

The MoonBridge Way

Challenged

'Beware the MoonBridge Way – once entered, you will never want to leave'

Books 5 in The MoonBridge Way Adventures

David G. Sheppard

Copyright © 2022 David G. Sheppard

Chapter one sample

v2022-05-28-1521

Chapter 1 – Reflection

*When you look in a mirror, who do you see?
Is that you looking back, or possibly me?
We both look alike, the same you may say.
Or different, reversed, and remote in some way.
Are you somebody else, like a thought or a dream?
Or a shadow of something that ought to have been.
How many are hidden, ghosts from our past?
Each facet of truth, shining back in the glass.
So close to my touch, so clear in my sight.
So where do you go when I turn off the light?
I think of you then, far beyond what is real.
Do you wonder of me, or how I might feel?
That smile on your face, as you see me too.
Yet how can I know if it's me, or still you?*

“Awaken, ‘My Lady,’ we have much to confront,” whispered Korbynithus¹ cautiously.

The Vinkef immortal gathered his resolve summoning his inner strength. Beads of sweat raised across his brow as each hand clenched subconsciously and the grimace of effort contorted his

¹ Pronounced ‘Core-bin-ith-us’

face. The plea for help drove relentlessly across all existence searching, probing, and seeking the lost deity.

Korbynithus continued, "The monster Rakah is only wounded and the threat to our universe remains."

Fear gripped the Vinkef's mind clouding his determination, "You must regain your strength, majesty. Follow my voice, return to us I beseech thee."

Tendrils of recognition permeated his thoughts. A glimmer of hope shivered through his soul, he dared to believe.

"I sense the darkness around you, I share your pain and shoulder your grief," he pleaded as flashes of lightning drilled from his fingertips.

The force of the Vinkef's passion focussed into a beam of pure energy.

"Reach out for my hand, I have found you! Now bathe in my light," urged Korbynithus. The lump in his throat constricted his breath.

Panting desperately, he continued, "You are not alone my dearest hope, I am here."

The words rasped away into the darkness. Tears filled his eyes, overcome by unrelenting desperation. Sweeping each one with his sleeve, sniffing defiantly, and struggling to focus, he directed his life force into his fallen saviour.

“Come back to us my Lady. Recall your Guardian, bring him forth, and recreate the MoonBridge. Our work is far from complete!”

In the instant when both ‘planar² energy’ weapons detonated, on each side of the divide between one universe and a parallel deraverse, all entangled timelines separated. Pasts, presents, and futures erupted. Within many restored possibilities the incalculable conflagration destroyed everything on both sides of the boundary. Immeasurable forces radiated outwards at unparalleled velocity stripping the neighbouring planets of Danthienne³ and shadow deraverse home-world bare, erasing everyone.

A once beautiful paradise incinerated; seas boiled dry, landmasses disintegrated, and the world shrank to a third of its original mass and size. Within moments a seething inner mantel and molten iron core glowing white hot coalesced, devoid of any form of life.

Fate, however, also dealt an improbable hand. Fortuitously, in some of the infinite timelines, like this one, another outcome occurred. Here, an unexpected invisible protective shield, gifted by an unknown incredible force, projected far out into the abyss beyond the planet Danthienne.

² Pronounced ‘Plane-ah’

³ Pronounced ‘Dan-thee-en’

A gigantic umbrella guided the efflux of the Terranians⁴ incredible weapons harmlessly away into the cold oblivion of open space, sparing the planet and its populous. The source of this projection remained a mystery. Despite concerted effort, none could identify the planet's saviour. Some believed the universe itself protected all that day. Others gave thanks to their gods for the gift of life. Thankfully, whatever the truth, this home remained intact. High above in the emptiness of open space the tear closed and the evil links to the deraverse ceased. For the inhabitants, other than an initial bright flash and a firework display lighting up half the visible heavens, the shield offered its protection as life continued unaffected.

The terrible fates of so many other timelines, after their separation, remained questionable. The entangled anomaly parted restoring the equilibrium of the multiverse. As they separated, their individual paths to their futures continued without any reference to any others. Restoration re-established balance. Each timeline restarted their own story to tell and their unique destiny to unfold. Every subtle nuance of eternity carved their own version of the infinite variety of creation. Time unwound, freeing any probable future, exactly as it should have been.

Here, normality returned during the days and weeks following the closure. Whilst the mystery surrounding the planet's beneficiary remained unsolved, everything else moved forwards with little regard for their good fortune.

⁴ Pronounced '*Tear-rain-eons*'

Some months later after offering much help to those below, the technically advanced Terranians, in orbit high above the planet, bid their farewells to friends and acquaintances on the surface. Once again departing Danthienne, heading off into the depths of space, continuing their search for others of their 6000-year-old race. The planet's secretive benefactor remained a mystery to them too.

The All-Father and his beloved daughters remained silently incapacitated. Their continued absence impacted many individuals reliant upon their favour. With each still suffering from their fateful encounter with Rakah from the deraverse, their duties and influences ceased.

Danthienne slowly progressed the clear up operation following the fall of the Necromancer. Some potential dangers remained, especially from the alien Shumiat⁵ race and their evolving forces. Gradually, a reluctant normality emerged from the chaos.

Back on Earth, Jack's temporary access to Guardianship abilities faded with the tear's destruction and the final closure of the MoonBridge Way. His return from Danthienne, with his niece and nephew, placed them some days after the destruction of his sister, Tina-Lu's⁶, home. Time did not unwind as expected. For them, a new fate awaited. The twins however, retained their Vinkef⁷ powers and would soon begin a new adventure.

⁵ Pronounced 'Shoe-me-at'

⁶ Pronounced 'Tina-Loo'

⁷ Pronounced 'Vin-kev'

A drizzly wind swept biting across the bleak autumnal meadows. Danthienne's open spaces, between the rolling hills, funnelled the perishing breeze into vortices twisting and tugging at everything in its path. Jaden⁸ grumpily pulled his cloak tighter around his torso to resist the draining chill. Each cruel gust sucked yet more warmth from his tired aching body. Exposed in the open landscape, he could hope for little shelter or respite.

"Come on Autumn, spare us a little!" the Sage of Sages grumbled.

When the weather turned, everywhere felt bleak. Everywhere except for a welcome oasis of makeshift tents and windbreaks forming the temporary camp around the vicinity of his home. Today, the wind noisily flapped the green and grey waterproof fabrics of the remaining shelters. Heavy twine, anchored firmly into the downtrodden grassed soil, resisted the buffeting. A few other hardy souls ventured out to continue their work. Each acknowledged Jaden politely, offering their respects to their Sage and mentor.

For four and a half months volunteers tirelessly dismantled then reconstructed the adjoining cottage; from the deep cellar to the newly grassed roof, work continued apace. The Sage gratefully accepted the assistance of his friends from the far South and elsewhere to rebuild his home. So many workers, and their families, kindly gave up their time to help reinstate the charred

⁸ Pronounced 'Jay-den'

remains of his wrecked abode. Shattered wood, crushed stonework, remnants of dead blue Shumiat and even a fallen dragon carcass; all required removal and disposal. Weeks of clearance, preparation and reconstruction restored the area. Work approached the final ending, and not a day too soon, the weather had changed for the worse. Winter would soon be upon them.

As the building work completed, helpers departed for their own homes far away in the lush southern plains. They faced a long dreary trek back to their warmer climate. The dismantled temporary accommodation left tell-tale geometric shapes in the meadow. Faded greens and browns formed a patchwork where they had once stood. Nature would erase this over time but for now they left a reminder of the numbers of workers previously camped here. A few craftsmen remained to finish the Sage of Sages new home. Jaden felt humbled at the selfless contribution these friends and artisans offered him. At such times as this, his lifelong dedication and service made everything worthwhile. He looked at the result with gratitude and excitement. The cottage blended perfectly into the landscape and offered a simple, but comfortable, new abode. He eagerly awaited being able to move in and to rebuild his life.

“So many kind souls. How can I ever thank you all?” he muttered appreciatively.

Living out of a tent seemed fun for a week or two, especially at the start of the summer when the nights were so short and pleasantly warm. After four months of shrinking days and chilling winds, the novelty had firmly worn off. Jaden wanted a real roof

over his head again with the invigorating smell of freshly hewn pinewood and a sturdy front door to close out the weather. The large campfire, surrounded by the tents in the centre circle, offered welcome warmth. He had enjoyed many evenings of friendly banter and laughter with his compatriots. Sitting together, as the toil of the day ended, each sharing wildly exaggerated stories and repeating overly familiar anecdotes. But now, he wanted his solitude back. He yearned for the peace and quiet of his own parlour fire and a hot kettle steaming on his new kitchen stove. For months, he had no time to reflect or think deeply. The reconstruction consumed every moment of his waking hours and exhaustion had now set in. Even the most patient person could suffer with a sense of desperation as the final tasks seemed to take forever to complete.

Jaden's adopted grandson Kaygee⁹ spent the last few months living with a close friend. Attempting to return to normality, the youngster had an opportunity to catch up on regular schooling. Jaden missed his Sageling in waiting. Years earlier, shortly after his birth, the boy's parents were lost in a tragic accident. Kaygee's father, another Sage and close friend of Jaden, sadly perished far too young. Jaden took in the boy and became his adopted grandparent, mentor, and Sage.

Kaygee would soon have his first audience with his deity Tarre-Hare¹⁰. The day when she would hopefully approve of his Sageship and gift him her Sage sight. However, following the encounter with the deraverse, where the All-Father and his

⁹ Pronounced '*Kay-Gee*'

¹⁰ Pronounced '*Tar-hair*'

daughters were abducted, they had remained ominously silent. None were responsive to any communications; all were absent and lost.

For the first time in his sixty years of Sageship, Jaden felt alone and powerless. The Sage of Sages no longer had access to his mistress's portal, he could not call upon his ancestors' advice nor could he project his spirit away from his physical self. Jaden felt trapped in someone else's body. This was not him. Not the Sage of Sages.

"If this is how ordinary people feel, I want no part of it!" the Sage grumbled under his breath.

Jaden became increasingly frustrated. He constantly worried he may be the last Sage of Sages. Was this the end of eons of Sageship?

As the sun set a few nights later, and the twilight faded, the Sage walked up to the top of the hill away from the noisy gathering around the campfire. Their loud voices and cheery laughter followed him, drifting on the still evening airs. The final days of work approached. At last Jaden felt ready to reflect and relax.

"I love you all, but really need everyone to go back home!" the Sage huffed to himself.

The events leading up to his cottage's destruction still hung heavily around his neck. Jaden looked up into the partially overcast sky and glimpsed the familiar stars shining brightly between the slow-moving clouds. Above arced the inky black

heavens tonight, the moon had not yet risen, and the peacefulness refreshed his mind. Thoughts of his friends, across the MoonBridge Way, brought a lump to his throat. He hoped they returned safely but had no ability to check. A small coppice ahead whispered to him as the light breeze ruffled the remaining autumnal leaves clinging precariously to the branches. A fallen trunk became his seat. Here he could let his mind drift.

“Be safe my dear friends,” whispered Jaden.

Gazing up, he recalled the terrifying multi-coloured shimmering tear hanging menacingly out in space. Whilst he remained glad the threat had been removed, after all their concerted efforts; he regretted the loss, it caused him and others. So many lives lost in the conflict, such saddening grief and lingering heart ache. Rakah, from the other side, had much to answer for!

The Shumiat Sentinel sensed the activity of The Terranians in orbit. He fully expected an attack. His plans had not succeeded, many of his workers fell destroyed by the Necromancer and his dragon. His Elite force entered the battle felling the flying beast before driving towards the enemy. He had not expected Danthienne’s Underworlders to enter the affray. The Shumiat had faced them once before and they proved far more powerful than he anticipated. His Elites fought valiantly but perished. Their deaths were not in vain, he had learned much and prepared to evolve his creations further.

Choosing to retreat, the Sentinel did not wait for any of the others, they would be left to their own fate. The Gigantager¹¹ powered up, on the Sentinel's command, and opened a spacetime vortex to the near future. At the instant of detonation in space, as the tear closed, the Shumiat Gigantager vanished from this time and re-emerged safely in the same location, one year later.

Work began immediately. A new strain of enhanced Elites would be created to be faster, stronger, and smarter. These Elites would not yield to any Danthienne inhabitants. They would seek out the Underworlders, and any others. These irritating insects had caused him enough trouble; his new Elites would crush them all.

On the other side of the MoonBridge Way, the devastation close to the capital's river, around Tina-Lu's destroyed home, extended for several blocks. Many people died on that terrible day. Others were now injured or homeless. The area remained cordoned off with makeshift fences and some more permanent barriers. None of the residents had been permitted to return. Floral tributes, half deflated balloons and thousands of written messages of condolences lay knee deep along one rapidly constructed wall. Within the enclosure, the devastation seemed frozen in time. Jagged, mangled steel hung hideously unable to support the structures it had been designed for. Shattered wood, blocks and bricks spread in haphazard disarray around the

¹¹ Pronounced '*Jig-gant-a-ger*'

perimeter. Some thrust effortlessly by the force of the blast, others piled high by hundreds of volunteers who had searched frantically for any survivors and victims' bodies beneath the rubble. The smell of death still clung ominously to the desolated area.

Tina-Lu and Harry looked through one of the steel mesh barriers at the dreadful sight ahead. Neither could recognise their home. Where once their trendy apartment block had cheerily overlooked the busy waterway, now a brutal war zone confronted them. Tears filled Tina-Lu's eyes as she remembered her unfortunate neighbours lost in the blast. She clung painfully to the wire mesh, her hands nearly drawing blood as she squeezed so desperately.

"We've lost everything," Tina-Lu sobbed.

Harry held her tightly. He wanted to speak but no words of comfort could undo the terrible reality. They remained transfixed on the gruesome insanity of their current situation. But, both grateful to still be alive when so many others were not.

"How can we hope to start again Harry?" she whispered. "Will we ever get over this?"

Silently, the two stared into the carnage and privately prayed for those so suddenly taken.

Jack Ferns approached cautiously towards his sister and her partner. He had not heard their brief conversation but recognised the pain of grief on their faces. He stood respectfully

back, several yards, to allow them to grieve together. Since his return, a handful of days ago, he had not dared to confront Tina-Lu. Jack had finally drummed up enough courage to come and face her. He knew she was rightly angry with him. He had endangered her, the twins, himself and all those hundreds of other unknown souls affected by this disaster. The MoonBridge Way had, yet again, caused misery and sadness for many around him. Unlike previously, time did not unwind. The impact of his meddling spread everywhere around. With the closure of the space-time tear at Danthienne, his briefly reinstated access to the MoonBridge Way evaporated as quickly as it had appeared. After so many years of 'normality' here, his world and life had been thrown upside down by the MoonBridge reappearance. And now he returned into a world of pain and grief.

Tina-Lu instinctively half glanced behind to see her brother standing solemnly close by. The instant recognition offered no comfort. She grimaced at his presence. Momentarily, she wanted to strike out at him. Everything here was because of him. She clenched her fists and bit her lips. But the look of remorse on his face and his saddened posture prevented further reaction.

"Why are you here Jack? What do you want?" she struggled to rasp.

Jack looked at her tearful eyes as a lump formed in his throat. He never wanted this.

"Come back to my house Lu, you know I have loads of room. You and Harry can stay with me until we can get you both sorted. I am going to be away on business anyway, the place is yours.

Please Sis. I never expected any of this to happen and desperately wish to put things right. You can stay if you like. I will help you rebuild your lives if you'll let me."

Harry nodded in appreciation then warily glanced at Tina-Lu to gauge her reaction. She shook her head slowly and chose her words carefully.

"I know you're sorry Jack. That dammed MoonBridge of Yours, it has never brought anything but hurt and pain. How many more victims are there going to be? How many more innocent lives lost?"

Jack wanted to shout out his innocence. It was not his fault, or his doing, or even his choice.

Tina-Lu continued, "I'll not come and live with you, Jack. Death and pain follow you around. Harry and I are going to stay with his parents in the west country for a few weeks. They have a holiday let on the coast and the change of pace and scenery might help us both come to terms with all this."

Jack gulped nervously.

Tina-Lu flicked her arm towards the destruction. After a heavy sigh and a moment of contemplation she continued, "We are here today to pay our respects to these poor people and bid our farewells to our friends."

Jack opened his mouth to speak but words failed him.

Tina-Lu sniffed heavily as she wiped another tear from her eye, "I have told the twins I do not want them near you again."

Jack felt heartbroken at this last statement. He knew better than to try to protest.

"You are to stay away from my children Jack. Do you understand me? Keep out of their lives!" Tina-Lu sniffed again and wiped more tears from her face.

Jack felt powerless to respond.

"And keep out of mine too," she threatened.

Tina-Lu never looked back as she pulled Harry after her and strode off in the opposite direction to her brother. She hurriedly walked alongside all the messages and flowers, head bowed and clearly shaking.

Jack remained motionless for many minutes as his sister turned a corner and walked out of his life.

"Sorry Sis!" he whispered to her shadow. "I am so very sorry."

Luen-heema¹² shivered uncontrollably; pain, so utterly overwhelming, consumed her mind. Entrapped in a shell of despair, she barely functioned. Deep in the recesses of her lost

¹² Pronounced 'Loon-he-mah'

soul she meagrely attempted to erase the memories of her entrapment.

“Get out of my heart!” the deity pleaded pitifully to herself.

Above Luen-heema’s limp body a vaguely familiar shining white being offered energies and comfort. Despite the valiant effort, nothing penetrated her hopelessness. All help seemed remote and insignificant. Her friend’s determination could not counteract the raw primal hatred still emanating from the all-conquering deraverse creature. Her incarceration, within Rakah, left her completely drained. Never, in all eternity, had she imagined anything so utterly horrible.

“My Lady, I am here to help,” the voice repeated hopefully. “Do not give up hope. Your Guardian needs you. Your Family needs you. We all need you.”

Luen-heema felt physically sick, with every aspect of her life force tainted and corrupted. Her rescue from the other side had not removed the filth and desperation the monster had inflicted upon her. The repulsive taste of his infestation persisted.

“Can you hear me My Lady? It is your friend Korbynithus!”

Luen-heema gingerly raised a hand to push away the annoying creature. She wanted to protest but collapsed helplessly. Even raising an arm proved an impossible task. Nothing remained inside her, she felt broken and afraid.

‘How has Rakah stolen her life so easily?’ the Vinkef wondered.

The Lost Room, normally so bright and pure white, took on a dim sickly grey colour. The surroundings responded to the deity's condition.

"I am here My Lady. I am here to help," Korbynithus struggled to sound upbeat.

kneeling nervously beside Luen-heema, the Vinkef transfused his own life force into the injured deity. This process had never been attempted before. For many minutes, the powerful transfer continued, hope and confidence gradually turned to despair. Despite the immeasurable Vinkef¹³ depth and strength, even this seemed inadequate. Suddenly, he felt light-headed and weakened as the power drained from him. Luen-heema remained pale and listless. Even with his unparalleled efforts, the goddess lay unresponsive.

Luen-heema blinked once just managing to see an outline of her benefactor.

"Sorry My Lady, I must rest for a moment," spluttered Korbynithus.

The energy flow stopped as the Vinkef slumped exhausted. This proved far harder than he had hoped. His injured patient lay helplessly incapacitated.

Luen-heema grimaced as the life-force transfer ceased. She barely managed a brief half smile in appreciation at the

¹³ Pronounced '*Vin-kev*'

determination of the Vinkef friend beside her but relapsed immediately into oblivion.

“Do not give up, My Lady. You must resist him; do not give in to Rakah.”

The goddess did not respond. For all the life-force Korbynithus offered, Luen-heema seemed barely changed. Groggily, he reconsidered his situation.

“I must seek some other help for you, My Lady. Please try to rest whilst I am gone. I will return to you soon.”

Korbynithus touched Luen-heema’s hand tenderly then reluctantly faded from view leaving the fractured deity struggling to comprehend his parting gesture.

End note: I hope you enjoyed my first chapter sample, and this will inspire you to purchase the full book. Thank you. David G Sheppard