

STALKING THE

DEMON

By

Ciara Ballintyne

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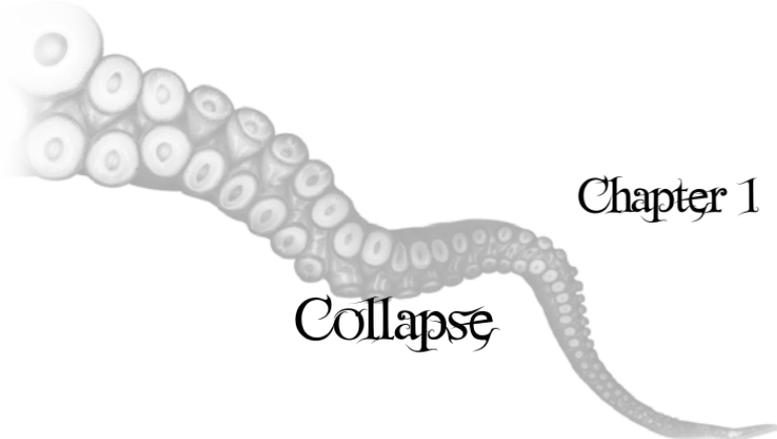
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Dedication

For my husband, Matt. Unlike many husbands, you don't have to endure recitations of the office gossip and who broke up with whom and why. Instead, you patiently listen to me recount the lives of imaginary people – lovers separated by gods, wizards torn in two by tentacled demons, evil in the shadows, and amazing feats of courage and sacrifice. Thank you.

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Chapter 1

Collapse

Alloran rushed through the citadel halls heedless of the rich carpets crushed beneath his heavy boots. Gisayne hung limply in his arms, and her black hair trailed over his elbow. A few people watched him pass, but none offered assistance. Over the past six months, Gisayne collapsed often enough to blunt the urgency and the panic. The faces turning in his direction bore only mild curiosity, oblivious to the fact that this time was different.

Her chest barely rose and fell beneath the thin cream silk of her night gown and robe, and blue tinged the edges of her bee-stung lips. Seven hells, was she dying? As he raced onwards, he clutched her against him and her cold skin pressed against his. With no left hand, he had no way to check for a pulse. A choked-back scream of desperate frustration tightened his chest until it squeezed the breath out of his lungs.

While juggling Gisayne, he fumbled with the latch on the door to the citadel's hospice. Damn his missing hand to the first hell. When the door finally

gave, he shouldered it open and backed into a long room lined with starkly made beds. The few occupied by sick or injured had curtains drawn for privacy. Braidmar, dressed in the red-trimmed white robes of a citadel doctor, bustled over at their entrance.

Orange brows pinched with concern over her violet eyes. ‘Again?’

‘She’s...’ The lump in his throat choked him. He swallowed hard. ‘She’s hardly breathing.’

‘This way.’ Pointing to an empty bed, Braidmar called out and strode to a door at the far end. Before she crossed halfway back, an unfamiliar girl in acolyte’s white appeared in the doorway.

Alloran placed Gisayne on the bed with gentle care. Her slack body slid from his arms, her skin pale. When he let her go, her eyelids fluttered but did not open. Nausea knotted his gut. The last time she’d fainted, the recovery was quick. Now, she looked as if death hovered over her, waiting for the moment to snip the thread of her life.

As Braidmar began checking Gisayne’s vitals, she waved Alloran off. He hesitated. What would he do except wait, patient, and idle while Braidmar tried again to determine what illness affected her? She would try and fail, most likely.

‘Are you sure this is not the falling sickness? It’s supposed to get worse with each successive bout.’

‘She’s not got the right symptoms. No seizures,’ Braidmar responded in precise, clipped tones.

Alloran frowned. He wasn’t an idiot. ‘Then what? These collapses are getting more frequent and

more severe! Seven hells take you, *tell* me. Whatever the illness, it can't be too complicated for me to understand.'

With her severe lips curving down, she sniffed. 'No amount of genius can assist you to comprehend a malady I cannot explain. While you've made any number of miraculous discoveries, you have no particular expertise in medical matters. Leave this to me.'

'The title of doctor is reserved *only* for those who have studied in the citadel, and yet you say *you don't know*? After all this time, you must have some notion.' Wisps of his black hair hung about his face, torn free of their bindings in his haste. He pushed them back with a rough motion. When they slid back into disarray, he tore the leather thong free and began tying his hair back with short, sharp motions.

The doctor scowled at him. At her nod, the acolyte whipped the curtain around the bed in a rattle of rings. The cloth brushed Alloran's nose; he jerked his head away.

A heartfelt sigh escaped his lips before he retreated to a waiting area that comprised a group of chairs. No, sitting still would be intolerable. He changed direction and paced the length of the room, passing the rows of identical empty beds. His boots echoed in the open space. Sterile and odourless air filled his nostrils.

Apparently, Braidmar shared the sentiments of many people in the citadel. Some blamed him solely for the demons that plagued the city of Ehsan six months earlier, and others accused him of working

with the renegade wizard, Ladanyon. Although Alloran wasn't subjected to a disciplinary hearing, the council's public announcement that they were banning him from all forms of magic involving the hells only reinforced the blame.

Seven hells, the councillors banned him *because* some of them felt the same as the other citizens. Those residents who lost loved ones in the battle against Ladanyon's first-circle demon were the most damning. Councillor Valgon's wife died, and he made no bones about believing Alloran to be a public menace. *I just can't prove it*, was what he said.

Alloran rubbed the stump of his left arm, but a phantom hand couldn't be scratched. Nevertheless, he tried. *You'd think cutting off your own hand would be proof enough of your innocence.*

The door opened accompanied by the squeal of its hinges to reveal Gisayne's father, Lord Wizard Harlden. He appeared hag-ridden with dark circles beneath eyes the same indigo shade as Alloran's and a pinched worried expression that didn't ease at the sight of him. A flat, velvet cap sat askew upon his head, and his grey-streaked black beard hung in uncombed tangles. Even the heavy gold chain of his office as the lord wizard and head of the citadel's ruling council dangled crooked around his neck. He seemed almost lost within the bulk of his puffed velvet doublet and mantle of black fur.

Alloran shifted his shoulders beneath the simple linen of his white shirt and plain, unadorned grey doublet. Coming upstairs was like being the one dove in a crowd of peacocks. Abandoning his pose as

a useless fop also meant turning his back on the complicated, uncomfortable fashion that went with the role.

To make matters worse, the mere sight of Harlden made him tense. Alloran's actions indirectly led to the loss of Gisayne's hand. Harlden never mentioned the matter to him, but it was undoubtedly the dragon in the room.

'Again?' Deep exhaustion was etched on Harlden's face, but his voice was sharp and almost accusatory.

Alloran gave a small nod. What was there to say?

'The same thing?'

'The same thing.' Seven hells, what he wouldn't give to offer some other answer—any answer. 'Inasmuch as an unknown and unidentifiable illness can be described as *the same thing*. Bredimar insists this isn't the falling sickness. She got quite short when I asked again. And it's getting worse. Gisayne is...she almost stopped breathing.'

Harlden grimaced, wrinkling the many new lines of stress scribed into his face, and lifted a hand to worry at his chain of office. 'Barely breathing? I thought you would have solved this by now.'

Demons and damnation. As if a wave of the hand would fix everything. Alloran bit back his response. Harlden was afraid. Hells, *he* was afraid too. 'Would that I could. Medical magic is not my strength.'

'You're a hell-damned indigo wizard. You'd think you'd have an affinity for healing.'

Forcing a smile, Alloran tried to ignore the fact he was making allowances for Harlden's distress while none were made in return. 'I guess one can't be talented at both research and medicine.'

'What if that benighted link to Ladanyon is making her sick?' Harlden's nostrils flared. 'What if you were wrong? What if the spell *does* still operate across dimensions?'

Alloran massaged his forehead in frustration. What if it did? Every test he could conceive said otherwise. Without a doubt, the lines of the one-way mirror spell continued to mar Gisayne's aura, but the link was as inactive now as before Ladanyon ignited the magic six months ago. The closing of the gate rendered it dormant, so Gisayne shouldn't be affected by Ladanyon's experiences in the first circle of hell.

Removing the spell would answer the question most definitively, but hours of study produced the same result—the lines of the spell twisted through dimensional space. The source magic was really in Ladanyon, and the threads wound through Gisayne largely originated in him. He struggled to think of a meaningful analogy. It was like...trying to stop a river here by damming the water downstream. In this instance, the river must be dammed upstream—at Ladanyon—before a stone could be dug out of the riverbed here.

He shook his head. 'It can't. It doesn't. I checked. Several times. And then I double-checked everything again.'

Harlden strode towards Gisayne's bed, stopped, and came halfway back. Momentarily halting

again, he reversed direction to take one step closer to the bed. He rubbed the back of his neck, and his gaze bounced around the room without settling on any one thing. The low discussion between Breidmar and her assistant buzzed in the background.

Alloran lowered his eyebrows. What was wrong with the man? Gisayne was lying here near to death, and Harlden fidgeted like a bored child. Or wasn't that enough to hold Harlden's attention? Seven hells, Gisayne's announcement of her impending marriage to Alloran certainly caught her father's attention. The entire citadel heard the ruckus, and it was no secret that Harlden considered Alloran to possess a magnetic attraction to trouble that was likely to bring his daughter to ruin. So why did he seem so distracted now?

Still rubbing his neck, the lord wizard came back towards Alloran but stopped short. 'A message arrived from the king today.'

Alloran's eyebrows twitched before he smoothed his expression. The king ostensibly ruled the kingdom of Idras from the city of Ehsan, leaving the citadel to itself and vice versa. But in reality, the citadel held the final authority at least as far as the city boundaries and influenced policy throughout the archipelago kingdom.

Harlden *was* agitated—he'd never share information like this outside the council of wizards ordinarily. Alloran assumed an expression of studied disinterest. A week's worth of urgent research, long nights, and little sleep meant he was behind on the news from the city—much less the king.

‘What did his majesty want?’

‘To complain, as per usual. Over the last four days, the city’s experienced a rash of inexplicable burglaries and kidnappings. Mostly insignificant trinkets and ordinary citizens. In some cases, rare and valuable items and personages of wealth and power.’ Harlden stared at the bed where his daughter lay out of sight.

‘That hardly seems a matter for your consideration.’

‘So I informed his majesty. I don’t expect a pleased response.’ Harlden’s face fell into the harried lines beginning to form permanent parts of the landscape of his visage.

Alloran chewed on his lower lip. For Harlden to share this information, and with him in particular, he had to be under significant pressure. He glanced towards the curtained-off bed, but the words of the doctor remained indistinguishable. Was Breidmar making any progress at all?

‘Perhaps, someone else needs to deal with the king, at least while Gisayne is sick.’

‘I tried.’ As his expression slumped into glumness, Harlden heaved a sigh. ‘The king says this has been going on for two months. Long enough to warrant my personal attention, he insists. I don’t know what he expects from me. If the law keepers can’t find a thing, why would I?’

Alloran whipped back around to face Harlden. ‘They haven’t found anything? By which you mean not even a single clue?’

‘Nothing. The best-protected items vanished from locked and guarded strongrooms. In one case, the vault of the city bank. The same for the most important personages. No one saw or heard anything. Not so much as a footprint in a garden bed has been found. To all appearances, everything just...vanished.’

Alloran wet his lips. Eight days ago, he detected a problem in the fabric of the fifteen dimensions. Disturbances in reality were probable, and sudden disappearances could easily be the first and least severe of the symptoms. But surely, the effects weren’t starting already... Then again, how long since the problem began all unnoticed? And now Harlden chose to divulge this information. Was he fishing? No, this must be common knowledge in the city.

Glancing towards Gisayne, he licked his lips again. Disappearances in the city, and now she was growing sicker. Were these events connected? They must be; he didn’t accept coincidences. If the boundaries between the hell dimensions blurred, would Gisayne’s link to Ladanyon activate? A leaden weight filled his belly. Seven hells, if Gisayne’s health depended on him solving this problem...

Could he have *caused* all this? Gisayne’s illness, the dimensional instability? He messed around with significant amounts of half-understood hell-magic in order to banish Ladanyon and his demon. Admittedly, that was an inadvisable course of action but desperate measures and all that. A few days of hurried research wasn’t enough to understand all the ramifications of a spell. Who knew what the consequences might be?

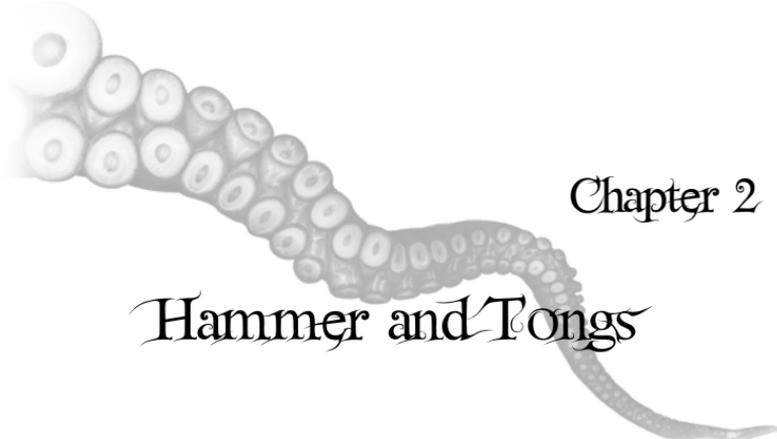
Not this, please. Anything but her.

‘I’m...sure you’ll find a solution,’ he said. Only silence came from the other end of the infirmary now. ‘I think this may take a while, and I have some things that need doing. I’ll...I’ll stop back later.’

‘What? Where are you going? Aren’t you staying with Gisayne?’ Bushy eyebrows lowered over narrowed eyes, and Harlden snatched at the sleeve of Alloran’s shirt. ‘You should be here for her, Alloran.’

Flinching, Alloran jerked away from Harlden’s grasp. *She needs me to save her. No one else can.* But he couldn’t say as much to Harlden.

He rushed out of the hospice, nearly slamming the door behind him.



Chapter 2

Hammer and Tongs

Alloran squinted as he stepped into the blazing light of his workrooms. The air reeked of the burnt odour of discharged energy and static. Despite the long walk to these lower tunnels of the citadel, Harlden's quiet accusation still rang in his ears. He should be with her, and she did need him. But what she needed from him right now was more than holding her hand.

His judgement of Harlden as an absent father left this truth somehow unconvincing. Another truth, which was that Ladanyon targeted Gisayne for her connection to Alloran, only compounded his guilt. The possibility of being the cause of everything, including Gisayne's illness, laid an impossibly heavy weight across his shoulders.

His eyes finally adjusted to the brilliance of the workroom lights. From her seat at the central workbench, Ashraque regarded him from beneath her black pillbox hat and veil. Pins secured the hat so tightly to her carefully curled and piled platinum blond hair that it didn't even shift at the movement. She

appraised him a moment with her unreadable amber eyes, which were typical for sorceresses who all had eyes of purple or yellow. One errant lock slipped free of her pins, giving her stern, angular features a touch of whimsy.

On the opposite corner of the square workbench, Dalvor stooped over his work under one of the blazing wizard lights that illuminated the windowless room. He didn't bother glancing up at the sound of the opening door. Black hair fell across his face, screening his expression.

As usual, he wore the latest fashions though his doublet wasn't quite so puffed and padded as Harlden's. Various parts of his clothing hung rumpled and out of order as if slept in. The hat that matched the expensive outfit was screwed up and abandoned on a spare stool.

Research assistants. Who needed them? Damn liabilities were all they were, and yet, the council of wizards saddled him with two. These weren't the first two—oh no. At first, he rejected a long string of them because he simply didn't want any. It was when the council made it clear they wouldn't compromise on that point that he realised his *assistants* were intended more to keep an eye on him for the council. Still, he rejected them because the sorceresses and wizards they sent just couldn't keep up.

While summoning demons or opening hell-gates and all related forms of magic were forbidden to Alloran, the study of the dimensions encompassed far more, extending even to the nature and origins of magic itself. Most of the so-called assistants lacked

interest in his field, but worse, *none* of them had any aptitude. A research assistant incapable of grasping even the bare fundamentals of inter-dimensional magic had no place in this lab. Even a spy should make himself useful.

Finally, the council sent Ashraque. A week later, Dalvor came. Both were hungry to learn what no one but Alloran could teach them, which was probably the reason the council held them back. Their thirst for Alloran's knowledge could sway their loyalties away from the council.

He stepped into the room, pushing the door shut behind him. Immediately, his gaze fell on the item in Dalvor's hands—a warhammer.

Alloran stiffened; the sudden tension in his shoulders verged on painful. That hammer was too delicate and dangerous of an object to be handled by a mere untrained assistant. He strode over and dragged the heavy weapon away from Dalvor. The metal scraped across the surface of the table. The head glowed with the light of infinitesimal runes, predominantly indigo smattered with amber and crimson.

'What do you think you are doing? No one is to work on this except me or under my direct supervision!'

Dalvor recoiled and blinked up at him too fast. Though the younger man possessed a wizard's jade green eyes, he always looked like some kind of underground rodent caught in blazing sunlight. 'I-I-I just wanted to study it. These spells, the interlocking runes, th-th-the way you've built layers of magic,

hoping t-t-to find and exploit any weaknesses the hellcats might have is exquisite.’

The thud of the hammer hitting the surface of Alloran’s own workbench cut off Dalvor’s stammering praise.

‘No one but me.’ He glared, enunciating each word with care.

The warhammer was for Dek, an experiment and a gift all rolled up in one. The mason would appreciate the irony of a weapon against hellcats, a threat he’d never face again, while for Alloran the hammer represented a puzzle solved. Two birds, one stone. The epitome of efficiency.

This didn’t breach the council’s restrictions. It didn’t. The hammer couldn’t open a gate or a window into hell, nor could it bring anything from a hell or allow anyone to venture into a hell. The hammer required only the knowledge he gained from his encounters six months ago. The ban had wiggle room.

‘Gisayne is ill again?’ An amorphous ball of amber and crimson energy shaped roughly like a hand sat cupped in Ashraque’s palms, and now she set it aside. The gold-worked sleeves of her dress were styled narrowly against the current fashion so as not to encumber her hands. ‘The news is all over the citadel.’

The anger ebbed as he stepped away from Dalvor. ‘Braidmar is searching for answers now.’

‘You’re not with her?’ Ashraque’s voice was cool and impersonal.

Alloran flinched. Amber sorceresses such as Ashraque were yellow-orange hybrids, who usually possessed a yellow’s unemotional logic.

‘I need a distraction.’ Impatient to get into his private laboratory and examine the numbers again, he almost jiggled on the spot. Gisayne needed a cure. ‘Are you making any progress?’

‘Some. It will work, given enough time.’

His fingers rubbed against the rough stubble on his chin. Time was running out. His stomach clenched. No, it was better to imagine Gisayne’s expression when he replaced her hand.

‘Keep working.’ He turned a baleful glare on Dalvor. ‘You go into Ehsan and bring Dek back. He’ll want to see Gisayne, and I don’t want him learning of this when it’s...when it’s...too late. Don’t touch that hammer again, except at my express instruction.’

Dalvor grimaced. ‘Can’t you send Ashraque? She seems to l-l-like going into the city. She v-v-visits often enough.’

The young wizard’s voice carried a whine that set Alloran’s teeth on edge. Ashraque’s lips curved in a fixed, brittle smile. Tension bubbled in the air like a caustic compound on the verge of overflow, and Alloran glanced from one to the other and back.

‘You have family in Ehsan?’ Alloran focused on Ashraque. She wasn’t citadel stock, but plenty of sorceresses and wizards came from beyond the walls of the city, including outside the borders of Idras. Her pale colouring suggested foreign blood.

Ducking her head away from his gaze, she dropped her chin into the lace edging the gold satin of her nigh-necked gown. ‘No.’

‘Just as well.’ A sneer twisted Dalvor’s lips. ‘Family j-j-just has the power to hurt you the worst.’

‘Yours is descended from Aehrik. I thought those kinds of relations had plenty of benefits.’

Alloran couldn’t even say as much. The so-called Destroyer of Worlds established the citadel thousands of years earlier. Hells, this world of Verusia owed its existence to him. A more prestigious line didn’t exist, and those who traced their ancestors back to Aehrik were some of the strongest red wizards and sorceresses known to the citadel. The blood consistently threw true and produced strong red magic.

Dalvor shrugged. ‘L-little good it’s done me.’

Unlikey. Alloran lifted a sceptical brow. Dalvor’s father was Councillor Valgon and a powerful crimson wizard, but he traded on the family name for political power. Harlden might be the lord wizard, but Valgon got what Valgon wanted. Almost certainly, Dalvor became the councillors’ choice for the position as Alloran’s research assistant because of his family—though perhaps not necessarily through his father’s direct influence.

None of it mattered. Valgon made it clear that he believed Alloran should be permanently locked up before he accidentally did something else to put the citadel in peril. *Thank the seven bells, he hasn’t succeeded on that mad crusade yet.* There was plenty of ill will towards Alloran, but the council didn’t consider him criminal. Well, except Valgon.

‘I’ll go if you want. Or not. I don’t care.’ Ashraque spoke before Dalvor.

The tension deepened, but neither said anything further.

Alloran pointed at the door to the hall. 'Just someone fetch Dek.'

He crossed to the warded door in the opposite wall without waiting to see who obeyed. It was wasteful, sending a wizard to do a servant's job. They were all argumentative and egotistical. But since Dek possessed no magic to access the citadel, a wizard was the only choice.

Ordinarily, he'd go himself, since the bond forged by months of companionship carving stone and surviving the tentacle horror deserved that much. Nevertheless, no one possessed the same degree of understanding of the dimensions or Gisayne's link to Ladanyon as Alloran—he must stay and research.

A small surge of magic released his warding spells in a brief indigo flash of expended power. He turned the handle. On the other side lay the rooms converted for use as his suite complete with bedchamber and private workspace. Closing the door cut off the murmur of conversation between Dalvor and Ashraque. Though the words were indistinguishable, her voice sounded low and angry. Dalvor's replies seemed like mumbled deflections.

Like the lab itself, the room was windowless, but the glowing balls of light suspended against the ceiling were dimmer here. This far down in the citadel, rooms were carved out of the mountainside. The walls were rough-hewn granite still marked by chisel and hammer.

He ran his hand along the textured surface next to the doorway and closed his eyes. Those months spent carving the statue with Dek were

peaceful. Each day, he immersed himself in the rhythmic chiselling and polishing as they brought the likeness of King Dohnagel out of the rock. Now, he couldn't even look at that half-finished statue with crumbling stone tentacles wound around without reliving that day.

The horror of the first-circle demon writhing into the square, wizards and sorceresses screaming and dying, their bodies torn apart like blood-soaked rags, and the thunder of falling walls and collapsing masonry was so vivid. And above the chaos rang the wild, maniacal laughter of Ladanyon as he surveyed what he had wrought and found it pleasing.

He forced his eyes open to banish the dreadful images and the echo of Ladanyon's laughter. Six months ago, all he wanted was to get his old pampered life back. Now, he would give anything just to have a few peaceful hours carving a statue.

The corner serving as his sleeping area was partitioned off with a three-panelled timber divider adorned with fantastical images of dragons battling across a cloudy sky. The wood surface appeared scratched and in need of oiling. His bed was large with the sheets and blankets pulled up neatly and filled most of the space behind the screen. A small table with drawers sat alongside the bed, and a tall wardrobe for his clothes stood on the other side. The grey stone floor at the foot of the bed was covered with a scrap of rug, and a couple of moth-eaten tapestries hung on the wall. Nothing matched. But no one visited him except Gisayne, so what did it matter?

The rest of this room held a workbench pushed against one wall that was covered with the tools and compounds of his craft, a long-legged stool, and a large table. The floor remained bare in the work area. No point damaging even old rugs with spilt acid.

The work he concealed from Ashraque and Dalvor was kept here. And on the table rested something the council didn't know about—something Alloran probably shouldn't know about.

A complex construct of wires, string, and magic filled the table's surface. Unlike models of the solar system where each planet orbited the model sun on tiny gears, this one modelled the relationship between the fifteen dimensions: the seven circles of hell, the seven celestial levels, and this reality of Verusia.

A clever spell of his devising caused the model to change to mirror the actual state of the dimensions in real time. A nice trick but sadly an adaptation of the magic linking Ladanyon to Gisayne. That spell was the perfect base since it only worked one way—Gisayne mirroring Ladanyon but not the reverse. He clenched his jaw. Building on Ladanyon's work was an experience he didn't care to repeat.

The model was unbalanced. The seven coloured-circles to the left of the orb symbolising Verusia should've been concentric and evenly distributed. Instead, the fourth circle expanded to overlap the fifth that swelled out into the seventh. The sixth contracted, so that it lay between the fifth and fourth circles. The inner-most first hell strayed to the far side of the second circle. On the other side, the

celestial levels contracted closer to each other but not closer to Verusia.

A rule and other tools rested alongside the model. Picking up the rule to take new measurements, he balanced the end of the tool on his left arm when needed. After each measurement, he noted the result down on the wax tablet. With only one hand, he held the tablet in place by rolling his wrist awkwardly to the side. A nearby journal contained a copious amount of notes on all the observed changes as well as everything he discovered, learned, hypothesised, and wildly speculated during his intensive bout of research.

Gisayne used to come down to make sure he ate and slept a few times. Not knowing the importance of the work, she nevertheless accepted his frenzied obsession as part and parcel of loving a man who loved puzzles. Hells, he didn't know then that her life might hang on his research. At the same time, if he hadn't been so focused on his work, he would've been there when she collapsed. Instead, he found her in the wee hours of this morning when he went looking for too little sleep in the comfort of her bed instead of the cold loneliness of his own.

It was maddening. He did the right thing; he knew that now. But given his knowledge at the time, he should've been with Gisayne. Was he doomed to second-guess every reasonable action?

Though the changes in the model were indiscernible to the naked eye, the numbers didn't lie. The dimensions drifted closer together since his last notations twenty-four hours earlier. But if Gisayne's illness were connected, when did this start? Her first

collapse was about nine weeks after Ladanyon's banishment with another one six weeks after that. Then they happened at intervals of four and three weeks with the second to the last one occurring two weeks ago.

He set the stylus down and rested his elbows on the bench, focusing the inter-dimensional energies into the spells needed to refresh and repair any decay in the model. Indigo light, the only visible sign of his magic, flashed and died fast.

Sighing, he leaned back. Gisayne's episodes were becoming more frequent. At the same time, the hells were collapsing inwards and drawing closer to Verusia at an accelerating rate. Somehow, there *had* to be a connection between the dimensional reintegration and her illness. He stared at the model, pensive.

The seventh hell almost crossed into physical reality. The celestial levels were harder to read since for several centuries their denizens screened them from mortal view. But the left side of the model rattled against the bars of distant memory.

On another wall, a bookcase held his personal journals, research notes, and a moth-eared, much-thumbed collection of books. He reached for a history bound in faded red leather rather than any magical theory or dissertation. How long was it since he opened this book? Fifty years? With one eye on the model to remind himself of its proportions, he flicked through the tome, turning each page by pinching the paper between his thumb and forefinger.

There. He stopped and leafed back half a dozen pages, concentrating on the crabbed script. A

few glances from page to model confirmed that the similarity was close enough to be more than coincidental. Under the diagram, the caption read: *Evolution of the fifteen dimensions from the pre-history state of Geruk into the world of Verusia and its attendant seven bells and seven celestial levels.*

His model depicted a reversal of the movement shown in the diagram. Was the world returning to its primeval form?

A dull ache throbbed in his temples, and he massaged one side of his head. The pain resisted. It was a novel puzzle and one too frightening to excite the smallest spark of enthusiasm. Should he tell the council? But then, tell them what? All he had were suspicions: no proof of what caused the problem, no solution, and no escape.

He must've caused this by forcibly closing the hell-gate or banishing the demon. The possibility of unforeseen consequences was always the risk of hasty research and untested magic. Did he unwittingly tear something in the dimensional fabric? If so, the hole eluded discovery.

Aehrik the Destroyer closed the great conduits between dimensions, thus changing the paths of the planar winds and driving the dimensions apart. Re-opening a conduit, even a small one, might have the opposite effect. That would explain why his model resembled the diagram in the book. A tear explained Gisayne's illness too. Her link to Ladanyon could've been re-establishing episodically through a tiny breach—perhaps too briefly or tenuously to be detected.