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Reading Article GP2

Article #19: Excerpt from GUARDIAN OF THE DARK

by Bev Spencer

Air shaft-crawling had been a fine, daring thing to do in their younger days, but Duff was in line for an apprenticeship as a toolmaker — one of the most respected skills in Senedu. Duff was ready to settle into the pattern expected of him. Being caught in the air shafts could change all that.

"I shouldn't have asked you to come. If they catch us you'll lose your apprenticeship." Gen hesitated. "You stay here. I'll go alone."

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that, Gen's time would be even less his own. Four servants would watch his every move and nag him about every appointment. He wouldn't be able to see Duff. Official duties would drive a permanent wedge between the friends. Gen was determined to squeeze the last bit of companionship out of the time remaining to them. Wandering the air shafts was the best possible way to spend that time.

There was something compelling about the endless maze of narrow passages carrying fresh air from room to room. Even five seasons of furtive exploration had not revealed all their secrets to the boys. Directions became confused in the darkness. It was impossible to tell what little-used storage chamber or dusty cul-de-sac lay around the next bend. This was far different from their everyday world, in which every corridor had been numbered and known from their earliest years.

"How did you get your father's servants off your back this time?" Duff asked.

"I told them we needed absolute privacy to study. We weren't to be disturbed."

Duff frowned. "I've been wondering lately. What if there's a reason for the air shafts being off limits?"

"There is a reason," Gen said. "The adults can't go there!"

The tunnels were too narrow a fit for fully grown men. The Guardian's servants could not follow Gen in.

Duff chuckled. "All right, turnip-brain. Just promise you'll turn back in thirty minims. We can't afford to be late for Truth Time again! We're still on report for the last time."

"I promise. Are you coming or aren't you?"

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exhausted. Still, Gen and Duff were adept at moving quickly in confined spaces, and they had soon left the more familiar shafts behind.

What Gen found in the dark tunnels was an illusion of freedom, not the real thing. And not just because he had to go back to classes, chores, an endless round of duties. Senedu was a closed world. The green caverns, where crops were grown under light-giving lenses, led to the kitchens and the dining chambers. The study halls led to the artisans' workshops and the meeting rooms. The sleeping chambers led to the games rooms. All of them led to the Hall of Waters — the enormous underground lake that furnished their carefully measured drinking water. None of the corridors led anywhere else. The boys might become disoriented in the air passages, but they could not really get lost. They had only to loosen a grating and drop through into a familiar chamber or corridor. Wherever they went, they would be in Senedu, their known world. Because beyond Senedu, there was nothing. The doors were sealed. There was no way out.

To Gen and Duff, the word Sky was something to be memorized for a test — a cavern larger than any other. Gen suspected sometimes that it had never existed, that it was a story the adults liked to tell. The controlled caverns of Senedu — the cool rock against Gen's hands as he crawled, the dust in his nose, the glimmer of oil lamps through the gratings as Gen and Duff slipped quietly past — these things were real and familiar. Too familiar!

The boys squeezed past a rock fall. Sharp corners of stone bit into Gen's hands. He welcomed the sensation. The corridors of Senedu had no sharp edges, no litter, no surprises. Even if the Vandals disturbed the order, the destruction they left was soon mended. Order, Balance, Rules — that was Senedu.

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