed the humble town into an important place, a town of scholars and librarians who gathered there to study and care for the largest collection of books in the country. The library had in turn spawned a university, and the scholars, forced to live in the bitter northern climate, tried to make their months of shivering indoors by a smoky peat fire into an intellectual virtue.

Emil Paladin considered frostbite a small price to pay for the privilege of being a student in the university at Kisha. He was older than some of the masters, and his long-time teacher, Parel Truthken, had warned him that he might be more learned, as well. For ten years, since his first piercing, Emil had accompanied Parel on the rounds of his territory, capturing fleeing wrongdoers and occasionally executing them when it was necessary. It was Parel who had finally arranged Emil's admission and who would be paying his fees. So now Emil had arrived for the spring term, with a letter of introduction that was about to bring him into the presence of the Makapee manuscript itself.

Despite expensive carpets, rooms crammed with books, and fires that burned year round to prevent the damp, the library was a chilly and echoing place where men and women in scholar's robes tiptoed about.

Being admitted to the Makapee manuscript, which set forth the principles that now unified Shaftal, was like being admitted into a temple. As he put on the silken gloves that he was required to wear, it occurred to Emil that Makapee himself would have found this ritual tremendously peculiar. The first G'deon had been an obscure potato farmer, who sat by a peat fire all winter long, writing of mysteries in a crabbed, nearly unreadable handwriting. The paper, Emil had been told, still smelled of peat. He doubted that the frowning librarian would let his nose come close enough to the paper for him to sniff it, but still, Emil felt almost giddy with anticipation.

A door opened, and the sound of an urgently ringing bell intruded on the silence. The librarian turned her head, frowning. "What!" she breathed at the man who hurried towards her.

The man whispered in her ear. Paling, she turned aside and hurried away. Emil was left with the gloves on his hands and the door to the Makapee vault still bolted shut. He felt a tearing, a sense of loss so profound he could not believe it had anything at all to do with the manuscript. Something momentous had happened. Dazed, he went through the halls, following the sound of the bell out into the square that fronted on the library.

As the bell continued to ring, the square became crowded with scholars carrying pens with the ink still wet on the nibs, librarians carrying books, townfolk wearing work aprons, with babies in their arms and tools in their hands, and farmers from the countryside in heavy, muddy boots, with satchels on their shoulders. The farmers must have spotted the messenger on the road, and followed him into town to hear the news. The messenger's dirty, ragged banner hung limp from the bell tower, and Emil could scarcely make out the single glyph imprinted on it. It was Death-and-Life, he realized finally, which was commonly depicted on glyph cards as a pyre into which a man stepped and became a skeleton, or, alternately, from which a skeleton stepped and became a man. It was the G'deon's glyph, carried through Shaftal only once in each G'deon's lifetime: when the previous G'deon died and the new one was vested with the power of Shaftal. It called the people to simultaneously mourn and rejoice. Soon, the messenger would announce the death of Harald G'deon, who had given the land protection and health for thirty-five years, and would name his successor.

Emil did not envy the young elemental selected to inherit that burden of power and decision. The government of Shaftal had been in discord for some years, and the coastal regions were occupied by foreigners who lacked the Paladin compunctions over the use of violence. This was a time that demanded wisdom, and the new G'deon would not have much leisure to learn it.

A townswoman with a child clinging to her leg turned to Emil and said anxiously, "Well, it's a pity about Harald. But what I most want to hear is the name of his successor. It would relieve my heart to know that the rumors we've heard are wrong."

"Rumors?" said Emil. "I'm sorry, I was isolated all winter, and have only just come into town."

"Well, they say that even though Harald has known since autumn that he was dying, he refused to name a successor. Surely he did it at the end, though. He'd change his mind when he felt the breath of death at his heels. And now all this Sainnite nonsense will come to an end, at last, for a young G'deon won't fear to act against them."

The bell stopped ringing. The messenger, whose road-grimy clothing had once been white, stood up on the bell platform to speak, but he could utter only a cracked whisper that those closest to him could scarcely hear. The people pushed a big man forward to stand beside him and listen to his broken voice, then shout his words in a voice that carried across half the town.

"Harald G'deon is dead!"

The gathered people nodded somberly.

"He vested no successor!" the big man boomed.

Some listeners groaned, and others cried out in dismay, but Emil stood silent in horror. It was unimaginable that a G'deon would allow the accumulated power of ten generations of earth witches to die with him.

"The House of Lilterwess has fallen in a Sainnite attack!" the big man shouted. His words were heard in stunned silence, followed by an outcry of shock and grief that swelled to fill the square. The big man's final words could scarcely be heard. "No one survived."

From every quarter, the townspeople shouted frightened, frenzied questions. The messenger sank down onto the bell platform and replied in his broken whisper, "I don't know. I don't know. I don't know."

Emil had already stripped off his silk gloves, and now handed them to a nearby librarian—the same one who had been about to admit him to the vault. “What will become of us?” she cried.

“Shaftal is at war,” he said.

He pushed his way through the weeping crowd and headed for the nearest Paladin charterhouse, where he knew the members of his order would gather. He noticed that he himself was weeping, though, except for that first tearing sensation in the library, he felt nothing. It was a small thing, insignificant beyond notice, that the fall of the House of Lilterwess had severed Emil’s soul, separating the scholar from the soldier, leaving his heart on the steps of the library while his duty called him away to war.

At the edge of the crowded square, an old man and a young woman observed the aftermath of the messenger’s terrible news. Though they did not look like anyone else in the square, they were distinctly similar to each other: small-framed where the Shaftali were sturdily built, dark-skinned where the Shaftali were fair, with eyes and hair black as obsidian, where the townsfolk were generally tinted the color of earth. In dress also, they stood apart as strangers, wearing long tunics of finely woven goatswool and jerkins and leggings of deerskin, while the working people wore breeches and longshirts. Both had long hair plaited and knotted at the backs of their heads. Let loose from its bindings, the young woman’s hair would have brushed her thighs, and the man’s hair would have reached his knees. Even their faces were shaped differently from those of the townsfolk: narrow and pointed, with hollows under the cheekbones and eyes deep set in shadow.

With their pack animals tethered nearby, the two strangers stood beside a pile of beautifully woven blankets and rugs. When the messenger first arrived, they had been negotiating a large sale to a trader of woolens. The old man turned from his consideration of the weeping crowd to speak quietly to his companion, in a subtle, singing language. “So we cross the boundary into a new world.”

She said, “But I feel the world is dissolving away before us, like a crumbling ledge above a crashing cataract.”

“Every boundary crossing feels like this,” the old man said. “When we cross a boundary, it is a loss, a death, an ending. It always seems

unendurable. It always seems like plunging over a cliff." He added kindly, "Zanja na'Tarwein, what has happened here portends a future that is more yours than mine. It is not too late to change your mind and refuse the gods."

Though she was young, her face did not seem much given to laughter. She smiled though, ironically. "How shall I do that? Shall I unlearn all I have learned, these last two years? Shall I tell Salos'a that now I have seen the world beyond the mountains I want nothing to do with it?"

"You could," he suggested. "The mountains protect our people like a fortress. You might retreat behind those walls and never come out again."

"No, Speaker," she said, seriously and respectfully, "I could not."

They stood silently for a long time, watching the crowd divide into arm-waving, wildly talking clusters. The youths sent from the farms left to bear their news to the waiting elders. Zanja imagined the people of the entire country standing about like this, bereft and bewildered. She said, "Now the Sainnites will overpower them like wolves overpower sheep." Her people got their wool from goats, who were brave and clever and sure-footed. She had no admiration for sheep.

The Speaker said, "No, I think not. Perhaps the Shaftali people are not wolves, but neither are they sheep."

The trader finally remembered his visitors and their pile of woolens, and came over wringing his hands. "I don't know what to say to you. Ashawala'i woolens are a luxury, and I don't know if I can sell luxuries to a country at war."

The Speaker said dryly, "Good sir, this land has been occupied by Sainnites for fifteen years, yet you never had any difficulty selling your wares before."

"But now the House of Lilterwess has fallen." The man could not continue. "Come back tomorrow," he finally said in a choked voice. "I need to consider my future."

"I am considering whether the Ashawala'i people would be better served if we sold their woolens to a more decisive trader. One who will not make us spend an entire afternoon unpacking and repacking with nothing to show for it." He gestured, and Zanja, who understood the value of drama, began painstakingly and with evident weariness to