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NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR



HOW ABOUT ANOTHER SNEAK PREVIEW OF

THE ENGINEER

THE LAST HORIZON
BOOK TWO



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WILL
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THE ENGINEER

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CHAPTER THREE

SHYRAX'S PERSONAL TRAINING room was a hundred yards long, with a cavernous ceiling and a thickly cushioned floor, made to give under the impact of falling Karoshan bodies. Machines lined the walls, but Shyrax had no interest in them at the moment.

She spoke a single command word and golden Aetheric circles lit up all over the walls. "The training room is now prepared to contain a magical contest." She drew her wand and turned to face Varic. "You are an Archmage of binding. Inspect the spells if you wish."

Varic's silver eyes roamed over the symbols with what she would call mild curiosity. "My compliments to the designer of your warding spells."

Melerius whispered to Shyrax from the ring in which he was sealed. *"Even with his defenses weakened, he will be a defensive specialist. It will send the strongest message to the Starship if you overwhelm his shields."*

Varic hadn't drawn his wand, so Shyrax kept hers pointed down. "Just an exhibition, isn't it?" he asked.

"If *The Last Horizon* sees our abilities and judges one of us superior, I will be satisfied."

"As will I." Varic glanced over to the sidelines, where wary Karoshan soldiers kept weapons ready to train on the intruders.

Shyrax still wore her armor. If armed strangers hadn't been watching her, she might have removed it for the duel, but she wasn't foolish enough to expose herself to assassination. She kept a sharp eye on Varic's exchange, looking for any signs that he intended to cheat.

"Don't interfere," Varic warned his crew members.

Sola didn't respond, but Raion clapped a fist to his chest. "Never!"

"I'm not kidding. Stay there."

"I wouldn't interfere in a sacred duel!"

Varic didn't look reassured, but he turned back to Shyrax and extended a hand. "You first, Your Highness."

That pride would be his undoing.

Shyrax spoke a word that conjured the majesty of the solar dragons. Gold light shone from the end of her wand, a roar echoed through the training room, and illusory wings flared out from behind her.

Varic's makeshift mantle fluttered in the wind, but he showed no signs of chanting. He watched her calmly, so she continued speaking her incantation.

With every syllable, her spell grew stronger. The power of dragons built to a crescendo until it seemed a dragon made of plasma was crouched before her wand.

Sparks flew from around her, and magical symbols lit up around the floor, dispersing the heat and preventing her from melting her floor.

"I don't know how good he really is," Melerius muttered, "but he certainly thinks he's good."

Varic still hadn't reached for his wand.

Shyrax unleashed her spell.

A dragon conjured from the Aether shot from her wand like a slice of star-fire, sending off waves of hot air.

Varic slapped it apart.

With one gesture and a single word, he splattered the dragon to golden light.

Shyrax controlled her astonishment, revealing nothing on the outside. Inwardly, she examined the trick.

He must have known my magic ahead of time, she mused.

Melerius stuttered as he replied. *“Th-that’s it. I’m certain. Clever of him, to prepare binding magic for your spell in advance.”*

Clever and skilled, to both craft a countermeasure and execute it with split-second timing. Shyrax folded her arms.

“You’ve done well. Now, it’s your turn.”

Varic nodded. “As you suspected, I was aware of your spell. To even the odds, I’ll give you a chance to observe my spell closely as I cast.”

There was the heroic spirit *The Last Horizon* must have seen in him. If he was skilled enough to match her in magic, she would keep him on as a mage.

Varic raised his hand, not his wand, and traced a simple symbol.

The Aether trembled.

All over the room, the protective magic circles stuttered like faulty clockwork. Those in the room who didn’t practice magic seemed not to notice, but Melerius drew in a long breath.

Shyrax’s eyes widened further than they had when he’d dispersed her spell. He had layered so much meaning into one simple gesture that it rivaled a full spell. Was this the power of Varic’s basic Aetheric control?

Varic spoke one word, beginning an incantation.

Aetheric symbols appeared and disappeared in the corner of the rooms like sparks. Shyrax had never heard the incantation he was invoking, but she knew its meaning nonetheless: it meant ‘to be locked away.’ Perhaps ‘to be sealed eternally.’

Silver eyes now appeared to her like twin blades, ready to split her in half.

Shyrax raised her wand again on sheer instinct, pulling up defensive spells, but abruptly the flow of the Aether returned to normal. Varic lowered his hand and stopped chanting, the magic circles on the walls returned to their healthy spin, and an indefinable pressure lifted.

"Summon me," Melerius said urgently. "I need to see him with my own eyes. I can't imagine what he is, unless...Perhaps one of the Progenitor Aethril has taken a human form? Or he could be possessed by a World Spirit..."

Varic looked to Shyrax's side. "By all means, look for yourself."

Shyrax straightened. Of all the things Varic had done, this caught her attention the most. No one had noticed Melerius before he had chosen to manifest.

No one except one of the so-called Perfected.

Mist swirled out of Shyrax's ring, forming into an elderly, bearded human. The ancient Archmage, Melerius, bowed to Varic. *"My apologies, young one. I am Archmage Melerius, advisor to Queen Shyrax. I do not intend to spy, but I am most intrigued. If you don't mind?"*

Varic spread his hands. "I'm an open book."

Melerius spoke a word and magic symbols flashed around his eyes. He was the Archmage of a magic that allowed him to interact with the Aetheric structure of sentient beings; what many would call the soul.

This magic had allowed him to bind a copy of his consciousness to an artifact, to preserve his wisdom beyond the grave. It also allowed him to see into the nature of people. He would be able to see the origin of Varic Vallenar's magic.

The ghost gave a startled shriek.

Magic circles around his eyes flickered and vanished, but he still shuddered as he looked at Varic. *"You...I...How many of you are there?"*

"Seven," Varic said.

"Explain," Shyrax commanded.

"You cannot defeat this man in a contest of magic. No mortal can. He has seen into the Aether, and it has chosen him." For the first time since Shyrax had known him, Melerius sounded in awe. *"I would beg the opportunity to learn from this man, Your Highness."*

"If we have time," Varic responded.

Shyrax slammed her wand back into her belt. "So. I am not your

equal in magic." She dipped her head and bowed to him. "Thank you for the instruction. I concede the match for *The Last Horizon* and apologize for the disrespect."

Shyrax looked eagerly to the other two members of *The Last Horizon*. "Did you defeat them as well?"

The Visiri raised a red hand. "He defeated me! I almost caught him with a draw."

"I don't see why we would choose crew positions on single combat," Sola said.

"Merely a means of demonstrating our mastery," Shyrax said. "Naturally, the Zenith Starship wishes to know if we have the stuff of heroes. As do I. Raion Raithe, would you do me the honor?"

Raion folded his arms with a triumphant look on his face. "No! I swore I would not interfere!"

"You can take this one, Raion," Varic said.

"But your duel isn't finished!"

Shyrax wondered if Raion did not feel the duel had been appropriately decisive. "I am satisfied with my defeat. Captain Varic has proven his mastery."

Raion's three eyes were blank. "You...you didn't do anything, though."

Varic held up a hand. "It's courtesy among wizards, Raion. When our magic connected, she could feel my sincere heart."

"Oh, of course! I'm sorry. In that case, I would be delighted to be the next to introduce myself!"

Shyrax looked to Varic in confusion, but he gave her a gesture that said not to worry about it.

Raion walked up next, pulling a force-blade from his belt. "You know a Combat Art, don't you?"

"I am the ninth-generation master of the Imperial Execution Style."

An aura of red light spread over Raion as he released his internal energy, lifting his white hair. "I am proud to represent the Dance of a Burning World!"

Varic muttered incantations, flinging protective seals around

the room. One of her Karoshan mages stared in awe while the other began snapping pictures.

The defensive magic raised Shyrax's expectations for Raion's skill. She ignited her gold force-blade, extending it to point toward Raion's crimson one.

"Show me what it takes to be the Knight of *The Last Horizon*," Shyrax said.

Then she moved into the first step of the Imperial Execution Style. She slashed out horizontally, the Aether extending the slash in a wave of golden light.

She trusted the defensive magic to protect the bystanders. And her training room. Not only had Melerius vouched for Varic's skills, but her own analysis of the magic circles suggested they would be sturdy enough.

Her Combat Art was difficult to use aboard a starship, in normal circumstances. Its movements invoked the Aether to extend and empower her strikes, piercing through defenses. It was made to execute worms that burrowed through moons and bisect war-mechs.

It was easier to tear a starship in half than to keep the hull intact.

As expected, Raion destroyed her attack, but what stunned Shyrax was the effect his movements had on her own Combat Art.

Where her golden slash made contact with his scarlet one, Shyrax's attack burned away. It was as though his each movement carried a hungry red flame that devoured all that opposed him.

Raion raised his left hand, hurling a ball of crimson energy, but Shyrax had fought Visiri duelists before. She split the ball with her next attack, which also extended to take Raion's life.

He pierced through it, and in the Aether, his thrust felt like a spear made of flame.

The enchantments on Shyrax's breastplate lit up, protecting her from the aftermath of his attack as she turned it aside, but Raion was attacking again. And again. He stayed on the offensive, fluid as a river. His speed was so great that he was a blur; if she were human, she wouldn't be able to keep up.

With magically extended slashes, Shyrax defended herself. She

pushed herself further and further to meet his blows, faster and faster, using the skills that had cut through small armies. This Combat Art had saved her life against the ambush of the rebels. And now here she was, on the defensive, desperate just to stay in the fight.

Incredible.

She couldn't blink for fear of missing a movement, and each of her swings was executed with more concentration than before. The air was filled with a strobing red-and-gold light as they fought, the ship shook, and several of the protective seals had begun to crack.

This was what she sought. She needed allies like these to defeat the Perfected.

In her excitement, Shyrax couldn't shake off a question. Had she pushed Raion to his limit? Could he go further?

Though she normally disdained such tactics, this time Shyrax reached for her wand. While warding him off with the blade in her right hand, she leveled the wand in her left and spoke a quick word.

A misty dragon claw formed from the Aether and struck at Raion from behind.

A helmet formed on his head and the claw crashed against it. Shyrax's spell was dispersed.

Red fire formed beneath her feet, and she deactivated her force-blade to accept the attack. She had lost, so she would take her punishment and let the fire connect.

"I am truly defeated," she said, waiting for the rush of heat.

None came. A white magic circle spun beneath her and sealed off Raion's Combat Art before the move completed.

"No need for that," Varic said.

Raion leaped over in front of Shyrax, seizing her arms and looking up into her eyes with desperate energy. "Defeat is no reason to embrace death! You have so much to live for!"

"My enchantments would have protected me from true injury," Shyrax said seriously. "But I have earned the pain with my pride."

Raion gave her an encouraging pat. "No!" Then he backed up, paying no attention to the Karoshan guns and wands that had been trained on him since he had laid a hand on her.

Shyrax turned to Sola next. "If you are as skilled as they are, I am afraid I may have nothing left to offer *The Last Horizon*."

"I won't fight you unless you make me," Sola said.

Varic cut in, sliding smoothly between Shyrax and Sola. "We came here because you are exactly who we need, Your Highness. With your permission, I'd like to invite you aboard *The Last Horizon*, where we can give you an official offer."

Shyrax looked to her soldiers, several of whom immediately protested. "I am going, but I will not abandon you. I will return to you soon." She ignored their continuing arguments and extended a hand to Varic.

"Show me, Captain."

How great was that?

You can get the whole book on December 5, 2023!



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