

**A WORLD
Too NEAR**

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KAY
KENYON

BOOK TWO *of* THE ENTIRE AND THE ROSE



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In memory of our mothers,
Catherine Kenyon and Kathleen Overcast

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PART I

**A
BURNING
ROSE**

CHAPTER ONE



*Storm wall, hold up the bright,
Storm wall, dark as Rose night,
Storm wall, where none can pass,
Storm wall, always to last.*

—a child's verse

ABOVE THE FORTRESS THE SKY DIMMED TO LAVENDER, a time that passed for night in this world. Here every creature knew by their internal clock what time of night or day it was, all but Johanna Quinn, a woman of Earth. Between this universe and the next only a thin wall intervened, a permanent storm that forbade contact between Earth and the Entire. Or so most believed.

Johanna hurried down deserted corridors following the heavy drumbeat of the engine just ahead, a bass thrumming that pounded in her ears and the hollow of her chest. Coming to a divide in the hall she took the left branch, remembering her partial and wholly inadequate map. This hall too was deserted, and she rushed on. She prayed not to be discovered, although she had her alibi, thin as it might be.

Johanna wondered how he would kill her when the time came. There were good ways and bad, and she allowed herself—amid all her sacrifices—to have a strong preference in the matter. Her captors could do what they wished, of course. They were Tarig.

Tonight only one Tarig inhabited the Repel of Ahnenhoon, and Johanna profoundly hoped their paths would not cross. Her presence in this hall was not strictly forbidden, though. In her ten years of captivity she had earned a

degree of freedom. Like a butterfly with a pin through its body, she could move up, down, and in a circle. Enough freedom to have learned by now how large, how vastly large, was her prison with its thousand miles of corridors and mazes. Even so, few sentients lived here—a measure of Tarig confidence regarding assault and their preference for solitary lives. However, they had not reckoned what havoc a lone woman could wreak.

Something yanked her from behind. She stifled a gasp, staggering. But it was only her long hair, caught for a moment in a knot of cables snaking along the wall. She tucked her hair into her tunic collar and hurried on, following the thunder of the engine, louder now as she approached its seat.

Up ahead was the opening she sought: the deck that circled the containment chamber. She passed through the arch and onto the catwalk where in time of siege defenders of the Repel might take aim against intruders. That Johanna was such an intruder her lord would be surprised to discover.

She gazed out on a broad valley of giant and baffling technology. Lights winked across acres of metal machines—many presumably computational devices—separated by paths as narrow as the Tarig who had made them. Alongside these machines tall struts held up silos of churning material, and these in turn sheltered docks of instrumentation, arcane in design and disorienting in their scale. An occasional gleam announced the work of molecular fabbers cleaning and repairing. Standing on the high deck Johanna could easily see the great engine nesting at the center of the cavern. It shuddered and boomed, knocking all other sounds out of the air. The engine of Ahnenhoon.

From this distance it looked no larger than her fist. It crouched in two lobes like a metal heart. Within sight but not within reach. At floor level the engine nested in the center of an unbreachable maze. This was why she had come here tonight: to look for patterns. Somewhere in this cavern lay a path—a continuous course from the perimeter of the walls to the engine. Someday she would walk that path, to the heart of it. She gripped the rail and peered, searching for any route she could spy from this vantage point. Her eyes grew weary with the paths and their twists. She prayed for keen sight, being one who believed in prayer. But each lane that she traced through the valley of machines came to an end or fed back to the beginning. The maze held.

Nearby, perhaps three miles distant, the wall of the universe formed a

barrier between this cosmos and Earth's. The wall, crafted by vast and faultless technologies, resisted penetration. Yet this lobed engine could reach through, bringing about the collapse of all that she loved: the Earth and everything else beyond imagination to the ends of the folded, curving universe. It would not, Lord Inweer said, happen today or next year, but soon. In response to the siren call of the engine the Rose universe would fall in on itself in an instant. Thus collapsed it would burn so very brightly. A fine source of fuel and virtually an eternal one.

For all her intent gaze the maze kept its secret. No paths pierced the heart of the chamber; at least not one she could see. This excursion was a failure. God, of course, didn't owe her a revelation.

She felt more than heard a presence behind her. Turning, she saw her servant. The vile creature had followed her.

"SuMing," Johanna said, keeping her voice even.

SuMing bowed. As she did so her braid fell forward, a great rope of hair that hung to her waist.

"Did you bring my shawl? One is cold."

"Your shawl is in your apartments of course."

"Then you have a long walk back, SuMing."

With a hint of a smile, SuMing bowed to her mistress. She had no choice but to fetch the shawl. As she turned away she stopped suddenly, then bowed again, deeply this time, as another figure appeared from a side corridor.

It was the Tarig lord. SuMing must have alerted him. Johanna bowed to Lord Inweer. "Bright Lord."

In the early days his form had disquieted her, but no longer. Her lord's face was fine, even beautiful. One could become accustomed to anything, living with it long enough, Johanna had learned. The Tarig even seemed normal with their muscular, attenuated bodies and seven-foot height.

Standing before Johanna now, Lord Inweer's skin gleamed with a copper tinge as though he were cast from metal. SuMing hurried past him, causing his slit skirt to billow. "Stay," Lord Inweer said. The servant stopped and turned back, waiting on her lord's pleasure.

However, Inweer took no further notice of SuMing, his eyes fixed on her mistress.

“Johanna,” he said, his voice smooth and deep. “We find you abroad. Not sleeping, hnn?”

She had planned what to say if caught. With all the poise she could muster she turned from him, looking down into the chamber. “It called me. I had to see it.”

In four strides he stood next to her, his gaze sweeping the great hall one hundred feet below.

To Johanna’s dismay she found herself shaking. She breathed deeply to control this, but Inweer had already noticed.

“Afraid of heights, Johanna? Or afraid of us?”

“Both,” she answered, though only one was true.

On her back she felt the pressure of his hand, heavy and warm, without claws. Perhaps he believed her. She had served him well, and received his indulgence in return. Until lately, since the news had come that Titus Quinn had been seen again in the great Tarig city far away. And that he had fled, taking all the Tarig brightships with him. Now Inweer had cause to worry where her loyalties lay. He suspected that she still loved her husband, and she let him believe that. It conveniently explained her agitation these days. But she hoped that Titus had forgotten her. He should concentrate on more urgent matters. Such as this engine. If he knew it existed. Pray God that he did know it existed: She had risked everything to ensure that he did.

Inweer guessed that her thoughts were of her husband. “Titus did not rescue you when he came to the bright city. Did you think it possible?”

“No. Still . . .” She put on a wry smile. “My husband was always unpredictable.”

“We recall.” Once, long ago, Inweer had known Titus in the Ascendancy where the Tarig had kept him. All the ruling lords had known him. One had died of the experience.

Inweer watched her with an unblinking, black gaze. “You must shut your ears against the engine.”

“I can’t.”

“Other things which we required of you were eventually possible. You recall?”

Now he toyed with her. She dared to leave his question unanswered. Instead she murmured, “Why did you ever tell me, my lord?”

In his chambers one ebb-time when he had held her as she wept, he had murmured the thing that he thought might release her from longing. He had told her the purpose of the engine.

“We should not have done it if it deprives you of rest. An error?”

She put her hands on the railing, feeling the engine’s drumming even there. “Perhaps.” You made a mistake, she thought, a most profound mistake.

“Yes, an error,” he conceded. “We wished for you to give up your hope of home. It had sickened you. We favor that you remain well.” He added unnecessarily, “You will never go home.”

“If not, I wish always to be with you, Bright Lord.”

“Yes,” he murmured.

If it appeared that he had forgotten SuMing he now made clear that he had not. “SuMing,” he said, “come to us.”

SuMing appeared by his side, bowing low. “Bright Lord?”

Without looking at her but still gazing outward, he said, “Climb onto the railing.”

Her mouth quivered, then released the words, “Yes, Lord.” Wearing practical tunic pants, she climbed up, sliding her legs over the railing, locking her hands in position. She teetered ever so slightly.

Lord Inweer said, “Johanna, are you cold? You shake.”

“Yes, very cold.”

“SuMing,” he said, “remove your jacket.”

To do so SuMing had to remove one hand from the rail to undo the clasps. After a long fumbling at knots she undid the five buttons, dipping one shoulder to let the jacket fall away, leaving her with a small shift for a top.

“Hand it to your mistress.”

She did so and Johanna took the garment, locking glances with the terrified girl. The silks of the girl’s tunic rustled in the air currents from below.

“Now jump,” Lord Inweer said.

Without hesitation, SuMing let go, pushed off, and plummeted. In an instant Inweer had grabbed her braid, stopping her fall and ripping a terrible shriek from her. Then she hung quietly, her braid clutched in Lord Inweer’s hand.

Inweer's outstretched arm did not tire. He turned to Johanna. "Shall I open my hand?"

Below, SuMing hung perfectly still, keeping a terrible silence. Johanna wished she were strong enough to rid herself of this enemy. But not this way. "No, my lord," she whispered, "I will teach her to better please us."

He cocked his head. "If so."

She nodded.

Then Inweer raised his arm, lifting SuMing's limp body in an effortless maneuver that hauled her onto the railing. With his other hand he pulled her knees clear and deposited her on the floor, where the girl collapsed, twitching. A trickle of blood fell down her neck.

Ignoring SuMing, Inweer resumed his conversation with Johanna. "It all has a price," he said, gazing at the engine. "Even the gracious lords must pay a price for all we do."

Johanna watched SuMing shivering on the floor, her scalp pulled halfway from her head. She could not go to her yet.

Inweer went on. "You understand the price?"

"Insofar as I can."

"You can understand."

In saying this he required her to leave him blameless in the matter of the engine. The Tarig universe was failing, its power source rapidly depleting. Only one decent substitute existed: Johanna's universe. So the burning of the Rose was the price for the billion sentient lives gathered here in their far-flung sways and in their common hopes for life and love. The same things that people on Earth desired, which only one place could have.

SuMing inched away from the precipice and pulled herself into a ball, hugging her knees.

"SuMing," Johanna said, "can you walk?"

"Yes, mistress," she whispered.

"Then go to bed." Even traumatized and bleeding, SuMing should get out of Inweer's sight quickly.

SuMing looked up. Her expression might as easily have been hatred as gratitude. She crawled backward for a small distance, eyes on Lord Inweer. Then she managed to stand up and stagger away.

Johanna felt a cold river move through her, the currents of things to come. The person sitting on the rail might easily have been herself. It helped to watch how others faced a terrible death. SuMing had been brave.

Inweer held out an arm for her. "Now you will rest?"

She laid her hand on that hard skin, that tapering arm.

It would all be so simple if she despised this Tarig lord. But that was far from the case.

She looked into his dark eyes. "Yes," she said, answering whatever he had asked her. She must always say yes. Loving him, it was easy to do. In most things she gladly obeyed, serving him in all ways but one.