

# THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL

by

Sharon Green

The Renthan brought us into the area of pillars, their gait rapid but short of a gallop of alarm. They, as we, knew there were sniffers at our heels out there in the night, but none were immediate pursuers of evil intent. Had they been able to follow us into that place of Power, the evil of their intent would likely have grown, but this the shining blue radiance of the place disallowed. We would be safe for the darkness, and perhaps by dawn the skulkers would be found to have gone elsewhere.

"Have any of you ever sheltered here before?" Derand asked the other men as he dismounted, the stroke of his hand thanking his Renthan for having carried him. "For all the riding I have done over Escore, never have I been in this place."

The others looked at one another as they, too, dismounted, but none spoke up as being familiar with the place we had taken shelter in. Even the Renthan were silent upon the point of familiarity, and this soured Derand to an even greater extent than the long day had done.

"So first we must ride into the unknown by day, and now we must trust ourselves to it for the darkness," he said to me, coming closer to assist me from the back of the Renthan who bore

me. "For all this we have you to thank, Merilan, and for what pursuit we pick up as well. I sincerely hope you continue to find yourself pleased with your actions."

"I do continue to find myself pleased with my actions," I returned as I accepted his assistance, determined not to show how the sting of his words had upset me. "It was not I who set you and these others to follow after me, nor was it I who refused to return alone once I had been found. And this is a place of Power. Surely we will be safe here if anywhere."

"What safety we find remains to be seen," he answered, scowling down at me where I stood. "The blue of this place feels a trifle odd, but in what manner I cannot say. And had it not been for the pleading of your lady mother, we would not have come in pursuit of you. Your own oddness has been a thorn in our sides for too long, Merilan, and I, for one, have tired of it. You will speak to me now of your purpose in leaving our settlement alone, on foot, with none to guide or protect you. What silly, female notion set you to such a thing?"

"My reasons are for my own thoughts, Derand," I replied, feeling the heat rise to my cheeks as I sought a dignity I found difficult to attain under his stare. "You have the need to pursue warrior arts, and I pursue needs of my own."

"Once we have returned, you will pursue no other thing than preparing to be wed to my brother," he said, heavy annoyance clear in him despite the dusk we stood in. "Had he not been otherwise occupied it would have been he who rode after you, and his questioning would not have had the gentleness of mine. As soon as you have been restored to your lady mother I will speak with my brother, and then we will see whose thoughts your reasons are for."

He turned then and stalked away to join the others who had already begun building a fire and unpacking provisions, leaving me with the heaviness of spirit I had come to expect at the mention of Tullin, brother to Derand and the man chosen to be my husband. Our manless, landless household had been honored when Tullin had spoken of his desire to take me to wife, and my mother had accepted the honor with great relief. I, knowing her happiness, had been unable to speak my own feelings upon the matter, which had left me bound into a situation I

found well-nigh repellent. Tullin was much like Derand, only more so, and had there perhaps been another about who was filled more with the true spirit of so many of Escore men, my mother might have seen him in his true light . . . If, perhaps, there had been another, only there had not been.

I turned away from the knot of men and their fire, finding the quickly gathering dark a good deal more appealing than their company. Among those pillars the darkness of night seemed softer than usual, untinged with the apprehensions usually to be found, a refuge and haven rather than a menacing threat. Even the cool of the night air urged one to stroll rather than to retreat to the warmth of a fire, therefore did I succumb to the urge and begin to move about the area.

Even without the light of day as an aid, I soon discovered that the pillars about us had runes upon them, and not the runes we were used to seeing here and there about Escore. The blue-glowing carvings seemed to be as odd as Derand had suggested, and in some way that very oddness put me at ease. It was, perhaps, an oddness to match my own, one I had never spoken of to anyone, but one that had sent me out into hostile lands alone, seeking what no other had ever sought.

I sighed as I thought of that errand again, dreading the time Tullin would demand an explanation of my actions. What woman of sense would go off on her own, he would shout, exposing herself to the evil that lived and lurked all about in our land? How was I to say that I disbelieved in evil, that I had found it necessary to seek it out where it dwelt in order to learn what it truly was? Even if he were to believe my words, which he would not, he would surely never understand what lay behind them. In Escore one grew up in the shadow of evil and Dark Powers, knowing their reality, only one who was bereft finding it possible to deny them . . .

And yet I found it necessary to do no other thing than deny them. I could not, of myself, *accept* the concept of evil, in a way I found difficult to put into words. Certainly there was evil, the results of the use of Dark Powers, and certainly both existed. But what *was* evil, at the very root of its reality and existence? What was it composed of, and why did everyone fear it rather than ignore it? I, myself, felt no fear of it, only an impa-

tience with the very thought of it, and no attraction to it whatsoever. Why was it at the center and core of everyone's thinking? I had often wondered, but of late the wondering had grown to a burning demand within me . . .

Which had sent me out a-searching on my own, with supplies sufficient to keep me alive until I was able to return. A day and a half I had traveled alone, finding nothing, and then I had begun feeling that I neared what I sought. I continued on, taking encouragement from the very air around me, losing track of the days, suddenly discovering that my supplies were not as sufficient as I had thought, and then Derand and the others had found me—before I found what had called to me so.

A broken branch on the ground caught at the hem of my dress, distracting me from the distress of my thoughts but scarcely banishing that distress. I had little choice about returning home, but how was I to go back without finding what I so needed to find? And how was I to explain that need to those who would ask? Had I been able to speak to one of the Green Silences I might perhaps have made myself clear, but women of our settlement were forbidden to associate with those allies of Power. Our men fought in their cause because it was also our own, but they had no wish to see their women "tainted" with the doings of magic. They had had so difficult a time with the wise women of Estcarp . . .

Which meant none of our women were even permitted an examination to see if they possessed the capacity for Power of their own. Our men refused to consider the presence of witches in their midst, refused to allow even the thought of it, and those of us who had grown from childhood with an emptiness and yearning deep inside had early been taught never to speak of it. Or to question it. The yearning would cease when we married, we had been told, and that would be an end to it.

"But what am I to do until then?" I whispered to the soft, deepening dark, feeling as though it stretched an arm about me in an attempt at comfort. "And what if I have no desire for such an end? And what if, even after my marriage, the end fails to come? What will I do?"

For an instant it seemed as though the runes decorating the pillars shone a more intensified blue in answer, but when I

looked directly at them they were just as they had been. My need for understanding and support was so intense, then, that I was beginning to imagine things, I thought. Even the close presence of odd, lifeless runes was preferable in my mind to standing alone and friendless . . .

"Merilan, come here to the fire," Derand called, the command in his voice allowing no room for argument. "You have indulged in enough wandering these past days, and I mean to have no more of it."

I turned about to see that he stood by the fire, his eyes directly on me, at that distance no more than a dark outline of a man. A dark shadow, I thought, vehemently on the side of Light, but nevertheless of the Dark when viewed in a certain way. Was that part of what I sought, a true understanding of the difference between Light and Dark? To say that one was good and the other bad was in reality saying very little, at least to *my* mind. What was bad for one was a blessing for another, no evil to be found in it at all. How could such a thing be, when good and evil were supposedly entirely at odds with each other, no points at all in common? One was expected to *know* the difference between the two, and so most did. But did they judge the matter weighing the two points separately, or was it personal taste and bias that brought about decision . . .

"Merilan, bring yourself over here *now!*" Derand insisted, his annoyance growing almost visibly. "Would you have me tell Tullin you refused to obey me?"

I knew he would likely tell Tullin exactly that, but the thought that he might not was enough to start me walking quickly toward him. It would be difficult enough for me when I returned, and I could scarcely bear the thought of additional difficulty. I was in a turmoil of questioning and doubt, my mind aching . . .

And then the sight of Derand was gone, along with the solidity of the ground under my feet! I cried out once as I began to fall, my heart thumping wildly, but it was not a bottomless pit I had been plunged into. I fell no more than a very short distance before my booted feet hit something of slick metal, and then I was seated and sliding, down, down, into the ground. At first, shock kept me motionless and silent, but then a sense of the

absurd came to replace that. To be taken by the unknown was cause for fear and trembling, but how frightening was sliding expected to be?

My ride to the bottom was not long enough to answer the question. A faint blue radiance had been visible from the very first, and when I reached the bottom of the slide I was able to see rather well by it. What I slid on was indeed of metal, and it straightened at its bottom so that I came to a stop on it rather than abruptly finding myself off it and into physical harm. The distance was not all that much below ground, and rather than being in the dark of a cavern I looked about to see the stately walls of a large, neat room. The blue radiance seemed to spread to all the corners of it, illuminating it gently for ease of viewing.

Swinging my legs off the metal slide brought me to my feet, and I stood there brushing at the skirt of my dress, looking about at the place I had unexpectedly come to. There were runes and figures carved into the walls and others implanted in the smooth marble of the floor, and as I stood there a faint humming came to me, as though something in the room lived. I moved some steps away from the slide, in some way knowing I had nothing to fear there, and heard next the tinkling of a fountain. Behind the happy tinkling was the faint, far-distant sound of the joyous laughter of children, as though that, too, were contained in the room. Looking about again showed me nothing but the room, a quiet door hidden beneath the metal slide, but the sounds continued to follow me as though the very air contained them.

I circled the room filled full with curiosity and enjoyment, wondering how I knew I was welcome in that place, wondering at the eager, vital life force to be found in so quiet and ordered a chamber. The room was old, I knew, older than a mere lifetime or two, but the dust of ages had not come to smother the lovely blue of its glow. I felt then that the room itself, rather than something in it, lived and hummed, and rather than being frightened the thought pleased me.

My circling at last returned me to the place beside the slide, and when I glanced again into the center of the chamber I saw something I had somehow missed the first time. In its very heart stood two slim, shimmering silver pillars, and between them, as

though contained by their very presence, a cloud of soft, flowing blue. Calm was that cloud, and beautifully warm despite its color, and filled with a peace that one had only to touch in order to share. My need for that peace was so intense that I found myself moving toward the pillars without thought, desire alone enough to send me forward. I meant to touch it and gain what my desperation cried out inside me for, but I was still four or five steps from it when I was unexpectedly halted.

"Merilan, what are you doing in this accursed place?" Derand's voice came, harsh with fear and suspicion. "Why did you fail to answer when I called to you?"

I turned to see that Derand and two of the others had already come down the slide, a third arriving even as I watched. They stood with swords bared and eyes narrowed, too far drawn in upon themselves to feel what the chamber offered them. They were intruders in a place never meant for their kind, but even so the room continued to attempt to welcome them.

"I heard nothing of anyone calling," I answered, feeling again that inner shrinking at the accusation. "Had I heard you I would have responded. Surely you believe that."

"I believe only what my eyes and ears tell me," he replied, still with that terrible harshness. "Or what my sword bites into and draws blood from. Come over here to us now, and quickly, for I mean to see us out of this place as rapidly as possible."

"I will join you in a moment," I said, glancing over my shoulder at the calm blue that awaited my approach and touch. "There is something I must do before I leave here, and it will take no more than a . . ."

"You will join us *now*," he growled, the glare from his dark eyes refusing even to allow me to finish the words I spoke. "I said I mean to see us quickly out of here, and your female foolishness will not be tolerated. To linger in a place like this is madness, and we, at least, are not mad."

His gaze attempted to hold mine and draw me to him by its strength and power, and almost I succumbed to the command. If I refused to obey him he would surely tell Tullin, and naught save ill would come from such a telling. I *had* to obey him, and yet . . .

The peace of the blue cloud awaited me, making no de-

mands, holding no sense of accusation in case of failure, compelling nothing but offering all. The choice was mine, and I found that I had no choice but to do as my own nature directed.

As I had deliberately turned my back upon the settlement, so did I then do the same with Derand and his insistences, moving again toward the waiting cloud of blue. The silver pillars seemed to shine even more brightly with the shouts of anger and outrage that arose from behind me, but those who stood by the slide were too far away to halt me. In four steps I was only a pace away from the beckoning cloud, and even as I took the final step my hand was rising and reaching forward to touch what I had so great a need of.

All sound in the chamber ceased as my hand reached and entered that blue softness. Not a cloud, I saw at once, but what a cloud would be with no moisture or mist in it, a palpable softness and warmth that nevertheless allowed penetration with ease. It gave me what I had had as a child, when my father, before bloody battle had claimed his life, would take my hand in his. I had never, before or since, experienced such strength and warmth and uncritical support, and I stood whole again as I had stood in those long-dead days, knowing the peace I had known then.

Until, that is, I heard the gasps and moans from those who stood by the slide. I opened eyes that had closed in satisfied accomplishment, to see that the thick blue cloud was no longer as thick as it had been. It had already thinned to show the shadow of a form within, and even as I watched it thinned further and yet further. I found that I had withdrawn my hand and had taken a step backward, but that failed to halt what had been begun. The shadow cleared more and more, taking on firm shape and color and detail, and then the cloud was completely gone, leaving only what it had hidden.

A man with dark hair and clothing the likes of which I had never before seen. A man who wore bright colors and a sword, but no mail. A man who stood framed between the silver pillars as though they guarded his safety.

A man who opened dark eyes to look out at those in the chamber, and one who undoubtedly lived!



\* \* \*

"Merilan, what have you done?" Derand hissed in agony from where he stood, clearly having come no closer. "Now you have doomed us all with your madness! Magic such as that is *evil*, and you have loosed it upon us!"

"What fool is it who calls magic evil?" the figure who had appeared asked in a scorn-heavy voice, stepping out from between the silver pillars. "Have you never been taught the difference between good and evil?"

"Who are you?" Derand demanded in a quivering voice as I backed from the advancing figure, not so much frightened as wary. Here was someone who seemed to know well the concepts of good and evil, and the compulsion within me refused to take notice of the fearful manner of his sudden appearance.

"I am Baelialt, lord of those lands you now stand as guest upon," the man replied, calm rebuke in his words for the harshness of the demand put to him. "Or perhaps I should say I was once their lord. How long have I slept?"

"How could we know?" Derand asked in turn, confusion and a cautious diffidence now coloring his tone. "Never have I heard of one called Baelialt, nor have our allies spoken of a time within their memory that these lands were claimed. You slept, you say?"

"In a manner of speaking," Baelialt agreed with something of a smile, as though he shared a jest with himself. "It will be easier, I think, if I put my query in another way: How long is it now that Light and Dark have ceased to do battle?"

"How long—?" Derand echoed, and I saw that the others looked to one another and murmured in upset, adding to Derand's distress. "You ask how long the battle has ceased? Your second query is more meaningless than the first, for battle between good and evil continues to rage as ever it did. What gave you to believe it would be otherwise?"

"My spell demanded that it would be otherwise," Baelialt returned with a frown, fists to hips as he sought within for a meaning to what had occurred. "I was not to be awakened until— Not even to be approached unless— How could such a thing be?"

"Your spell," Derand said, his face pale in the blue radiance,

those behind him equally as shaken. "You—you are an adept, then—? Not ensorceled by the will of another, but by—"

"By my own desire and ability?" Baelialt finished when Derand did not, the scorn having returned to his voice and eyes. "Yes, I am an adept, and all you say is true. You fear the fact that I am not a victim?"

"A man fears what is, not what is not," Derand answered with the harshness returned to him, his fist closed more tightly about the weapon he had not as yet resheathed, and then his gaze moved deliberately to where I stood. "Do you see now what you have done, female of foolishness? You have returned one of *them* to our midst, and it is we who shall pay the penalty for your folly."

"You need not concern yourself over the composition of those in you precious midst," Baelialt said, the dryness and words for Derand alone, not even a glance for she who stood well to his right. "Although my desire is great to revel in your unparalleled proximity, circumstances force me to deny myself the pleasure. I shall return to the sleep from which I came, and hopefully will next awaken when there are those about who have no 'midst.' Remain or depart as you please, it will all be the same to me."

He turned back toward the silver pillars then, his intentions clear, and the relief to be seen on the faces of Derand and his men was well-nigh painful. Their need to be free of the presence of one of Power was understood by me, but I, too, had a need that would not allow denial.

"Wait!" I called as I took a step forward, forcing myself to speak where my words were so clearly unwanted. "I must know what you thought to find when your sleep was ended."

Baelialt hesitated on the very threshold of the silver pillars, one pace away from returning between them. For a moment I was certain he would ignore my question, and then he turned his head to regard me over his shoulder.

"I had thought to find that men had at last discovered the root of all evil, and had managed to exterminate it," he replied, the words more courteous than those addressed to Derand. "My spell was to awaken me at such a time, for there is much to be done and I am eager to begin. Are you able to tell me how near I am to such a time, Witch?"

"I am Merilan, not a witch, and do not believe that such a time will ever be," I said, the words coming from me as though another spoke them. "Should you return to your sleep, you will slumber on even after all memory of this world has ceased to be so much as a shadow. Had you voiced your spell differently, you would not have slept at all."

"For one who denies witchhood, you speak with the assurance of knowledge beyond that of others," he said, turning from the pillars to face me squarely. "Even now, after having reviewed it, my spell seems to me entirely adequate. What flaw do *you* find in it?"

"I . . . have not the ability to find flaws in a spell," I stumbled, suddenly more than diffident but unable to keep silent. "I know only that men will never find the root of evil, for there is no such thing as evil. Should that be the manner in which you voiced your commands, you will—"

"Do not heed her maunderings of madness!" Derand called from where he and the others continued to stand, a frothing madness of his own clear in the fury of his voice and eyes. "She will only delay your intentions, lord, and for no reason related to sanity. Once you have returned to that which awaits you, we will take her from here with utmost speed, so that you will not again be disturbed."

"So that I will not again be disturbed," he repeated, looking to Derand thoughtfully before returning his gaze to me. "My mind must truly be addled from having passed the ages by, for it had not occurred to me to seek more deeply into the true reason for my having been awakened at a time when I should not have been. What was done here, and which of you performed the doing?"

"It was she, lord," Derand pounced in triumph, allowing me no opportunity to speak in my own defense. "She it was who intruded upon your sleep, and awoke you before the time you had commanded. I ask that you spare her for so intrusive an action, for she is promised to my brother, yet should your anger be too great to contain, my brother will grieve but surely understand."

I looked to Derand with the shock I felt, but he showed no more than grim satisfaction over having abandoned me to what-

ever fate his accusation would bring. From the others there were looks of unease and discomfort, yet not one of them stepped forward to speak an objection. That I was supposedly one of them had no bearing, nor the fact that they were there through no insistence of mine. I had been offered up to assure their own safety, for my loss was more acceptable than theirs.

"I would expect your brother's grief to be as full as your own," Baelialt responded, and I saw that he stared at Derand with what appeared to be anger before returning his gaze to me. "Does he speak the truth, girl? Was it you who awakened me?"

"Such a thing was not my intention," I admitted heavily, needing to voice the truth despite trembling reluctance. "I saw the cloud floating between the pillars and felt what was within it, and the driving need would not allow me to depart without touching hand to it. I would offer my apologies for having disturbed you, and must add that those others had no part in what I felt it necessary to do . . ."

"Of that I have no doubt whatsoever," he interrupted the flood of my confession, the dryness of tone having returned to him as he glanced to the knot of nervously waiting men. "My spell would not have chosen ones such as they to bring to my rescue. You, however, are another matter entirely, and I offer my thanks for having allowed yourself to be drawn here to my assistance. If you had not allowed it, I would still be unaware of my error. I thank you for that as well, and would offer you a boon before I take my leave."

"Leave?" I asked, too stunned to reply to what he had said concerning a boon. "You mean to return to your slumber after all?"

"No, not to my slumber," he answered with a smile, paying no mind to the stirring and muttering coming from the men of my settlement. "I am now able to see that the hopes I had for the progress of men were in vain, and must therefore do as I was previously reluctant to do. I shall find a place all of my own, and there will labor in an atmosphere that this world will never know."

"An atmosphere where good no longer battles evil," I said, in some manner certain of what I said. "Or where evil no

longer battles good. For what reason do you believe this world will never know such a thing?"

"You should find it possible to answer that question more fully than I," he replied, and then his hand was raised before him, tracing a shape of some sort in the air. Naught save his fingers moved, and yet where they passed the shape was drawn in sparkling blue in midair, to hover between us before fading. "You are a witch who has not been permitted to be a witch, and for no reason other than that men have not found the root of evil. I would say, should all men nowadays be as these who accompany you, that never will they find the root and conquer it. May I ask that you speak now of the boon you would have?"

"You believe that Dark will find victory over Light?" Derand demanded, his outrage causing him to intrude in the conversation he had earlier kept from. "I, for one, refuse to accept that, nor will I accept unjust accusation against my people! That the woman has not been allowed witchhood is good rather than evil, for great suffering has ever been the lot of those who permitted witches among them. We have not taken the lives of those who would have been witches, merely have we refused them the Power that would have brought misery to us all. We acted for the greater good, and there can be no evil in doing such as that!"

"Ah, you believe so, do you?" Baelialt asked, turning his full attention to the man who had addressed him in such an outspoken manner, more of a purr to the words than an edge. "Since you have taken no lives outright, you consider yourselves as having done good? It may, perhaps, be possible to alter that view. Your accoutrements suggest that you are a warrior; is this so?"

"Yes, I am a warrior," Derand allowed cautiously, no longer as forward as he had been a moment earlier. It was clear he mistrusted the adept's lack of anger, and likely already regretted having spoken his mind.

"I, too, was given the training of a warrior," Baelialt confided with a warm smile, touching left palm to hilt in confirmation of what he said. "In my youth I had need of such training, as you and those with you have need of it, but I no longer find it the same. Should the girl ask it of me as the boon

I offered, I will speak a spell that will no longer permit you and the others to retain what warrior skills you have thus far attained, nor relearn what you will have lost once it is gone. You will never again find it possible to name yourselves warriors."

"You could not do such a thing!" Derand gasped in shock, backing a step as the others did the same. "We would be forever bereft, half our lives taken from us! You could not commit such an evil act upon us!"

"Evil?" Baelialt asked with one brow raised, still held by calm amusement. "Are not warriors those who cause death and destruction when they ride to battle, leaving widows and orphans in the wake of the steel they swing? Surely *those* are the actions of evil, the ruining of innocent lives? I shall merely exempt you from the guilt of such terrible doings, saving you from yourselves and the accusations of others. Will that not, in reality, be an example of good?"

"But—but—what of *us*?" Derand stuttered, beside himself with fear and horror. "We do battle only against those who are enemy to us, never against the innocent! We have done nothing to deserve being denied what others are allowed, to be made to live with the knowledge of what we shall never be permitted to be! It would be a waking nightmare, doing nothing to halt battle, only to disallow our participation!"

"And yet you and those of your ilk chose to keep this child from a complete knowledge of her Power," Baelialt returned, and now his voice and stare were cold as steel in ice. "She could not help but know and suffer from the lack within her, but those of you who had no such suffering to endure found the denial given her no more than a comfort! Others brought about ill with the use of Power, therefore was it clearly her lot to be made to pay for the misdeeds of those others. For what reason should you not be made to do the same? For the reason of your innocence? In what manner might she not be considered equally as innocent?"

The men of my settlement stared wildly about themselves, searching for a reply that refused to come within reach of their desperately groping minds. To me it was clear they knew there was a great difference between what had been done to me and what was proposed to be done to them, only they were unable,

at that moment, to put the difference in words. Because of this inability, rage took them over, and almost as one, swords raised high, they launched themselves at the adept who had threatened more than their lives.

I gasped in renewed shock as they started forward, certain a calamity was about to occur, unprepared for what did in fact happen. To hear of the doings of adepts is not as seeing the reality of the thing, and when Baelialt raised his right hand, I thought his movement no more than reflex, a feeble attempt to ward off the attack of those who came at him. A moment passed before I realized that they should then be reaching him, and were not; I looked over to them in confusion, saw them frozen in place—indeed in midstride!—and gasped a second time.

“When I release them, they will emerge unharmed,” the adept said, and I saw that he spoke gently to me. “Do you still believe there is no such thing as evil?”

“They would be poor examples of evil under any circumstances,” I replied, surprised to find that he had heard and recalled what I had said. “They are no more than men filled with fear, for themselves and their loved ones, and therefore not to be blamed for their actions. You, I see, have not blamed them either, for you have said they will be unharmed. How could you expect the root of evil to be found and eliminated, if there is no such thing as evil?”

“Ah, but there is such a thing as evil,” he said, his previous amusement returned to him. “You, I take it, have been searching for it, but have not yet found it. The reason for that is that you have searched in the wrong places.”

“But those in Escore claim that evil is all about,” I protested, then suddenly found myself too weary to remain standing. I folded to the marble under my booted feet, and looked up with the confusion weighing me down. “I searched even in areas that withered life as I know it, but found only what was wrong for me, nothing that was evil. Am I as mad, then, as Derand insisted, to pass evil by and not know it for what it is?”

“To know what evil is *not* is not to be mad,” he said with firmness as he moved toward me, then took a place on the floor opposite to where I sat. “When the battling began between

those of Power, I thought, like others, that that was true evil, but then I was granted deeper insight. The Dark, they say, is true evil, but what is dark but the absence of light? Without light ones misses most of what there is to see, clinging only to the known that makes the dark more bearable to exist in. Such dark is far too limiting, therefore is light the preferable mode of existence. Those who insist upon dwelling in the dark—or the Dark—consider themselves courageous and powerful, never realizing how pitifully they have constricted their every effort.”

“I . . . cannot follow your reasoning,” I said, nearly pleading for the understanding I had such a need of. This man before me *knew*, of that I was certain, and I, too, had to know.

“Let us return to the very beginning, then,” he replied with a gaiety to him, as though he greatly enjoyed converse such as we were engaged in. “When one discusses a point, one must define one’s terms. Is the taking of a human life a matter of good or evil?”

“Such a thing is considered an evil,” I ventured, supplying the response I felt he sought. “Should the question have been put to Derand, he would likely have answered so.”

“As would most, if not all, others addressed so,” he agreed with a nod. “And yet, is a human life not taken when a man is executed for some heinous crime? And are lives not lost in large numbers when battle is engaged in? And what of the wild beast? Is it evil when it slays a human being to keep from starvation? In each of these instances lives are lost, and yet the taint of evil is seldom, if ever, attached to them. They are termed ‘necessary evils,’ and as such are accepted.”

“You believe these things should not be?” I asked, much concerned with what his reply would consist of.

“I feel you already know the proper answer to that,” he said with a gentle smile. “These things are not evil, necessary or otherwise, merely are they necessary. We, even those of us named adepts, are no other thing than men; for what reason do we so long insist to ourselves that we are as the gods?”

“To be what you are is no shame,” I agreed, feeling a warmth within my breast. “To seek to be the best of what you are is a worthy act, to seek to be other than what you are is naught save foolishness.”



"Alas for the lure of foolishness," he replied with a sigh, then immediately brightened. "And yet, not all of us need be foolish. Those who claim to be of the Dark are foolish, for they know not what they do. Is fire a good thing or an evil?"

"Why—how can fire be evil?" I asked, startled by the abruptness of the query. "It warms us, cooks our food, permits the hardening of iron into steel— How might it be considered an evil?"

"Would you ask that of a family who has just lost its home to a fire run wild?" he returned, the look in his dark eyes sharp. "They could scarcely be expected to consider fire a boon and an aid, and yet we have most of us learned that destruction is not caused by *fire*, but by carelessness in dealing with fire. To allow a child access to fire, as though it were a toy, would be inviting disaster in as an honored guest. Might the *child* then be considered evil for having caused a disaster with fire?"

This time I did no more than shake my head, at last beginning to see the trail he led me upon. Soon it would be clear before my eyes, of that I had no doubt.

"No more, then, might those of the Dark be considered evil," he said, a quiet statement accompanied by a quiet smile. "They are as children experimenting with that which they have no full understanding of, and the disasters they cause have ignorance at their roots, not what men call evil. Not all life forms are able to exist in peace and harmony with ours, and to bring these forms into our world, in order to attain what is considered great power, is more idiocy than evil. They have not as yet learned what truly great power might be theirs, were they to bring light into the dark in which they grope."

He sighed then, and lay back upon the marble of the floor to gaze up toward the ceiling of the chamber, lost in might-have-beens.

"All seem to be aware of the fact that there is a balance in nature and in life, and certainly in magic," he said, a murmur directed upward but to me as well. "Those of the Dark use foul balances, ones to turn the stomach of all who learn of them, and in their use lose part of themselves to complete the balance. Had they the intelligence of more than children, they would have brought light into their dark, to see that there are

more balances to be found, ones that are not half measures and therefore more effective. And a good deal less damaging to themselves and those about them.

“When one wishes to use fire, one takes certain precautions to be certain that they will not be charred during their use of that fire. Light, brought into the dark as a guard and a guide, will allow the safe use of what is essentially fire, and so the fire may be used to benefit everyone. The look of fire is so lovely that an innocent child will reach out to it barehanded, in order to capture its beauty, but an adult knows better than to do the same. I, as an adult, wished to bring to my fellow men what there was of benefit to be found in what all consider the Dark, but could not do so in a world that contained the root of evil. I therefore set a spell of sleep upon myself, commanding that I be awakened when evil was gone, and had I not added protection to the spell I would have slept on till eternity was past and gone. I am now forced to admit that my work cannot be done here, therefore must I seek elsewhere, for the labors must be performed. I could scarcely call myself a man, were I to shirk a duty such as that.”

“You mean to turn the Powers of the Dark into that which may be used by the Light,” I said, shuddering within me at thought of such an undertaking. “I had considered myself fully grown, and yet—I know not whether I would have the courage for such a doing. But there is still a thing I fail to understand. We have eliminated so many things from the calling of evil, that surely there is nothing left? My conviction that there is no such entity as evil must be correct, and yet you say our world contains the root of evil. How could this be?”

“Your confusion is understandable,” he said, rising to sit again and to smile at me. “For you, there *is* no such thing as evil, for there is none of it within you. This is the reason my spell called you here, to awaken me, for no other might have accomplished it. And as I said earlier, you have failed to find evil for the reason that you sought it in the wrong places. The root of all evil is fear.”

“Fear?” I echoed, lost again in confusion. “How might fear be the root of evil? And should it be so, then I am scarcely one without evil. There are many things I fear.”

"To have fear within one is not, in itself, evil," he said, his gentle understanding soothing me even as he spoke. "Fear is necessary in that it keeps one from overly reckless ventures that might well end one's life. Fear becomes true evil when it rules the one it resides in, making that one view happenings and others only in its light. In you, fear is no more than a sensible caution, what it was meant to be. In others, however, it becomes something else entirely.

"For what reason would a man turn to the Dark in order to accomplish his aims? For fear, and only that. Fear that he will not accomplish it otherwise, fear that he will die before his life wishes are completed. For what reason does he seek power? For fear that another will gain greater power, and therefore be a danger to him. Fear of death, fear of poverty, fear of hunger—these are all things one would consider natural to fear, and yet most are willing to do anything to avoid them, rather than simply take on the determination to see that they do not occur. It was fear that kept you from your birthright, fear of what Power you would learn to wield. Trust and fellowship go by the boards in the presence of fear, as does common sense. Had fire been feared in such a way, its benefits would not now be ours. But fear breeds fear, and so the root will grow rather than wither and die. I cannot remain here and see such a thing, therefore shall I seek other lands, other places where the root has not yet taken hold."

"So you, too, have fears," I said, but gently, so that he would know I meant no criticism nor wished to give pain. "To seek the avoidance of evil is understandable, and I wish you great success and happiness in your pursuits. You have shown me what I sought so long in vain for, and now the demand inside me is stilled. There is no such thing as evil, no more than those poor souls tormented by the twisting within them. Some may need to be removed from the society of men in order to protect the innocent from them, but the others— It may yet be possible to save them."

"As I said, there is no evil within you," he repeated with a smile, reaching out with a hand that halted before it touched me. "I have many long, lonely years ahead of me, and now I would ask a boon of you. Become my wife and accompany me

where I go, and we may each learn from the other. There are so many things I would teach you—and so many I would learn from you.”

“I . . . am honored to be asked such a thing,” I answered, disconcerted and flustered and suddenly realizing that I wished it might truly be. “To learn and share would be a delight—but to abandon those of my world I might be able to aid would be to bring true meaning to the word evil. I . . . cannot leave them alone with their fears, for fears are always greater when one is alone.”

“Yes, fears are always greater when one is alone,” he agreed, his dark eyes now sad as they rested on me, and then he shook his head and sighed. “I should have known better than to become enmeshed with one lacking evil—or, if you prefer, one lacking fear. The disease is apparently contagious, for I have now myself contracted it. As you mean to remain, so shall I do the same, and together we will dig out the root and watch it die.”

“Together,” I agreed with great happiness, putting my hand in the one he extended to help me to stand. I would need to be extremely gentle with Tullin, but knowing that it was fear that moved him would allow me to be understanding of what he was. Understanding, I thought as we turned toward those who needed freeing from the positions they had been frozen in. Could that be the opposite of what I had been seeking?

If fear was true evil, could understanding be true good?