

Caliban's End  
Akin to Pity

Paul Francis Stewart



Akin to Pity

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This is a work of fiction. Characters, institutions and nations mentioned in this novel are the product of the author's imagination.

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<http://www.morguefile.com>

This book is dedicated to

Zac,  
whose imagination and curiosity  
inspire my mind to wander further afield

Hannah Beth,  
– I hope one day you will read these books  
and bite your arm with excitement

and Toby,  
a constant reminder that the world  
should always be a happy place



*‘To pity distress is but human; to relieve it is Godlike.’*

– *Horace Mann (1796 – 1859)*





## Dramatis Personæ

### ACORA

CATE AUDREY, an Almoner  
CLAUDIA KALLADY, a Scientist  
JIMM HAWKINS, a Seaman  
JONAS KALLADY, the Captain of *The Silhouette*  
JEHENNA CANNA, the Consul for Acoran  
MAELDUNE CANNA, the Minister for Justice

### ANKARAN

RAMA TA, the Consul for Ankara

### CABAL

AVENTAIL  
CRIBELLA  
NAUSASIS  
SUCCELLOS  
THE ANTHROPOG  
THE MORRIGU  
THE RYUGIN  
UGUKU

### CAQUIKKI

LOKOTA FALL, the Ambassador for Caquix  
TAWHAWKI FALL, the Consul for Caquix

### CEPHALONIAN

BORMANUS COLE, the Ambassador for Cephalonia

### CESSAIRIAN

PORENUTIOUS WINDLE, a Bureaucrat  
SAMUEL MELKIN, a Bureaucrat  
TIBERIUS LLYR, Lord Chamberlain of the Myr

**GHADDAR**

AZAZEL

**GHUL**

CHABRIEL, a Major  
DEFECIOUS, a Sergeant  
DRABELLA, a Major  
DROOLA, a Sergeant  
GOLAGG, a Corporal  
LUCETIOUS, a Lieutenant  
SCREE, a Servant

**HELYAN**

AUGUSTINE LEIPPA, a Senator  
DECIUS SEMIRAMUS, a Lieutenant  
PEDAEUS RHODES, the Ambassador for Helyas  
PYLOS CASTALIA, the General of the Helyan Army

**KEELII**

DENA  
YUMA

**KHEPERAN**

SEFAR HADITH, the Consul for Khepera

**KOBOLD**

ABLO BOGLE, a Lapidarist

**MABBIT**

TAGTUG

**MORGAI**

ADDISON COLE  
REMIEL GRAYSON  
LILITH CORTESE

**NESSAN**

FATHER GIDEON, a Priest

**PRYDERI**

ARETHUSA DORE, a Witch  
ARINNA BRINE, a Witch  
CALLISANDRA GALLEY, a Witch  
LARA BRAND, a Witch  
MEGGAN GALLEY, a Witch

**SAPPHYRRO**

TRYPP ELAN, the Consul for Skyfall Town

**SESSYMIRIAN**

LOKASENNA HAGEN, the Foreman of Strom Mir Mine  
RIG GUDRUN, a Captain  
VILA HELSTROM, a Keeler

**SCORIAN**

CALIBAN GRAYSON, a Scholar  
SIR EDGAR WORSELEY, a Knight

**SPRIGGAN**

MULUPO, a Merchant

**SUSANESE**

SUMI KIMURA, the Consul for Susano

**TAMUAN**

SELA NOYE, the Consul for Tamu  
TOMU NOYE, her husband

**TETHRAN**

BARBAROSSA JUDD, the Ambassador for Tethra  
GUNTHER ROSS, the Consul for Tethra

**TUATHAN**

GAMELYN BLAKE, the Captain of *The Melody*  
GERRIOD BLAKE, the Captain of *The Crimson Dawn*

**TUIRRENIAN**

KIP STOOPS, an Archer  
WILL STOOPS, an Archer



## The story so far

Thousands of years ago the people of the Myr locked away the world's evil creatures in a subterranean realm known as the Endless. For centuries, the Myr was untroubled by these creatures, but the evil never went away. It was only hidden...

Gideon Grayson lies dying. As is the way of his kind, one of his children is destined to inherit his mystical powers.

Plagued by dreams in which his twin brother Caliban throws the world into chaos, Gideon's son Remiel seeks out a seer by the name of Lilith Cortese who confirms his worst fears. Hoping to avoid the future Cortese described, Remiel poisons his brother with an apothecary's potion which gives Caliban all the symptoms of leprosy.

On a ship bound for Sanctuary, a leper colony on an island in Lake Erras, Caliban escapes by jumping overboard, taking with him the ship's captain, Gamelyn Blake. Caliban and Gamelyn are swallowed up by the Worldpool, a churning vortex in the middle of the vast lake. Concerned for Gamelyn's son Gerriod, Remiel administers a potion to the boy, making him forget the terrible events of that day.

Thirty years pass.

In the land of Camulos, the Kobolds break through to the Endless whilst mining for shatterstone, inadvertently granting the ancient evil known as the Ghul access to the Myr. Now led by Caliban Grayson, the Ghul strip Camulos of all its shatterstone and round up every single Kobold. The Kobolds are taken into the Endless where a creature called Succellos uses her unique power to rob them of their free will, reducing the once proud race to mindless slaves. The Kobolds spend the next year digging, opening breaches throughout the Myr. The Kobolds also unearth the Cabal, terrifying behemoths that were buried deep in the Endless eons ago.

One such beast, the Morrigu, attacks the peaceful hamlet of Skyfall Town, the first of many Myrran settlements to be threatened by the Cabal.

A short distance to the west, Gerriod Blake is transporting supplies to Sanctuary when he is attacked by lepers trying to escape the colony. He manages to fend off the lepers' attack but in the process is swept into the great vortex now known as Caliban's End.

Gerriod survives his fall into the Endless. He finds his father bound to a crucifix but is unable to free him. Informed of Caliban's plans to subjugate the world above, Gerriod flees the Endless, unaware that his escape is all part of a much greater plan.

Caliban sends a battalion of Ghul to the Bregon Woods where the witches of Morae dwell. The witches – known as the Pryderi – share a unique bond with their offspring and Caliban exploits this in a terrible way. His troops abduct the Pryderi young over a protracted period. As the months pass more and more witches submit to Caliban's request that they join him in the Endless.

The Pryderi send Lara Brand to the Isle of Grisandole in the hope that she may find a grimoire known as the Incanto, a tome that would give the witches the power to defend themselves against the Ghul's relentless attacks. Lara fails to find the book and is assaulted by the Ghul on the isle. She escapes and is picked up at sea by an Acoran sea captain by the name of Simeon Kallady.

Caliban's forces search the Myr for the whereabouts of his brother. A Kompiran boat is attacked by the sea beast known as the Ryugin. The town of Marshmead is invaded by the Ghul. Similarly in the lands of Acoran, Ankara, Kolpia, Helyas and Sessymir, the Ghul and Cabal make their presence known.

An Assembly of Nations is convened. Representatives of almost every Myrran nation attend, hoping to find the means to stop the evil that has crept into the world. After much discussion, the Myrrans, hoping to avoid all-out war, agree to send three assassination squads into the Endless to kill Caliban.

One squad, led by a Sessymirian by the name of Lokasenna Hagen, will journey north to the mine of Strom Mir in Nilfheim. Another squad, led by the politician Maeldune Canna, will head across the Nessian Sea to the Myr's eastern continent and enter the Endless via Caliban's End. The third company will be led by Jehenna Canna, the Consul of Acoran. This group will make their way to Lucien where thousands of Myrrans have already died in battle with the Ghul.

On the eve of the squads setting out from Cessair, they receive their first loss - the great hero Bannick Landen is killed.

The three squads begin their journeys and suffer setbacks immediately.

In the underground passage known as the Acoran Way, Jehenna Canna's squad is ambushed by the Ghul. They escape only to be attacked the following day by the Cabal behemoth known as Kleesto. Kali is killed.

Meanwhile Maeldune Canna's squad makes its way through the Stone Forest of Tethra. They too are ambushed but suffer no casualties. Pylos Castalia realises that the Ghul are vulnerable to the metal known as shatterstone but is forbidden by Maeldune to return to Cessair to inform the Chamberlain.

Eventually making their way up on to the Ganesa Plateau, Maeldune's squad discover the grisly remains of thousands of Tethrans, slain by the diminutive Argas, a member of the Cabal. Remiel risks betraying his Morgai identity in an attempt to save his companions. The squad are saved from defeat by the unlikely intervention of one the Colossi, gargantuan, ancient creatures that wander the Ganesa Plateau.

Pylos takes Remiel aside and, having realised his true identity, attacks the priest. Remiel tries to explain to Pylos his actions and the Helyan spares his life. The two agree to keep Remiel's identity a secret – both men realise that they have a traitor in their midst in the form of Maeldune Canna.

The progress of Lokasenna's squad has also been curtailed by repeated attacks by the Ghul. The Tuirrenian archer Will Stoops sacrifices himself to give his companions the chance to flee. They strike out across the Hollow Hills where Lokasenna's duplicity is revealed. Sir Edgar is slain and Tagtug the Mabbit is wounded, brutally impaled on Lokasenna's steel spike.

Hundreds of leagues to the south-west, in the face of overwhelming odds, Jehenna Canna abandons her plan to enter the Endless through the breach at Lucien and travels to the Acoran port of Griflet. En route they meet the Morgai Lilith Cortese who helps them defeat Kleesto.

The squad sets sail on *The Fortitude*, a great Acoran clipper captained by Jehenna's brother Simeon. In the middle of the Arion Ocean they are set upon by the Ryugin, who kills Simeon and most of the ship's crew. The Myrrans manage to wound the Ryugin enough to cause it to retreat, but Jehenna's squad does not escape unscathed, losing Tawhawki who was cast into the sea by the Ryugin.

The ship limps on through the Arion Ocean, facing an uncertain future.

Maeldune's company makes its way to Murdertown where Gunther Ross causes trouble with the local constabulary and is taken into custody. The

rest of the squad flees across the Nessian Sea where they are assaulted by a fleet of Ghul. Remiel saves the squad and they arrive the following day in Nessa to find the Abbey at Garlot burned to the ground.

Eventually the squad makes its way to the Grove of Nemetona where they are aided by Cephalus Silenus who grants them access to the Thin Grey Line, a narrow passage through the Amaranthine Mountains.

In the land of Khepera they discover the city of El Khadir has been decimated by a disease akin to leprosy. Unwilling to be delayed any longer, Pylos decides that the squad will cross the Marid, a terrible expanse of desert that offers little chance of survival.

Meanwhile Lara, Sumi and the wounded Tagtug make their way across wilderness, eventually finding the town of Providence on the northern edge of Scoriath. They battle the Ghul and the Pryderi, both of whom are commanded by Arinna Brine who is now sympathetic to Caliban's cause. Arinna and the other witches display incredible power and Lara suspects that they have found and accessed the ancient grimoire known as the *Incanto*.

Escaping across the inhospitable Oshalla Ocean, Lara, Sumi and Tagtug find sanctuary in the research outpost known as Toshi Station. Sumi's brother Matsuo assists them, providing the trio with a leviatha known as Suki who will bear them all the way to Sessymir. However, moments after leaving Toshi Station, they are attacked by the Ryugin.

The story continues off the coast of Ankara where Jehenna and her squad are at the mercy of a savage electrical storm...







## Chapter One The Jungles of Ankara

Jehenna's concerned face was lit up by brilliant lightning flashes off the starboard bow. The ionized air crackled as tongues of blue, orange and magenta lightning licked the weltering clouds above.

The seas off the coast of Ankara were often the venue for extraordinarily beautiful and fierce electrical storms and *The Fortitude* had stumbled in on one of the largest, most violent tempests the region had seen in years. Long strands of coloured lightning spread out across the skies like a shatterbug's web. Successive electrostatic discharges seared the air above the ship. The rain had also become electrically charged. The polarized drops sizzled as they hit the ship and stung those who had not retreated below deck to take shelter from the storm.

Jehenna's dark hair was pressed flat against her forehead as seething sheets of rain slapped down upon the ship. Drenched sailors scurried up and down the boat, fastening lines, trimming sails and battening down anything that moved.

'Lilith!' Jehenna screamed above the relentless thunder that rolled across the disturbed sea. 'Can't you do anything about this?' Jehenna grimaced as countless raindrops pelted her body, each one carrying with it a small electric shock.

Lilith Cortese looked across at Jehenna with one eyebrow slightly raised. 'You're not serious are you?'

'You can summon the wind. Can you not control the weather?'

'Even Morgai have their limits Jehenna and I reached mine days ago.'

Able Seaman Hawkins stood at the helm beside Jehenna and Lilith. His long brown hair hung in thick wet clumps, plastered across his neck and scalp. Eyes red from lack of sleep peered out of his gaunt face. Exhausted, he hung his arms over the steering wheel and scanned the exploding sky above for some sign of respite from the fury that had filled his sight for the past three days. He had hardly slept since the Ryugin had attacked the ship and a week had passed since that tragic day. Striving to step into the breach left by Simeon Kallady's death, Hawkins had managed to bring the shattered vessel thousands of leagues closer to the isolated islands of Cephalonia, but now he and the ship had now reached their limit. With a guilty look he turned to Jehenna and said, 'Consul, we must take refuge from this storm. If we don't hole up in a safe haven soon, we'll perish. We have no choice – we need to make repairs.'

Jehenna knew he would not say it if he had any other options. But they were still far from Cephalonia and no closer to fulfilling their

mission objectives than the morning they left Cessair. With a voice contorted by her sense of failure, she said, 'Do what you have to do Hawkins.'

Two more days passed before the lightning storm finally abated. Hawkins had found a small, secluded cove about fifty leagues north of the Ankaran city of Xochipilli. It was a pretty bay which the ship shared with a number of small, lushly vegetated islets.

'It's a lot worse than we thought,' Hawkins said as he peered down into the hole the Ryugin had torn in the main deck. 'We can't maintain the integrity of the hull without bracing the keel properly.'

Jehenna followed his gaze to the tortured mass of timber that rose from the large pool of water at the bottom of the hole. 'How long do you need?'

Hawkins gestured towards the dense forests that sat hunched over the nearby beach. 'Fortunately, the jungles of Ankara contain a lot of good wood. We won't have to travel far to find the timber we need for the keel. But it won't be easy to make the repairs, especially with such a small crew.'

'How long?' Jehenna said a little impatiently.

'Two weeks. Maybe three. It's hard to say.'

Jehenna's face dropped. 'Three weeks?'

Aware that he had disappointed her, Hawkins blushed and lowered his head like a remorseful child. 'I'm sorry Consul, but she's a big ship and we have lost many men. The shipwright on board was killed when the —'

'You don't need to apologise, Hawkins,' she said as she turned her back on the broken deck. Her voice was softer now. 'You've honoured yourself by getting us this far.'

Rama sat on the stairs leading up to the quarterdeck, polishing his golden staff with a strip of cloth. As Jehenna approached, he stood and smiled her way. 'May I inquire as to our status?'

'We're moving on Rama. On foot. We'll get to Cephalonia if we have to walk every step of the way.'

'That may prove rather difficult Jehenna, considering that Cephalonia is on the other side of a rather deep sea,' he replied with a smile. 'We'll just have to hold our breaths. I'm sure we'll be fine.'

Even though he could not see it, she could not help but smile back. His calm optimism was remarkable in someone who faced each day in absolute darkness. Rama had the ability to diffuse a tense situation. His disarming smile was a reminder to Jehenna that though things seemed

bleak, there was always the promise of something better. Despite his snoring, which had remained a constant source of irritation to her, she found she actually liked the Ankaran.

‘It’s good to see you so positive about it Rama,’ she said with a smirk. ‘You can be the one to tell Sela we’re walking.’

‘I am not walking another step!’ Sela shouted as she threw down her pack upon the mud-encrusted jungle floor. She had managed to trip over every single root that lay across their path and was annoyed that Rama had not snagged his considerably larger feet on anything.

‘I wouldn’t shout so loudly if I were you,’ he said softly to Sela as he took a seat on a thick twisting log that lay to the side of the similarly twisting path they had been following up and down the steep, overgrown landscape.

Sela looked incredulously at the impenetrable jungle around her. Viridian vines covered with exotic flowers hung between the moist boles of dark trees that curled their way up through the dense underbrush to a sky that lay somewhere above the crowded canopy. She felt as far away from civilised society as one could get. ‘Are you saying I should keep my voice down because someone might hear me, Rama?’

He lay his staff across his lap and smiled at her benevolently. ‘Perhaps it would be best.’

Sela placed her hands upon her hips and scoffed. ‘Who is going to hear me out here?’

‘The sleeches.’

‘The what?’

‘The sleeches. We’re lucky we haven’t run into any so far.’

‘You’re making me nervous.’

‘You should be. The sleech is something to avoid.’

Sela looked around warily at the jungle, as if a sleech could jump out of it at any moment. ‘What does it look like?’

Rama gave a self-effacing grin. ‘Well, as you can understand, I’ve never actually seen one, but I have been told that they are roughly ten feet in length and are the blackest black. There’s not much to them actually. They’re long and have no limbs. Someone once described them as dark, oily socks with teeth at one end. The sleech’s body tapers to a prehensile tail that it wraps around branches overhanging jungle paths. The other end is a wide mouth that stays open whilst it waits for its victim. When the sleech hears someone walking under it, it simply releases the branch it is hanging from and falls down over the body of its victim, swallowing them whole. The teeth then shut like a trap, slicing off the victim’s feet.

The sleech will then roll to the side of the path looking much like an every day log. From what I hear, it takes weeks for someone to be digested by a sleech. I have heard stories of people who have heard muffled groans coming from the underbrush where semi-digested victims have cried out for help.'

Behind her mask, a look of horror spread across Sela's face. 'That's the most disgusting thing I have ever heard.'

Rama nodded like a sage. 'Yes. I agree. That's why it pays to be quiet in the jungles of Ankara.'

Sela dropped her voice to a frustrated whisper. 'Whose insane idea was it to come this way?'

She looked accusingly at Jehenna who shrugged and said, 'I didn't know there were sleeches here.'

Sela lifted a finger and pointed it into Jehenna's breastbone.

'Well you should know!' she hissed. 'You're the leader! Now, lead us out of this mess.'

Sela had obviously changed her mind about not walking another step. She shouldered her pack and stormed off quietly down the path.

Later than afternoon, Jehenna caught up with Rama who was setting a rapid pace through the jungle. Sela had managed to stay close to him for most of the day, but had fallen back a number of paces as fatigue wrestled with her fear of the sleeches. Jehenna used the opportunity to question Rama about his tale. 'I have been to Ankara many times and I have never heard of sleeches before,' she asked suspiciously. 'Are they only indigenous to this region?'

'They're not indigenous to any region,' he confided to her.

'You made them up!' she exclaimed loud enough to be heard by any non-existent sleeches in the area.

'Yes, I made them up,' he confessed. 'Anything to keep her quiet.' If his blind eyes had eyelids, he would have winked at Jehenna. His mouth tightened as he tried to avoid a grin creeping across his copper-skinned face.

Jehenna made no such effort. A smile as wide as her mouth would allow stretched across her face. She looked back down the path where Sela had tripped over yet another root. She punched at the root but did not articulate her annoyance in any aural fashion.

Although the trek through the Ankaran jungle was arduous, it passed without major incident. Rama led the way through the moist rainforest

followed closely by Jehenna. Occasionally Jehenna would swipe at the lush undergrowth with her glaive which cut through the green tendrils of the jungle like a sharp knife through poddoo mash. Sela had done her best to keep up with Jehenna and Rama but her companions' long strides meant that a significant gap soon formed between them.

Bormanus preferred to walk on his own and whilst he was clearly unhappy about the steep climbs and muddy descents, he kept any comments he had to himself.

Lilith brought up the rear of the walking party. She was struggling. It was not surprising. For six days she had filled *The Fortitude's* sails with a wind drawn from her own mystical energies. It was a feat few Morgai before her had tried and it had depleted her. The sheer act of walking around the puddles that lay across the jungle path was a strain and as the hours passed, she fell further and further back. It may have been a trick of the ethereal light under the jungle canopy, but there were times when Jehenna caught glimpses of Lilith through the trees and she looked like an old woman, with dirtied purple and gold robes hanging over a stooped, shaking body.

'Rama,' Jehenna said to the tall Ankaran in front of her. 'How far to go?'

He stopped and swivelled around. His long, thick dreadlocks swept around in a flourish much like the dresses of women who graced the ballrooms of the palaces Jehenna had grown up in. A contented smile greeted her. She could see he was actually enjoying the jungle hike. He had dispensed with his robes and wore only a pair of tan breeches. The moist, humid air of the jungle coated his amphibious body in fine droplets of water which glistened in the thin shafts of sunlight that pierced the leafy fronds that arched above their heads.

'It is not far,' he said in answer to Jehenna's question. 'I imagine we will clear the jungle before sunset.'

'Good,' she said with a sigh. 'I have concerns for the Morgai.'

'As do I, Consul,' he said with an uncharacteristic inflection in his voice. He did not infuse the statement with the same meaning Jehenna had given it.

'What do you mean?' she asked, puzzled by his tone.

Rama sidled up to Jehenna and whispered, 'Don't trust a word she says.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Look at what's happened to us Jehenna. The ambush in the tunnels. Kleesto's attack, and last week the Ryugin. These aren't random attacks.'

'No, but why would you suspect Lilith? She got us here Rama. She saved us from Kleesto.'

'She wasn't appointed to join us by the Chancellor.'

'Yes, so she couldn't be held responsible for what happened to us on the Way. She couldn't have known our route.'

'Jehenna, she's a seer. She sees things before they happen.'

'Perhaps she's already seen this conversation, heard those words long before you thought them up.' She was being flippant. It was clear she didn't share Rama's concerns.

'That's all very amusing Jehenna but I don't trust her.'

'Rama, she defended my brother against the Ryugin.'

'Perhaps to save herself.'

'Why don't you trust her?'

Rama cocked his head to check whether anyone was within earshot. He was uncharacteristically anxious. 'Jehenna, I heard her talking to herself in her cabin the day the Ryugin struck.'

Jehenna laughed. 'You listened to her talking to herself? You spied on her?'

Rama shook his head slightly. 'No, I didn't. She was shouting. *I will let Kallady die! And Baffin. And Tawhawki.* Jehenna, she knew your brother was going to die and she did nothing.'

Jehenna's veneer of light-heartedness shattered and what lay beneath was cold and hard. The image of her brother dying in her arms burned across her mind's eye. He was looking up at her, commenting upon the wound on her cheek. Tears were filling her eyes.

The sound of Sela coming up the path behind Jehenna brought her mind back to the jungle. Her temples throbbed as a dangerous rage coursed through her veins. The scar on her face ached. She moved off down the path before Lilith Cortese came into view.

The last part of their trek through the jungles of eastern Ankara was the most difficult. The land before them rose up steeply, a wall of moist, green vines and cold, dark mud. The path became lost in the tortured flora and even Rama struggled to find a way forward. They could hear the cries and cackles of strange native birds, seemingly mocking them as they tried to find a way out the dense environment. No-one spoke as they scrambled up the sodden incline. Even Jehenna slipped a number of times, sliding back down the slope before staunchly marching back up to try again. Sela was so exhausted that she derived no joy from the sight of the mud-spattered Acoran falling on her backside. The only thing that mattered was leaving the jungle behind. They extended their hands to



one another and pulled and pushed their way as a group up the wet slope. No-one, not even Rama, expected what they found at the top.

‘By all the gods!’ Rama exclaimed as he stepped out from the fringes of the jungle. Sounds of countless animals filled his ears and these were accompanied by the smells of more species than he could count. This strange perfume was embellished with the sweet but potent smell of flowerfall in full bloom. ‘So, it does exist.’

‘I don’t believe it!’ gasped Jehenna, echoing his astonishment.

Sela, Bormanus and Lilith were equally surprised by what lay before them, but lacked the strength to say anything.

They had walked out of the jungle onto a wide sweeping hill covered in blazing flowerfall. It was late afternoon and the shadows of the jungle behind them lapped over the fringes of a great field. Further out from the jungle, the sun’s orange glow touched the land, lighting it up like a stage upon which a fantastic show was being performed.

An incredible menagerie of animals had gathered across the wide meadow to amble in the glow of the afternoon light. There were thousands of them: flocks of woolly shelp and long-haired grizzums, herds of proud staggorns and placid garumphs, mobs of wild snorses, congregations of stone gluks, droves of grouts, armies of friggu, farrows of swiggu, rafts of ducca... even a pack of jungle marroks had found their way out onto the grassland.

It was Sela who vocalised the most astounding aspect of what they were seeing. ‘The animals – they’re flying!’

It was true to a certain extent. Not a single hoof, paw, claw or talon touched the grass beneath the animals’ feet. The beasts hung contentedly in the air, floating above the long grasses like furry, scaly and woolly clouds. Occasionally a beast would kick its legs or flick its tail and move through the air in much the same way as it would in water, but most were happy just to laze in the warm sunlight on a cushion of air.

The meadow was home to many creatures that were not native to the region. A train of calumphs galloped across the air playfully chasing a shoal of sandgups while a herd of barga looked on with mild interest. A huddle of snufflegroots waddled along above the flowerfall and teams of pulloks pulled this way and that on their way to nowhere in particular.

Remarkably, there was no sign of animosity among the animals despite the fact a number of them were the bitterest of old enemies. The marroks did nothing to suggest they were even slightly interested in the shelp and the swiggu did not show any sign of fear when a pair of blood-beaked ostra floated past. A smuck of bloaters nestled under a business of flummoxes which had in turn nuzzled into the soft fur of tribe of huks. A bale of bobugs climbed across the backs of some sleeping bogcrabs.

A pair of land turtla looked over at the jungle fringes, giving a cursory glance at the group of Myrrans that had appeared on the crest of the hillside. Almost a league away from where the company stood, a brace of white mockworms hovered over the meadow pretending to be a patch of sky. Overhead, flocks of white larida, yaffle-birds, quawks and gillygulls filled the sun-soaked air.

‘What is this place?’ Jehenna said, rubbing her eyes as if waking from a dream.

‘My people have long regarded this place as just a fanciful myth,’ Rama said in disbelief. ‘The meadow before us is known in our stories as Vanna Nir. It is an ancient Ankaran phrase that loosely translates to *field of joy*.’

Bormanus eyed the area suspiciously. ‘Why aren’t the animals killing one another?’

Sela gave him a perplexed look. ‘Surely that is less strange to you than the fact these beasts don’t ordinarily float above the ground like that?’

Bormanus said nothing in response but took a few steps back from the edge of the meadow.

‘How did they all got here?’ Sela asked Rama but he just shrugged his shoulders and continued to listen to the wondrous carnival of beasts before him.

Jehenna stepped forward out onto the flowerfall and found that her toes did not touch the ground. She giggled as a sensation imbued with pure happiness crept across her skin. It was like a breeze had blown away all her troubles and left her with an oddly calm yet euphoric feeling. Ripples of contentment gently drifted up her body, swirling around her navel and tenderly brushing across her neck and face. She swung her arms before her, as if swimming across the surface of a pond and her body floated out over the meadow. As it did so, Jehenna was wrapped up in a feeling of serenity unlike anything she had ever experienced before. She felt safe. She felt certain. This strange but comforting attitude extended to her mission, her companions and her leadership.

She looked back to where the dark shapes of Rama, Sela, Bormanus and Lilith stood at the edge of the meadow, like swimmers unwilling to enter the ocean because the water was too cold. With the exception of Rama, they crossed their arms and frowned at the sight of their squad leader rolling about in the air enjoying herself. Rama raised an arm and beckoned her back to the fringe of the field.

As Jehenna's feet touched the ground, her body slumped and the feeling of wellbeing slipped from her body like a discarded dress. She felt colder than before and the four Myrrans who stood before her felt more like strangers than companions.

'Are you alright?' Sela said tentatively. Her curious eyes peered out from a mask encrusted with mud and grime as a result of her passage through the jungle.

Jehenna went to speak but found she was out of breath. Her pulse was racing and she felt restless. The calmness that had enveloped her seemed as far away as home. Everything seemed darker now. Colours had faded from the land.

She whirled around and found that that field was no longer draped in the effulgent sunlight of late afternoon. The animals were still there happily lolling about above the grass, but it was now nightfall. Thousands of shatterbugs lit up the field and the blossoms of flowerfall responded in kind, twinkling with their own iridescent beauty.

She turned back to Rama. 'What has happened?' she asked panic-stricken over the changes in her surroundings. 'How long was I out there?'

Rama threw back his dreadlocks and looked at the voluminous spheres above him – all three moons had risen. 'Jehenna, are you saying you don't know?'

Frustration took a hold of her and she snapped. 'Just tell me how long!'

He stepped back, wary of the volatile mood that had descended upon her. In a soft voice he said, 'Consul, it is almost midnight now. We have been calling to you for many hours.'

Jehenna felt weak and vulnerable. In a strange way, she felt violated. She had lost at least six hours from her day. She sat down on the grass at the edge of the meadow, eyeing the field with suspicion. 'I don't understand.'

Rama turned towards Sela, Bormanus and Lilith who were staring at Jehenna as if she were an exhibit in a travelling show. They said nothing but he knew their presence would be awkward for the Acoran who was obviously struggling with what had happened to her. 'Good night, my friends. We will speak in the morning but for now you must rest. Do not wander by the meadow. Take your sleep under the trees to the west.'

Without a word they responded, each one wrapped up in thoughts about the strange occasion they had just witnessed.

Rama leant on his golden staff and took a seat beside Jehenna. She was staring out across the meadow with a look of shock plastered across

her face. Without meaning to she scowled at the scene, distrustful of what she was looking at, and as her brow furrowed, a stinging pain shot down her face. The wound she had received when the Ryugin had attacked *The Fortitude* throbbed and her body ached. Any happiness she had experienced out in the field had well and truly faded.

‘Rama, what happened?’ she said, her voice frail, almost unrecognisable. ‘Where did all the time go?’

Rama dug one end of his staff into the soil at his feet, carving out small circles as he tried to piece together the situation. ‘Jehenna, how long do you think you were out there?’

‘Only a moment or two,’ Jehenna said with the sadness of one who had lost something special, something that cannot be retrieved.

‘What do you purpose now?’

She sighed. ‘I don’t know Rama. I know I should know, but I don’t.’

Rama said nothing for a while as the significance of her comment took full effect. He had led them through the jungle to this place and had planned to continue their route northwards into Tamu and from there across the Sea of Mists to Cephalonia. As long and arduous a trek as it seemed, it was simple. They were basically following a straight line to their destination. Now they had an obstacle in their path, the most unlikely of obstacles he could have imagined. ‘Would you venture out on to the meadow again?’

A quick but unequivocal shake of her head made it clear to Rama that crossing Vanna Nir was not an option. ‘I fear we would lose ourselves out there. Whilst there is a part of me that wants nothing more than to roll about on the air unburdened and free, we are not animals. We have responsibilities. We have people who have entrusted us with their welfare. There are lives at stake here. We cannot forget that.’

Rama smiled. ‘You are quite an astounding person, Jehenna Canna.’

Jehenna was caught off-guard. It was not the response she had been expecting. Her face blushed as she tried to absorb the compliment. ‘Thank-you Rama, but I’m not sure I –’

‘Deserve it?’ he laughed. ‘Of course you do. It seems to me that out on that meadow you experienced a joy that cannot be articulated and yet you would deny yourself even a brief respite from the hardships you bear to finish the mission. You are remarkable Jehenna. I hope you realise that.’

She had always struggled with compliments. Fortunately, she had married a man who gave her none, so she was spared the clumsy feeling

she now experienced as she tried to think of a response to Rama's kind words.

Sensing her discomfort, Rama focused upon the problem at hand. 'Where will we go?' he asked.

She gazed northwards, across the strange meadow to a distant horizon marked with conical mountains silhouetted against the starlit sky. 'That way lies Cephalonia so that's where we must go. We can't turn back to *The Fortitude* on the vain hope she will be fixed by the time we get there.' She looked to the east and west where the land fell away into darkness. 'Can we get around the meadow?'

'We can try, Jehenna. I guess all we can ever do is try.'

Early the next morning Jehenna informed the others that they would be walking around the meadow. No-one questioned the decision. Whilst Sela found the sight of so many wild animals floating over the flowerfall to be engaging, she did not want to lose herself to the meadow the way Jehenna had. 'Who knows how long we could be lost out there?' she mused as they made their way east, skirting across the hillside where the jungle met the meadow. 'I have a family to get home to. No offence, but I don't want to spend the rest of my life with your four.'

'You have a family?' Jehenna said with obvious surprise in her voice.

'Yes,' replied Sela doing little to disguise the annoyance in her voice. 'A husband and a child.'

'Really?' remarked Jehenna.

'Why do you find that hard to believe?'

'I'm sorry Sela, but I just never pictured you as the marrying type.'

'Not *the marrying type*! I have had eleven husbands Jehenna!'

'Eleven husbands!' Jehenna exclaimed. Lilith and Bormanus also raised their eyebrows in surprise.

'What happened to them?' Bormanus inquired.

'They asked too many questions,' Sela said coldly and quickened her pace across the grass unwilling to explore the topic any further.

By lunchtime, they could travel east no further. They made their way down to a beach that formed a long white line up the lonely coast of northern Ankara. The meadow faded into long seagrasses that marked the coastal fringe. Rolling surf teased the golden beach. Standing watch over the shoreline, a line of flaming red palms stretched out into the distance. About five hundred yards out to sea, breakers relentlessly

crashed on a sharp reef that ran parallel to the beach. The reef was the reason why the region was so devoid of any sign of civilization. Ships could not approach the beach by sea without suffering the same fate as the waves that ended in foamy white explosions.

The squad ate a modest lunch on the beach and then continued their journey along the coast. The sand was firm and made for easy walking. Following the pattern established on their jungle trek, Rama and Jehenna walked together, followed by Sela then Bormanus with Lilith at the tail of the group. The group spread out on the wide flat beach, bound on one side by the meadow of Vanna Nir and by the Tamu Ocean on the other. Every now and then silver-clawed crabbula stuck their heads out of the tightly packed sand to watch their passing, but other than the odd crustacean and occasional shatterbug (and the creatures floating in the meadow to their west) they saw no sign of life on their journey up the sands. No ships sailed by on the horizon and no birds flew in the sky overhead.

‘I wonder how creatures as evil as the Ghul would fare out on the meadow,’ Jehenna mused as she looked at the green and purple field beyond the small dunes that framed the beach.

‘Much like the marroks I’d imagine,’ Rama said. ‘I can’t be sure but I think it affects all creatures the same way.’

‘But how does it work?’

‘If you’re asking for a scientific explanation for Vanna Nir, you’re asking the wrong person. Maybe Tawhawki could have explained it. Or perhaps it’s just one of those things that can’t be explained. Like magick. Or love. Or the afterlife.’

‘Or snoring,’ Jehenna added. She was feeling tired. Rama had kept her up half the night with particularly robust snoring and she had tried to include a reference to it in most of their conversations that day.

‘I said I was sorry,’ he laughed. ‘After that jungle trek, I was tired and I always snore when I’m tired.’

‘You must be tired all the time then,’ she retorted, ‘because you have snored every night since we left Cessair.’

Rama did not have a defence, nor did he have a criticism to make of her that would even the scales. He decided to focus upon other matters. ‘In answer to your question, if a scientific explanation is required, I hypothesise that what you experienced was a chemical reaction to certain pheromones released by this strain of flowerfall.’

Jehenna was impressed. Rama actually sounded like he knew what he was talking about. ‘And what about the floating?’

Rama nodded and opened his mouth as if he had an answer for her. He nodded some more, but didn't say anything. Finally he smiled weakly and said, 'I can't explain the floating.'

She laughed. 'I'm disappointed in you Rama.'

'Jehenna, we live in a world where a woman can summon the wind with a thought, where people live in cities on the backs of crawling mountains, where monsters dwell beneath our feet and you want me to explain why you were floating a few feet above the flowers?'

'I take your point,' she conceded with grin.

He could feel the sun on the right side of his face and the salty smell of the wind rolling down the beach. 'So the plan is to stay on the sands and head north.'

'Yes. If we keep to the beach, I think we could reach Tamu in four days. I hope to replenish our supplies in Nuadu, Sela's village.'

'It sounds like a good plan – we must avoid heading inland.'

'Because of the meadow?'

Rama shook his head. 'No. Something much worse.'

'Jehenna!'

The cry came from behind them. It was Sela. About five hundred yards down the beach, the Tamuan was huddled over Lilith who lay crumpled up on the sands with her robes over her head.

Jehenna sprinted down the beach. Tiny explosions of water erupted from the wet sand as she raced to see what the problem was. She ran past Bormanus who was just standing on the shoreline watching the situation unfold, like an impartial observer in a dispute. He looked interested in what was taking place, but not concerned.

As Jehenna approached, Sela looked up and said, 'She's hardly moving Jehenna. She's gone into some sort of shock.'

Jehenna knelt down beside Lilith. She was rigid. She clutched at her gown so that her face was obscured, but her hands revealed that something strange was going on. Lilith's long, smooth fingers had been replaced by knobby joints covered in sallow, speckled skin.

Jehenna grabbed Lilith by the shoulders to sit her up. She almost recoiled when she felt Lilith's bony body. It was like the Morgai had lost all muscular definition and was little more than skin wrapped around a skeleton.

'Lilith?'

Underneath the robes draped over her head, a long, hollow voice rang out. 'Leave me!'

Jehenna looked up at Sela and gave her instructions. 'Tell Rama and Bormanus to find some shade further up the beach and wait for me there. Prepare a bed for Lilith. We will be with you shortly.'

Sela raced up the beach to carry out Jehenna's orders, leaving the Acoran to coax Lilith out from her purple and gold cowl. After some gentle persuasion Lilith released her hold of her robes and they slid off her head to reveal a face so withered and wizened, Jehenna could not help but gasp aloud.

Lilith licked her cracked, white lips and spoke. 'You have every right to be shocked, my beautiful Acoran. This is a secret I have kept from you.' Her voice was as cracked and coarse as her skin.

Jehenna's eyes flicked back and forth over the worn visage before her. 'What has happened to you?'

Lilith's thin smile was little more than a fold in her face. What was intended as laughter but sounded more like a groan broke from her pursed mouth. 'This hasn't just happened, Jehenna. It's been happening for centuries.'

At first, Jehenna did not understand the comment, but as Lilith's dark eyes looked up from under eyelids resembling discarded sacks, the Acoran could see the wisdom and knowledge of hundreds of years. Lilith was old. Older than any Acoran. Older than many trees. And she was coming to the end of her days.

'The journey has taken much out of me, my sweet girl. My powers are fading. Not much time left have I.'

'Are you dying?' Jehenna blurted out, her concern for the frail figure before her bringing a smile to the old woman's face.

'I have been dying for many years and I have wasted much power trying to extend my life beyond my allotted time. But do not worry. I won't die here upon the beach. My death takes place further north.'

Jehenna had never considered that the Morgai would have foreseen her own death. Even more alarming was the way in which she had reconciled herself to her own fate.

'But if you know the manner of your death, you can avoid it!'

'Dear girl, I could no more avoid my own death than I could stop your brother's. I'm sorry he died, Jehenna, but if there is one thing I have learnt in all of the chaos that has descended upon the world since I told Remiel Grayson of the threat his brother posed to the welfare of the Myr, it is this – what will be, will be. It isn't the end that matters – it is how we fill up the time in between. Your brother was a good man. His life mattered.'

Images of Simeon floated up in Jehenna's mind and she found it hard to push back the tears that thoughts of him brought to bear. She hurriedly rubbed her eyes and fixed her mind on the present situation. 'Are you in pain?'



The old woman shook her head slightly. 'No. Not really. My body aches from wear and tear, but I'm not in any real pain. Just drained. It's tiring maintaining the guise of a young woman. You're lucky you don't have to exhaust yourself to do it.'

'I don't understand. Why do it if it exhausts you?'

Lilith dropped her head and after a long silence, finally confessed her fault. 'Vanity.'

Jehenna was perplexed. 'What?'

Lilith continued to look down at the sand around her. 'Like other female Morgai before me, I inherited the power to alter my appearance. I chose to wear the form of an attractive, young woman. I have become quite fond of it, like a favourite dress.'

'But why can't you just be yourself.'

Something resembling a smirk was sitting on Lilith's face when she lifted it. 'Oh, I am being myself, Jehenna. This was how I looked over 300 years ago. I was the prettiest girl in Pelinore, with a string of suitors hanging on my doorbell.'

Jehenna bent her face closer to the old woman's. 'Beauty isn't everything, Lilith.'

Masked somewhat by her wrinkled, blotted skin, Lilith shot Jehenna a reprobating look. 'That's exactly the sort of comment a beautiful young thing like you can afford to make.'

Jehenna lifted a hand to the right side of her face and felt the long, hard scar that had formed as a result of her injury aboard *The Fortitude*. 'Not beautiful any more, I'm afraid.'

Lilith lifted her wrinkled hands to Jehenna's face and in a voice as soft as spring said, 'More beautiful than ever, sweet girl.'

The rest of the day was spent under the wide red leaves of a palm tree. Lilith slept soundly for most of that time, occasionally waking to take a sip of water from the flask that Jehenna had placed by her head. Bormanus skulked off into the dunes and was not seen for much of the day. In contrast Jehenna and Sela stayed by the old Morgai's side the entire time. They took turns to dab Lilith's face with a piece of wet cloth to spite the hot wind that blew down the beach from the north. Rama spent much of the afternoon swimming in the surf in the hope of catching fish for the company to eat. As night approached he emerged from the water with at least a dozen lemonfish on the end of a pole he had carved from a piece of driftwood he had found earlier that day.

They sat around a fire that night and feasted on the fish. Whilst Lilith did not revert to the young form she had worn for so many years,

she looked a lot better than she had earlier that day. The company was in good spirits and exchanged stories of their homelands the way old friends would, laughing and listening as the night swept by. Even Bormanus occasionally contributed to the conversation. When Jehenna finally laid her head upon the sand some time after midnight, she did so with a smile. She didn't need the meadow of Vanna Nir to know what happiness felt like.

They rose early the following morning. Lilith had assured them she felt strong enough to walk. Deciding not to expend herself needlessly, she did not assume her youthful façade and so she hobbled along the beach as fast as her rickety legs would take her.

By lunchtime they had covered many leagues and the land before them began to change. The fine sand they had been walking on became thicker, interspersed with angular rocks that made walking upon the beach a less pleasant experience. The dunes beside them also slowly changed and were gradually replaced by shelves of rock that grew higher and higher the further north the company travelled. By mid-afternoon their comfortable stroll along the beach had become a treacherous combination of rock-hopping and wading through wide rockpools. It was not long before they realised they could not go any further.

'There are cliffs ahead of us. How are we going to get around them?'

'Perhaps we should head inland,' suggested Bormanus. 'Surely we've left Vanna Nir behind by now.'

Rama shook his head emphatically. 'It's not a route I would suggest.'

'Why not?' Sela said apprehensively.

'The rumours of Vanna Nir have been substantiated. It is likely that another field exists that would be best avoided.'

Sela's hands went to her hips in her characteristic combative stance. '*Another* field?'

Jehenna walked over to some sharp, flat rocks that led up to a patch of grass to the west. She clambered up the rocks, jumping from shelf to shelf until she finally stood where she could survey the land. She turned back to her companions and waved to them, her gesture indicating that they follow her up to her vantage point.

They were all surprised by what they saw. The lush meadows of flowerfall had faded away, replaced by a place so disconsolate, Jehenna felt lonely just looking at it. It was completely absent in colour. There was grass covering the wide, flat expanse, but it was grey. It seemed that

even the sky was subject to the same aesthetic - thick, low-lying monochromatic clouds robbed the land of any warmth it may have extracted from the day. No beasts moved on the land nor did any birds fly above it. It was the unhappiest place Jehenna had ever seen.

‘What’s that smell?’ Sela groaned, gagging behind her mask.

‘It’s the smell of sadness,’ Rama said as he joined Jehenna and Sela on the small rise that overlooked the grey land. ‘This place is called Sad El. It’s an easy enough translation to work out. Just as Vanna Nir is a place of euphoria and bliss, Sad El is a place of despair. Or so the story goes.’

Sela looked up at Rama and said, ‘One look at this place will tell you that the story must be true. I feel a sense of emptiness just standing near it.’

Jehenna placed a hand over her nose. ‘It will only get worse when we march through it. I do not believe we can proceed. If this drab meadow affects us as potently as Vanna Nir affected me, I do not believe we would reach the other side.’

Sela peered at her curiously. ‘Are you saying we turn back Jehenna?’

‘I do not believe we have a choice. We can’t swim the sea and we can’t traverse the cliffs.’

Bormanus and Lilith clambered up the rise and immediately reacted to the dismal surroundings. Lilith turned her craggy face away from the scene, overwhelmed by the sense of hopelessness the place evoked. Bormanus brought his hands up to his milky white face and quailed at the sight of melancholy meadow. ‘What is this?’ his thin voice whispered as he grappled with the gloom that had descended upon him.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Jehenna. ‘We’re not staying.’

She turned her back on Sad El and made her way to the edge of the rise. To the south, the beach stretched out like a scimitar, gleaming in the afternoon light as it curved around the deep blue ocean to the east. Out to sea, the sun had burst through clouds, lighting up patches of water so that they glistened like coloured glass in a church window. At once her heart lifted. She breathed in deeply and the salty air cleared her head. She was retreating, but it was the right decision. The only decision.

Suddenly, something caught her eye to the south. At first she thought it was a low-lying cloud, but it was moving too quickly. Its shadow skipped across the distant rockpools, sending fish scurrying for cover. The dark shape was large but lacked distinguishing features that would mark it as an animal. It was wide and flat but had no face, nor did it have arms or legs. The extremities of the shape slowly moved up and down like the great leviatha of the Oshalla Ocean, but it was no sea

creature. It was like nothing Jehenna had ever seen before and that probably meant it was dangerous.

'Prepare yourselves,' she hissed to the others. 'Something's coming.'

Lilith hobbled up next to her and peered down the beach. 'Its name is Katkochila. It's one of the Cabal.'

'Another one!' sighed Jehenna as she twisted her arms slightly and cocked her crossbows. With a click and a snap, the bows extended and a bolt was drawn into the tiller of each weapon.

Sela and Rama took their cues from their leader and readied themselves for an attack. Sela pulled her gown over her shoulders revealing her quills which rose up and quivered like the hair on the back of a cornered animal. Rama raised his staff before him and kept it pointed at the approaching creature though he could not see it at all.

Lilith sat down atop the rise and closed her eyes, focusing within as she tried to draw out what little Morgai power remained in her frail body.

'There is no defeating this monster,' Rama said solemnly. 'I believe it's the one that attacked the city of Xochipilli.'

As it neared, Jehenna could see that the creature was actually made up of many smaller parts. Countless spherical segments floated together in a clump, all part of the one body but not actually attached to one another. It was like looking at the individual snowflakes in a blizzard, only these were black, round and large enough to hit. Or so Jehenna thought. She took the initiative and fired of ten bolts in succession, five from each arm. The shatterstone-tipped shafts burst through the air aimed directly at the centre of the great black beast. It seemed impossible to miss, but when the bolts neared the creature, it simply shifted its segments around so that the shots passed through it. Despite the flurry of bolts she had dispatched, Jehenna had failed to hit Katkochila and that was something for which she would pay a price.

As Katkochila dived towards the tiny Myrrans on the edge of Sad El, it reconfigured its body. At the point where most creatures had a head, a large knot of the black segments formed, like a great black fist being clenched. Sela, Bormanus and Lilith were fortunate enough to escape being hit. Jehenna and Rama were not so lucky.

A moment before Katkochila's blow, Lilith managed to erect a barrier between the beast and its intended targets. The mystical energies crackled as Katkochila slammed into it. It was a temporary measure and did much to soften the strange beast's blow. Jehenna and Rama were thrown backwards, down the slope towards the monochromatic field they had hoped to avoid.

As they tumbled down the hill, Jehenna threw out a hand to grab Rama. She managed to snag his thick, moist dreadlocks. He grunted in pain but she held on, less concerned about the tendrils hanging from his head than she was about being separated from him. For some reason, she felt scared and she did not want to be alone.

They stopped at the base of the slope, on the fringes of Sad El. Jehenna lifted her head. It felt like a great weight upon her shoulders. Her limbs also felt heavy. She felt nauseous. In her mind, it seemed that she would always feel this way, that there was no other way to feel. She looked up the long slope in front of her and could see the black shape of Katkochila wheeling in the sky. The sight of it filled her with dread. She found it difficult to think about how her companions were faring against the monster. She was not even sure she cared.

Rama shook his head, trying in vain to clear it of the fear and melancholia that had also enveloped him.

A forlorn expression crossed Jehenna's face. Her eyes flicked back and forth from the meadow to the rise above her. She bit her lip as she tried to sort through the clutter of emotions that filled her head. She looked at Rama who was crouched on his knees, his head hidden under his arms. He was not going anywhere.

'We should go,' she said unconvincingly. She knew she should climb back up the slope, but that way lay Katkochila. She was caught in a bind. She could not stay but she found it just as hard to go.

Looking up the hill, she caught sight of the glaive Simeon had given her back on *The Fortitude*. It had been dislodged from its harness when Katkochila had struck. In the grey landscape surrounding her, the glaive stood out like a beacon – golden and brilliant. She would concentrate on getting to it. She put all thoughts of Katkochila aside and focused solely on Simeon's gift. She forced into her mind images of her brother smiling as he playfully teased her on the deck of his proud ship. She crawled through the grey grass and though each step was an effort, she eventually made it to the glaive. The further she went, the better she felt. By the time she held the golden shaft of the glaive once more, her fear had dissipated and was replaced by anger.

Jehenna turned to find Rama was just behind her. She could tell by his face that he too had left his fears at the base of the hill where the meadow of Sad El clutched at their hearts. 'You know, Rama,' she said with a snarl, 'I'm getting a little tired of these Cabal smashing us across the countryside.'

Leaning on his staff, Rama hauled himself up onto his feet. 'So am I, Jehenna. Let's get back to the others.'

By the time they reached the top of the hill, the courage and determination that usually characterised the pair had returned, which was just as well for what awaited them was terrifying.

Katkochila had landed on the rise and had taken the form of a many legged creature with a large head shaped like a pick-axe which it used to attack Lilith, Rama and Sela. Lilith had erected a cocoon of magick around them. This sphere of Morgai power was small but it had been enough to protect the trio from Katkochila's vicious onslaught. Each time the beast rammed its wedge-shaped head into the sphere Lilith winced and the translucent blue light that formed the protective bubble would flicker. Jehenna did not understand the magicks involved but she could see it would not be long before Lilith collapsed under the savage attacks and the bubble would pop, leaving the three of them defenceless.

Jehenna cocked her crossbows and fired another volley. Although she was sure she had not gained Katkochila's attention when she fired, the spheres simply moved aside and let her bolts pass through.

Rama was just as quick to move and his attack was similarly ineffectual. Sensing where the creature stood, he sprinted towards it and thrust his staff upward deep into what could have been the monster's belly. The closely-packed segments parted and his blow struck nothing but air.

The segments shifted dramatically, rising up high above Rama. They formed a long pylon that hovered momentarily in the air before hammering down towards the Ankaran. A split-second before the dark pole struck, Rama was hit from the side.

It was Jehenna. Realising the mortal danger her companion was in she had leapt to his aid. It was a most fortuitous collision. Not only had she pulled him out of the path of Katkochila's killing blow, but she had managed to send them into Lilith's protective sphere.

Jehenna wasted no time in going to Lilith's side. 'How long can you maintain the shield?'

Lilith did not move. She did not have the energy to answer. It was taking every vestige of strength just to keep the barrier up. Jehenna looked out through the translucent blue surface of the sphere expecting to see the black shape of Katkochila beyond. Instead she saw the bright sky and the shimmering sea beneath. A sliver of hope entered her heart – frustrated by its attempts to squash them, Katkochila had abandoned its attacks and flown off in search for easier prey.

She lifted her gaze to find that this was not the case. Katkochila had flown away but only so far as it needed to go to build up momentum to smash the sphere of magick apart. Up into the eastern sky it flew until it paused, hovering high above the pounding surf. It seemed to be

looking at them from afar, scrutinising them, although as far as Jehenna could tell, it had no eyes.

Suddenly it shot forward, like a spear with wings. It moved at such a phenomenal speed, Jehenna hardly had time to tell her squad to brace themselves.

The impact was terrible and there was none who felt it more than Lilith Cortese. She let loose a wrenching, agonised cry as Katkochila drove its pointed mass into the sphere. Despite the pain that accompanied such a blow, Lilith somehow managed to maintain the integrity of the bubble. The jarring collision did not break the barrier but it did send the entire sphere high into the air. The company tumbled around within the ball as it flew high above the rise, out into the grey sky above Sad El.

Whatever hope Jehenna had experienced was quickly shattered when she realised the ramifications of Katkochila's attack. If by miracle they survived the landing upon the meadow far below, they would fall under Sad El's disheartening influence and lose themselves in despair. She tried to think of what to do but it looked hopeless. 'There is always a way, there is always a way,' she repeated to herself, but as the ground came rushing up to meet them, she had to accept that perhaps she was wrong. Sometimes, perhaps, there were no options.

When Jehenna lifted her head from the soft grey grass of Sad El, it felt as heavy as an anvil. She tried to lift herself from the ground but found she neither had the will nor the energy.

She lay her head back in her arms and wept. She did not know why but the tears came easily. She could hear herself sobbing, could feel the tears' warm tracks on her cheeks and could taste their saltiness as they ran down to her lips. She put her hand to her face and brushed the scar that had formed as a result of the Ryugin's attack upon *The Fortitude*. The scar made her feel worse as it reminded her of her dead brother. And someone else. Someone who was beyond her reach. She rolled over in the grass so that her face was buried in the pungent grass. She could do nothing but cry.

Sela was huddled so tightly, she resembled a small, prickly bush amongst the long blades of grass. Her spines stuck up defensively as she wrestled with the doubts that consumed her mind. Her thoughts weren't centred upon herself. They were devoted to her family. She pictured her village, spread out on wooden platforms located high above the savannah. Long, golden stalks of grass spread out in all directions, rippling as a warm

breeze ran across the land. It would have been a picturesque scene had she not caught sight of something moving through the grass. Suddenly the land became a sea of teeth, gnashing and snapping at the village perched above it. She saw her husband Tomu walking out of their hut with their baby Seba in his arms. In her head, Sela heard her child crying. It was not the half-hearted cry of tired child; it was a scream fuelled and shaped by absolute terror. 'I should have been there to protect him,' Sela said mournfully and curled up even tighter on the dark grass of Sad El.

Lilith was barely conscious. She had never been more exhausted in all her long life. She could not remember a time when her body did not ache, nor could she remember a time when her mind was free of the oppressive guilt that weighed upon it. 'I shouldn't have told him anything,' she mumbled to herself. Her voice was so broken and weak that her comment was more like a thought than a statement. Her craggy face lay pressed against the black soil from which sprung the shoots of grey grass. She blended into the landscape and was content to stay where she was, until death took her. In the back of her mind, she knew that her death was not meant to take place upon the meadow of Sad El, but she had no interest in the incongruity. All she wanted was for her life to end. She didn't care where just as long as it was soon. She closed her eyes and repeated, 'I shouldn't have told him anything.'

Rama had fallen face first. As he struck the dirt, he heard something crack. Moments later, he was aware of something warm running down both sides of his face. Ankarans' nostrils were usually difficult to see as they were little more than slits on either side of the shallow ridge that ran down from their foreheads to their wide lipless mouths, but in Rama's case, his nostrils became the most noticeable aspect of his face. From them ran vivid red blood, all the more shocking in a landscape of grey. The bleeding was profuse. The pain under his scaly skin told him that he had fractured his skull and his nostrils became the outlet for the blood that was rushing through his aching head.

Rama clambered to his feet which were both splattered by his blood, as was the grass. He lifted a hand to his face and squeezed his nostrils shut. The swelling feeling behind his fingers made his head swim, so he reached down to his thighs and quickly tore a strip of cloth from his leggings. He bound this tightly around his face, hoping that the pressure would be enough to stem the flow of blood.



He raised his head and listened for some sign of his companions. He could hear voices, soft and muffled as if they were far away. The fact he could hear voices was uplifting. It meant that some of the company at least had survived the fall.

It was then that he realised that he did not feel like he had before. There was no heaviness, nor was he plagued with the fear and dread that had almost frozen him to the spot earlier. The bitter sting of the blood had somehow cleared his head and protected him from the effects of the meadow.

*'It must be the pheromones of the meadow,'* he thought triumphantly to himself. *'I can't smell them so I am immune to their sickly charms.'*

Free of the melancholia that had laid waste to his companions, Rama listened carefully for the voices that sat on the edges of his hearing. The blind man who had lost his sense of smell would be the one to save those who could see and smell but were handicapped by their hearts.

He found Bormanus sitting on the bank of a black stream that ran down the middle of the meadow. He had drawn his rapier for the first time since leaving Cessair and placed the blade across his wrist where he planned to make the first of a series of incisions that would take his life. Rama knelt down beside him and pulled the blade away from Bormanus' exposed flesh.

'Mean you to kill yourself Bormanus?' Rama inquired gently, fearful that strong words would tip the Cephalonian over the edge of whatever precipice he sat upon.

'I've lost my way,' Bormanus' thin, faint voice replied. He spoke as if caught up in a dream. Rama was not even sure Bormanus was aware of his presence.

'I'm here to lead you to safety,' Rama said as he tore the bandage from his face.

'No, you don't understand.'

Rama pushed the bloody cloth towards the Cephalonian but Bormanus would have none of it. He lifted his small hands and pushed Rama's hand away.

'I have wronged you all.'

Rama shook his head and pushed the cloth back towards Bormanus. 'Listen to me Bormanus. The meadow is corrupting your heart. If you wear this cloth over your nose, you won't be—'

'Get that cloth away from me,' Bormanus snapped. His hand whipped up his rapier.

‘Will you kill me Bormanus?’ Rama said calmly. ‘Is that what you intend?’

Bormanus’ eyes framed the despair in his heart. ‘Yes.’

Rama had no choice but to act. He could not reason with Bormanus whilst he was under Sad El’s influence. He had to break the hold the meadow had on him. ‘If you won’t smell my blood, you can smell your own.’

Rama threw a punch that sent Bormanus from the bank and into the shallows of the black stream. Blood poured from his broken nose covering his mouth and chin in a crimson flood.

Bormanus gulped at the air if breathing for the first time. ‘What happened?’ he said as he gazed upon Rama, surprised to find his companion standing over him with blood upon his fist.

‘You were lost to the sadness.’

‘So you hit me?’ he said confused and a little annoyed.

‘Yes, I’m sorry about that,’ Rama said with a look of embarrassment. ‘It was an act of desperation. I think you were about to kill me.’

‘I see,’ Bormanus said as he pulled himself out of the black stream and gazed around the bleak landscape. Everything was dull. The oppressive clouds above pushed in and a cold wind blew across the meadow.

‘Can you see anyone?’ Rama asked. ‘I can hear sobbing and murmuring voices.’

A long pause preceded Bormanus’ answer. ‘I cannot see anyone.’

‘How can that be?’ Rama exclaimed. The grass of the meadow wasn’t so long that it would hide the others from sight, nor was he aware of undulations in the landscape that would obstruct Bormanus’ view. ‘Bormanus. I know they are near. I can hear...? Bormanus?’

The doleful wind carried on it the pitiful musitations of his companions but Bormanus had fallen silent. Although unsettled by this, Rama decided he could not spend any more time on the Cephalonian. Should the other members of the squad be similarly suicidal, he had to get to them before they did something desperate.

Suddenly a scream rang out across the meadow. It was Sela. Her declaration of despair was so clear and loud that Rama had no trouble finding her. She was huddled in a ball not far from the river. Her masked face was buried so deeply in her arms that Rama struggled to make her aware of his presence. He forcibly lifted her head so that she could look upon him. Although he couldn’t see her expression, Rama could feel her confusion. She spoke to him as if she were addressing a stranger. ‘The shakku have returned!’

He knew it was pointless to indulge her. Bormanus had spoken nonsense as well. He shoved his blood-soaked bandage under her mask and felt her body stiffen as the caustic smell of his blood overcame the saddening scent of the meadow. 'Rama?' she said as if waking from a heavy sleep.

'Yes, it's me,' he reassured her. 'Here. Tie this around your face.' She took the makeshift bandage and fixed it so it would keep Sad El at bay.

The wind blew across Rama's bare face. A stinging, burning sensation erupted inside his nostrils. The bleeding had not stopped but he didn't care. The pain gave him focus and that was what was needed in the hopelessness of Sad El. 'Tell me what you see,' he said to Sela as he drew her to her feet.

She scanned the low-lying clouds first of all – her fear of Katkochila had not dissipated with her sadness. Amidst the grey, swirling shadows of the clouds, a deeper, darker shadow moved. 'Katkochila is near. It's circling in the clouds above.' She moved closer to Rama. He could hear her spines quivering anxiously across her back. 'Why doesn't it attack Rama? We're more vulnerable now than ever.'

'Perhaps the smell of Sad El keeps it at bay. I don't know.' He twisted his head around, trying to catch the sound of the others on the meadow. 'Sela, where are the others?' he said somewhat anxiously, gently turning her head from the clouds so that she could concentrate on the meadow around them.

'They are close!' she said with a joyous note in her voice. 'Lilith is nearby and Jehenna is down the slope a little.'

'And Bormanus?'

She swivelled around and quickly surveyed the area surrounding them. 'I can't see him.'

Rama grumbled something to himself that Sela couldn't hear. He then knelt down and tore off two strips of cloth from his breeches and wiped them across his face. Sela was shocked to see him bleeding so much and wondered how much more blood he could lose before collapsing to the ground.

He took one of the bloody strips and handed it to her. 'Go to Jehenna whilst I attend to Lilith. Go quickly and call to me when you are done.'

Sela sprinted across the grass with bloody rag in hand. Jehenna was curled up in a foetal position on the grass. Her eyes were open but they looked at nothing. She just stared blankly in front of her. One side of her

face was pressed against the grass. The other side – the scarred side – faced the sky. Sela could see where tears had pooled before spilling over the bridge of her nose.

‘Jehenna?’ Sela said tentatively. ‘Are you alright?’

‘No,’ she said disconsolately. ‘I picked the wrong man.’

Sela was perplexed. It was not the reaction she was expecting. ‘I don’t understand,’ she said softly.

‘Neither did I,’ Jehenna said in a voice so distant it could have been coming from the other side of the world. ‘Neither did I.’

Sela grabbed Jehenna tenderly by the forearm and rolled her onto her back so that the Acoran could see her. ‘Jehenna, it’s me. It’s Sela.’

Jehenna absentmindedly lifted a hand towards Sela. It shook in the air, fumbling, like someone reaching for something in the dark. When her slender fingers touched Sela’s mask, her hand recoiled quickly. She turned away and her gaze returned to a vacuous stare as her lips mouthed the dismal thoughts that floated through her head.

‘Jehenna! It’s Sela. Please look at me.’ Unnerved by the pathetic state her leader was in, Sela’s voice rose in pitch and volume. ‘Please don’t be scared – it is only a mask! I’m wearing a mask!’

Jehenna continued to stare out across the grass as she mumbled, ‘Maeldune wears a mask. I wear a mask. We all wear masks.’

‘Sela!’ hollered Rama as he marched towards the pair. He was supporting the wan figure of Lilith Cortese who was struggling to match his stride. She looked so small and withered beside the tall Ankaran.

‘She won’t respond to me!’ Sela yelled back.

Rama knelt down beside her and fumbled about Jehenna’s face. Sela had forgotten to use the bloody rag to overpower the hold Sad El’s pheromones had upon Jehenna. Rama quickly wiped one of his hands in the blood leaking from his thin nostrils and shoved it under Jehenna’s nose, smearing her skin, staining it red. At first, she didn’t react and Rama feared that her depression was so deep she could not be pulled out of it. Suddenly, she sat upright and swallowed deeply. She closed her eyes as the air filled her lungs and she regained control of her heart and mind.

She turned to Sela and said with great urgency, ‘What have I said? Just now, what was I saying?’

Sela shrugged. ‘It made no sense.’

Jehenna grasped her forearms and drew her closer. ‘Did I mention anyone?’

‘No,’ Sela lied.

Jehenna cast a fleeting glance at her companions. ‘I see Bormanus has vanished,’ she said coldly. She did not sound surprised.

‘I found him earlier but I lost him just as quickly,’ Rama said shamefully, as if he were responsible for the disappearance.

Jehenna's sharp gaze scanned the meadow around them. ‘He must have fled.’

‘But where?’

On the far side of the meadow, perhaps a league away, Jehenna could see stone structures carved into a steep mountainside. The building and the mountains cradling them were bathed in brilliant pink light. It was almost sunset and the colours that were splashed across the mountain contrasted dramatically with the colourless field they stood upon. ‘Rama, I see buildings to the north.’

‘It must be Johannan.’ It was not Rama who spoke but Lilith. Her voice was weak. ‘Long ago, the Morgai built a great city in the south. Few outsiders knew of it, but among the Morgai it was said to be a golden palace full of song and laughter.’ She wanted to say more but the mere act of speech was exhausting. She had drained herself of all her strength in her defence against Katkochila. She smiled apologetically and looked away.

Sela pointed up at the black shadow circling in the clouds above them. ‘Perhaps we could take refuge from Katkochila there.’

‘Maybe Bormanus is there too,’ added Rama.

Jehenna nodded. ‘Let us go to the edge of Sad El. I imagine Katkochila will be upon us as soon as we clear the meadow. If we move quickly we might just survive this day.’

It was the most optimistic comment that could be said on the miserable meadow. Rama strapped his staff to his back, scooped Lilith up into his arms and marched off with Jehenna and Sela by his side.

It was not long before they reached the edge of Sad El. They stopped momentarily upon the field's fringe to look upon the lost city of Johannan.

Whilst the painted facades had faded, and the finer details of its ornate reliefs had been lost to the ravages of time, the great metropolis was still an impressive sight. Tall columns lined broad plazas where intricately carved fountains once sprayed water high into the air. The magisterial statues of long-forgotten Morgai stood as tall as trees on podiums in the middle of the city's open spaces. Wide, broken stairways lined with iron lanterns curved up around the thick curved walls of municipal buildings. An amphitheatre lay in ruins in the shadow of an outcrop of rock that stretched out from the steep mountainside into which the city had been delved. Beside it ran a long straight avenue that led up

to a cluster of stolid-looking buildings which lay in thick shadow of the mountains. High above the meadow, the crumbling remains of twisting towers reached up into the pink sky like severed limbs.

‘Ready?’ asked Jehenna.

‘I think so,’ replied Sela nervously. She looked up into the clouds behind her for Katkochila’s shadow. There was no sign of it.

Jehenna stepped forward and pointed into the heart of Johannan. ‘There’s a large entryway in the centre of the large building to the right of the amphitheatre. Do you all see it?’

‘Yes,’ came the reply.

‘That is what we are making for. Do not stop for anything. All you need to do is run. Don’t think. Just run.’

She made it sound so simple. Just run. They all knew that their lives depended upon how quickly they could cover the distance between the meadow and the shelter of the city. Somewhere above them, Katkochila was waiting for them to break from cover. That knowledge fuelled their adrenalin, gave them strength despite the desperate odds against their survival.

Rama held Lilith tightly to his chest. She weighed very little – she would hardly slow him down. He was more concerned about tripping up over obstacles he could not see. ‘Lilith, be my eyes,’ he whispered to the old woman. Lilith lifted her head from his chest and prepared to navigate their passage over the flagstone before the city of her forebears.

Jehenna scanned the clouds one last time and seeing no indication that Katkochila was near gave the command to go.

Jehenna sprinted out in front, followed by Rama and Lilith. Sela made up the rear but did well to keep close to her much taller companions. Barely ten yards separated the group as they vaulted rocks, jumped up stairs and leapt over elegantly shaped balustrades. By the time they had reached a wide avenue lined with the shattered remains of decorative urns, Jehenna dared entertain the thought that they might actually make it.

It was at that point that Katkochila sliced silently through the clouds. The creature had assumed a wide, flat shape, hoping to keep its prey unaware of its approach.

Fortunately, Jehenna’s instincts alerted her to the monster’s presence. She spun around and saw its dark form drawing closer, like a blanket being pulled across the sky. Sela momentarily stopped when she saw Jehenna pause which resulted in a fierce rebuke from the Acoran. ‘I thought I said not to stop!’ Jehenna screamed. Sela said nothing but doubled her efforts to reach the entryway in front of her.

To Jehenna's right lay the amphitheatre she had noticed earlier. Much of it lay in ruins. The steps were in a state of decay as was the old wooden stage in the centre of the flat performance area at the base of the bowl. As Sela raced past her, Jehenna jumped the small wall lining the avenue and sprinted towards the amphitheatre. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Katkochila change shape as it twisted around in mid-air to follow her.

Jehenna smiled. It was what she had intended all along. She had realised that they would never make it as a group and had never purposed to stay with them when Katkochila appeared. The only doubt she had in her plan was whether Katkochila would follow her. A broad defiant smile spread across her scarred face when she saw the beast had taken the bait.

Jehenna bolted for the wooden stage in the middle of the amphitheatre. She jumped up onto the broken timbers of the stage, took her place in the centre of it and awaited Katkochila.

She did not have to wait long. It barrelled through the air like hundreds of iron balls fired from a line of cannons. As it drew closer, it drew its body into a solid mass, intending to squash the Acoran into the timbers on which she stood, seemingly defenceless and trapped.

But Jehenna was not without options. She had pinned her entire strategy on a small hope. As a child, her mother and father had often taken her to performances at the Elidor Opera House. She had watched transfixed as dancers dressed as ghosts and angels would appear and disappear on the stage during performances. Years later, her father revealed the secret of such feats of magick. She hoped to use the same technique to vanish from sight.

As Katkochila swept in over the stage, Jehenna flicked up a trapdoor that lay in the centre of the stage. A split-second before the beast reached her, she dropped down into the hole and disappeared just like the costumed dancers of her youth. The sound of Katkochila's impact with the stage above was deafening.

She quickly clambered out from under the boards and exited out the back of the stage. As she did so she risked a quick glance back into the amphitheatre and was met with a most unexpected sight. Thousands of black spheres rolled around the rows that fanned out from the stage. Jehenna watched for a moment, transfixed by the sight of the black balls gradually rolling together to reform. Katkochila was in pieces but it was far from out of the fight.

'Get ready to shut the door!' Jehenna screamed as she approached the great entryway where her companions stood waiting.

It had not taken Katkochila long to reform. It was in the air behind her, flapping its wide wings manically in an attempt to get to Jehenna before she disappeared into the city. It was fast, but not fast enough.

Jehenna slipped through the small space between the thick oaken doors Rama was keeping open for her. As she shot past him, he shouldered the doors shut. Sela was just as quick to bar the door with an iron latch that was almost as big as she was.

Seconds later the sound of Katkochila slamming into the braced doors thundered across the large foyer they found themselves in.

'We can't stay here,' panted Jehenna. 'Let's move further into the city.'

A number of shatterbugs had gathered in the foyer and they supplied enough light to illuminate the immediate vicinity. Jehenna looked about until she found the very thing she had been expecting to find in the deserted city of Johannan – the pale, thin figure of Bormanus Cole skulking in the shadows.

'Bormanus,' she stated plainly, all warmth and tenderness stripped from her voice. 'I see you've decided to join us.'

He nodded but said nothing.

'What happened to you Bormanus?' It was not a question to quench her concern. Jehenna's tone was one of suspicion.

'I... I'm not sure really,' he answered clumsily. 'The sight of my own blood has always made me queasy. I think I fainted.'

Rama turned to Jehenna and assisted Bormanus. 'I broke his nose.'

'I don't remember how I got here. All I can remember is running. I arrived only minutes before you all did.'

'I see,' Jehenna said dispassionately.

Bormanus clutched at his nose. Though it had been broken, there was no sign of swelling. The bleeding had stopped. He seemed to be blessed with a remarkable gift for recovery. Noticing Jehenna's lingering gaze upon his nose, he said, 'It still hurts a great deal. Rama hit me hard.'

If Bormanus was seeking sympathy, he was looking in the wrong place. Jehenna sneered at him and raised her eyebrows. 'You owe Rama your life Bormanus,' Jehenna scolded. 'We all do. We're lucky to be here.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' said Lilith sardonically.

At first Jehenna didn't take Lilith's meaning. She followed the old woman's gaze up the stairs at the far end of the foyer. On the landing at the top of the stairs stood a group of skeletal warriors with pale skin and hollow eyes.



‘Oh gods!’ exclaimed Sela. ‘Not the Ghul!’

## Chapter Two Johannan, Northern Ankara

The click of Jehenna's crossbow was the only sound that could be heard. Jehenna's last remaining shatterstone bolt dropped into the tiller and was aimed at the head of the closest figure.

'Wait Jehenna!' Lilith cried. 'Don't fire!'

'I knew it!' Rama said to himself. 'You could not be trusted.'

'It's not what you think,' Lilith replied. She stepped closer to Jehenna who kept the skeletal figure in her sights. 'You have one shot left. Don't waste it. These are not our enemies. I sense no evil here.'

The one that Jehenna had trained her weapon upon spoke. 'Your companion is correct, Acoran. We are not your enemies. Quite the contrary in fact.' His voice was hollow-sounding like the Ghul, but his demeanour was gentle. Jehenna lowered her crossbow.

'You're Ghaddar aren't you?' said Sela.

At the sound of his race's name, the speaker bowed. He had ochre markings running across his face, markings Sela remembered from months ago when she and her countrymen stumbled across a cave in northern Tamu and found the remnants of a battle that had been fought between the Ghul and a race that resembled them in every way except for the ochre paint upon their faces. 'Tamuan, you are correct. We are the Ghaddar. You can trust us.'

To the surprise of her companions, Jehenna kept her crossbow raised. 'We can't even trust our own kind. Why should we trust you?'

The Ghaddar speaker did not give any indication that he thought her comment to be insulting. He merely gazed back at her with a passive expression and said, 'In order to answer that, we must look to history. Millennia ago, the Ghul wrought havoc upon your world. We could not ignore the atrocities committed against your people back then, so we sought to intervene. We assisted the Morgai and as a result of our involvement, the Ghul were vanquished along with the Cabal, sealed back in the Endless where they belonged.'

With her eyes fixed on the Ghaddar leader, Jehenna stepped forward. She scanned his painted face for some sign of duplicity but could find none. 'But aren't you kin to the Ghul? How is it you do not share their malevolent perspective?'

'We are not kin. Not anymore. There was a time before reckoning when we were related by blood, but those ties were severed many ages ago. Our people have been persecuted by the Ghul just as yours have been.'

‘Then why have you stayed in this dark place?’ asked Jehenna. ‘Surely the people of the Myr would have accepted you if what you claim is true.’

‘We do not crave to live on the surface. We are as susceptible to the light of day as are the Ghul. Even if we could walk under your sun, we would not have stayed. The Endless is our home. The Myrrans of ancient times did extend the invitation to join them, but we declined.’

Rama stepped forward to join Jehenna but his manner was not guarded like hers. He was curious about the Ghaddar. Like Lilith, he sensed no malice in the small group that stood before them. ‘What happened to you after the breaches were sealed?’

‘In the centuries that followed the sealing of the breaches by the Morgai, the Ghul hunted us down, striving to bring about our extinction.’

‘Extinction?’ said Bormanus suspiciously. ‘If you are like the Ghul, how can you be killed?’

‘There are ways. There is always a way. Sunlight and shatterstone are probably known to you but we are vulnerable to other attacks. Should our bodies be torn to pieces, or shattered beyond repair, then we will die. But now is not the time to discuss our relative mortality. You are in danger. We seek to aid you.’

‘What is your name?’ asked Jehenna.

‘My name is Azazel. I am the leader of the Ghaddar.’

‘Where are the rest of your kind?’

‘They are in hiding not far from here. There are not many of us left. We managed to avoid genocide and for hundreds of years, we lived untroubled by the Ghul, under the realm you know as Tamu. However, the past year has seen the Ghul aggressively expand their dominion. As you will be aware, they have sought out the old breaches and attempted to open them. A battalion of Ghul recently discovered our home and attacked us. They repaid old debts. Their hatred of us runs deep.’

Sela spoke up. ‘Some months ago we discovered the remnants of the battle.’

‘Hundreds of Ghaddar perished in that conflict. Now we number but one hundred souls.’

Jehenna was bemused by his use of the word *soul* – it seemed an odd description for such a race that looked bereft of any spiritual dimension. But she could not help but feel sympathy for the Ghaddar. They had been dislocated and dispossessed, left to wander the Endless, hunted and hated.

She thought more on this... *left to wander the Endless*. Suddenly a smile spread across her face. It was a strange reaction to such an encounter, especially in light of the tragedy Azazel had unfolded

regarding his own people. The Acoran's eyes twinkled and she paced backwards and forwards across the flagstones as excitement fuelled her adrenalin. 'Do you know what this means?' she said with great happiness as she moved about the group.

No-one said anything. Jehenna continued to pace awaiting their response. After long awkward seconds, Sela finally said, 'Obviously, we do not know what this means. Perhaps you could elucidate further Jehenna.'

'We now have a way into the Endless! And a guide.'

'You want us to lead you to Caliban?'

Jehenna stepped closer to him and lowered her crossbow. 'Can you do it?'

Azazel nodded. 'He is far from here, but there are underground rivers throughout the Endless that lead to the Ghul's main encampment. They call it the Village. That is where Caliban dwells. Without incident we could find our way there inside three days.'

Jehenna closed her eyes. It was the type of luck she had been denied since setting out on the difficult journey. She looked deep into Azazel's eyes and though they were very different to her own, she was sure they did not hide any deceit.

'Then it's settled,' she said. 'I want to seize this opportunity before it spoils. Let's go.'

The Ghaddar led Jehenna and her company through the vast city of Johannan. Deeper and deeper they went into the mountain, surrounded by the breathtaking designs of the Morgai. The rooms and passages inside the metropolis fared much better against the depredations of time than the crumbling facades outside. The strange murals that lined the corridors down which they walked had retained a vibrancy of colour that held the attention of the eclectic group. High overhead, arched ceilings told long-forgotten stories from the Myr's history. Jehenna was reminded of the exquisite artwork on the roof of The Glass Ball back in Griflet. It had been little over a month since she had sat there talking to Simeon; it seemed a lifetime ago.

After an hour of quietly making their way through the labyrinthine passages of Johannan, they walked out into a large space that extended out beyond the light the curious shatterbugs shed upon the area. They had passed through wide doors into what seemed to be a foyer above a huge room. Wide marble stairs disappeared down into the darkness before them. The marble around them was inlaid with glittering

gemstones of all descriptions. Intricate designs curled around one another in wide arcs of varying colours.

‘What is this place?’ Sela said loudly. Her voice echoed across the chamber.

‘I don’t know,’ Jehenna replied. ‘It’s too dark to see anything.’

‘I can change that,’ rasped a voice behind them. Lilith raised her arms and simply said, ‘Light.’

Her voice was little more than a hoarse whisper but the power it contained became evident within a few seconds. From her fingertips tiny white balls of light flew out into the empty room like a snow flurry circling around itself as it climbed higher and higher. As the spheres winged their way across the space, the light emanating from them became brighter and brighter, illuminating the jewels in the floor and the surrounding walls.

The swirling light rose high above the party eventually revealing the room’s most distinguishing feature – a crystal chandelier that was at least 100 yards from side to side. It was the most elaborate ornament any of them had ever seen. The coruscating brilliance of countless crystals shining in Lilith’s ethereal light made Jehenna shiver. The body of the chandelier seemed to be crafted out of pure gold. Its curling arms spread out to all corners of the vast room. Suspended from these arms were a myriad of silver threads upon which were laced thousands of precious Tamtu pearls.

The crystals that hung from the chandelier varied in shape, size and lustre. Some of them were the clear crystals that were commonly found in the mines of Camulos and Sessymir, but at regular intervals throughout the luxuriant chandelier hung sunstones. These massive crystals shone with a brilliant red that pulsed gently when illuminated. Sunstones were found deep inside the great shifting sand dunes of Khepera and there was nothing so rare in all the Myr. Jehenna had seen a sunstone once before in the great art gallery in Elidor. Hanging above her in the massive chandelier were several hundred sunstones all of which were notably larger than the one she had seen in Elidor.

Lilith gave her hand an elegant flourish and all the tiny lights she had summoned flew around the chandelier until they each found a candle to perch upon.

‘We’re in a ballroom!’ Sela said in a voice so soaked in awe Jehenna had to look twice to be sure it was the Tamuan who had said it. After weeks of huddling on rain-soaked ship decks and marching through humid jungles, it was strange to be standing in a room that was so civilized and refined. Sela had heard stories of wonderful balls in cities such as Elidor, Cessair and Pelinore but never realised that there was a

time when such affairs were held so close to Tamu. It was becoming apparent that the forgotten city of Johannan once held a thriving society where people danced and lived in harmony. She closed her eyes and imagined the music that must have filled the great hall. What she actually heard was something else altogether.

A crashing noise thundered through the wide doorway behind them. It was the sound of stone shattering, of marble cracking and oaken beams splintering. It filled the air and stripped away any sense of peace the great ballroom had temporarily provided.

Jehenna peered out into the dim hallway that had led them to the room. Something massive was hurtling down the passage. It wasn't difficult to garner what it was.

'Get out of the way. Katkochila is coming.'

Jehenna shoved Sela to one side. Rama threw his arms around Bormanus and Lilith and dived to the other side. A split second later, Katkochila barrelled through the opening, its malleable body shifting to a form that allowed it to squeeze through the doorway without slowing down.

Unfortunately for the Ghaddar accompanying Azazel, he was the only one to avoid the great black mass that smashed into the room like a mallet through rotted timber. They flew across the vast room and slammed into the wall of the far side, hitting the stone surface so hard that their bodies burst open like overripe honeygrapes. They slid down the finely detailed mural on this wall leaving behind three green smears upon the faded artwork.

Katkochila swirled around the vast chandelier. The creature's innumerable parts followed its central mass and in its entirety the monster resembled a densely packed flock of darkbirds out on the hunt. On the outer edge of the mass, Katkochila had formed a long dark tail. It swung this string of spheres like a whip. At the top of the stairs Sela ducked in time, as did Jehenna. Bormanus had taken shelter in the corner of the landing, but Lilith was stranded. Illuminating the room had exhausted her and she was not able to do anything to avoid the rapidly approaching tail. She closed her eyes and braced herself for the bone-shattering impact.

Fortunately for Lilith, Rama could hear the swish of the Katkochila's newly-formed tail cutting through the air just as he could hear the Morgai's rapid breathing. In a stunning feat of athleticism and grace, he used his staff to hurtle over Lilith so that he could stand between her and Katkochila. A moment before the tail reached him, Rama swung down hard with his staff and connected with the large segment that was about to slam into his body. The result of this strike was

most unexpected. He imagined his blow would do little to stop the sphere from smashing him aside, but it did not touch him; at least not immediately. A popping sound filled his ears as the skin of the sphere broke under the weight of his staff. It exploded, splattering viscous, black ooze all over the Ankaran's body.

The scream that exited Rama's mouth chilled all who could hear it. It was long and loud. His clothes hissed and steamed as the sphere's corrosive contents burnt their way through the material. Rama managed to divulge himself of what was left of his clothes but his left hand and forearm continued to burn under the liquid's acidic touch.

He collapsed to the floor surrounded by the acrid smell of burning flesh, cradling his arm like a wounded pet. He rocked back and forth, trying to work his way through pain unlike anything he could have imagined.

In the middle of the room, Katkochila spun wildly, sending flickering shadows across the floor and walls. Though only one small segment of its vast amorphous body was damaged by Rama's small blow, it had obviously been hurt by the attack. It twisted and contorted, its black body changing shape constantly as it tried to understand the strange new sensation that was bouncing across its many segments. It had never experienced pain before. It did not like what it had discovered.

Jehenna ran to Rama, whilst Sela took hold of Lilith's arm and led her to the relative safety of the corner of the platform.

Azazel had darted across the floor underneath Katkochila. A number of segments broke away from the central mass but he avoided these deftly and quickly ran up the stairs on the far side of the room to where his fellow Ghaddar lay in a bloody mess. Their bodies were trying to mend themselves in the fashion of the Ghul but they had been so badly smashed by the Katkochila's attack that their lives were quickly fading, leaking out the bodily shell that now failed to contain them.

The monster stopped spinning as it turned its pain into rage. Segmented tendrils spread out from the dense clouds of its body. These thumped down on the landing, trying to squash the hapless Myrrans who rolled and jumped about in an attempt to stay alive. Most of Katkochila's blows were aimed at Rama, the one who had introduced it to pain.

'You're going to die if I stay here with you,' Rama said in a voice wricked by the searing pain that coursed across his skin. Suddenly, he broke away from Jehenna and bolted down the stairs, following in Azazel's footsteps. Katkochila spun to follow him and extended more tendrils which would have resembled strings of black pearls were they not animated with hostility.

For a blind man, Rama's skill in evading Katkochila's blows was astounding, but it was not enough. Halfway across the floor he was hit from behind. Although it was only a glancing blow, it was powerful enough to send him flying off his feet towards the landing where the fallen Ghaddar lay.

He slammed into the wall and fell unconscious to the floor. Moments later, Azazel was standing protectively over his still body, preparing himself for the death that would be inevitably meted out.

'I've had enough of this,' sneered Jehenna as she cocked her crossbow and prepared to fire the last remaining bolt. She did not aim at Katkochila, but rather above it. She flexed her arm and the shatterstone bolt exploded out of the crossbow.

Jehenna's aim was uncanny. The bolt pounded into the iron link that tethered the chandelier to the stone ceiling above. The iron ring shattered instantly being the weaker of the two metals. Suddenly the colossal chandelier was in freefall. Katkochila had no sense of what was happening as it was caught in the vast golden arms of the ornamentation and slammed into the floor. It floundered for a moment under the weight of the fallen chandelier, then finding no other way to extricate itself from its unique prison, it split itself apart. Countless black spheres rolled about under an intricate web of gold and crystal.

'Well that's quite a trick!' Sela said to Jehenna. 'We should be able to kill it like this.' She reached around her back, pulled out a long, thick quill and made her way down the stairs and out onto the ballroom floor. Under the veil of silver threads, crystals and sunstones, the multitudinous segments of Katkochila's body hopped about erratically. They moved quickly, but Sela was faster. She stabbed the nearest sphere and droplets of the sphere's viscous liquid sprayed out into the air. Most of the spray missed her but a few stray drops splattered onto her mask. The smell of burning wood rose into the air accompanied a thin trail of black smoke. It was not enough to burn through the mask but it gave Sela such a fright she jumped back up the stairs. 'Not good. Not a good idea at all,' she said as she listened to the wood of her mask sizzling.

'Sela!' Jehenna screamed. 'Just shoot them from there. Quick! It won't stay down for long!' Without a moment's hesitation, the Tamuan span around and ripped back her cloak. Her spines rose slightly, quivered and then shot out across the room.

The sound of hundreds of spheres popping filled the space. It was a strange sound, like a muted explosion. The effect however, was so dramatic that had it been a noise, it would have been deafening. The spheres shot their dark liquid out across the room. When the liquid struck other spheres it popped those as well. This strange chain reaction



continued on until there was nothing left of Katkochila but a swirling mass of foul-smelling black liquid filling the floor between the landings at either end of the room.

Jehenna gazed out across the oily black pool to see Rama being helped up by Azazel. The Ankaran looked wobbly on his feet, but he was still alive and that was all that mattered. Azazel's companions were not so fortunate. They lay like refuse against the wall and there they would stay until their bones became dust.

'Rama!' called Jehenna. 'Stay there! We'll come to you.'

'How do you propose we do that?' said a voice behind her. It was Bormanus. He had stepped out of the corner of the room and made his way to the edge of the landing to look out across the acidic black wasteland that lay between Jehenna and Rama.

Jehenna ignored his question and stared coldly at him. She had hardly seen him lift a finger in defence of his companions on the entire mission. He had never entered the fray whenever they faced danger. He was always hanging back like a coward. Or a traitor.

'Whose side are you on Bormanus?' she sneered, grabbing him by the frills that hung from his collar.

If he was surprised by her attitude, he did not show it. He stared back at her, his grey eyes unblinking from underneath his white bangs. 'Let go of me,' he said in a tone as low as his thin voice would allow.

She gave him a derisive look. 'I don't trust you Bormanus,' she said as she shoved him away.

He continued to stare back defiantly at her. 'May I remind you that I didn't elect to go on this mission. I was chosen. By Maeldune Canna.'

Jehenna didn't flinch at the mention of her husband. She just kept her gaze firm and said coolly, 'I don't trust him either.'

They could see no way to cross the corrosive expanse. As they watched the ornate chandelier sink into the bubbling mess, they were left with no doubt that any endeavour to traverse the dark morass would end in an agonizing death. The gold melted and the crystals shattered as they came into contact with Katkochila's oily remains.

'Can you freeze it?' Jehenna asked Lilith who was sitting next to her on the top step of the stairs leading down to the floor that was now under six feet of deadly, black ooze.

'I can try,' she said with grim determination. She closed her eyes, held out her hands and whispered the word: 'Ice.'

The air crackled as a thin white film rolled out across the pool.

Katkochila's black blood bubbled and splattered as the skin of ice spread across it. For a brief moment it looked as if Lilith's attempt to freeze the acidic ooze would work, but a great hissing sound signalled her failure. The ice turned to a foul smelling mist and the black pool bubbled in triumph. Lilith slumped forward and groaned.

'Lilith?' cried Jehenna, concerned that the Morgai had finally depleted herself of the power that had kept her alive for so long. She sat down beside the old woman and took her in her arms. She was alive but her breathing was light and shallow. Jehenna could feel her swallowing as she prepared to speak. 'Jehenna,' she said, her faint voice resembling a gust of wind. 'I cannot --'

Jehenna nestled Lilith's head into her chest and stroked her ragged grey hair. 'I know Lilith,' she said tenderly. 'You did your best.'

Sela and Bormanus sat down beside Jehenna and Lilith. They sat there in silence looking out across the dark moat that separated them from their blind companion. Although Lilith believed that Rama would be protected by the Ghaddar, she found it difficult to accept that she was about to abandon another member of her company.

'You have no choice,' Sela said, aware of what she was thinking. 'We cannot get to him. To try will only delay us further. Time is of the essence.'

'How many more breaches must we walk away from?' she said with suppressed anger. 'I cannot keep retreating like this.'

'Jehenna, all the determination in the world will not get us across this room,' Sela said with uncharacteristic sensitivity. 'We are drawing closer to our goal. Over the mountains to Tamu and from there across the sea to Cephalonia. We can do this.'

Jehenna smiled at her. 'When did you become so positive?'

Sela shrugged. 'Don't worry,' she laughed. 'It won't last.'

On the far side of the ballroom, Azazel was helping Rama to his feet. The Ankanan clutched his gold staff. Jehenna was sure he would have fallen back down had he not had the staff to lean on.

Azazel strode to the edge of the black pool. 'The Ghaddar will protect him,' he shouted across the expanse. 'We will lead him to safer places. Lead him back to the surface.'

'Very well,' answered Jehenna and turned to leave, unwilling to indulge in the emotions that tore at her insides. But Azazel had more to say.

'Wait! You seek to cross the mountains that lie between Johannan and Tamu. There is a path up through the city.'

Jehenna turned back to face Azazel.

He continued. 'It will save you many hard days trying to traverse the steep mountains that lie baking under your burning sun.'

Jehenna walked back down the stairs and stood on the verge of the bubbling pool. 'Tell me more,' she said.

He was good to his word. The stone path he had spoken of wound its way up into the highest parts of the cavernous city. Thousands upon thousands of steps spiraled higher and higher until the masonry of Johannan faded into the rock of the Mahatmahog Mountains. Jehenna lost track of time as they marched up the winding staircase but it seemed like an eternity. There was nothing to look at but the stairs and the dark. A few shatterbugs accompanied them on the arduous trek and she welcomed the light, but the climb up the stone spiral was a journey she would happily forget. She carried Lilith for much of it and after a few hours, the frail Morgai felt as heavy as a grizzum. Jehenna's arms burned but she would not put down her burden. She could not expect Sela to carry her, nor had she any faith in Bormanus being willing to assist.

Sela did well to stay with Jehenna. The Tamuan said nothing, exhaustion sapping her of her will to complain. Occasionally, she grunted as she endeavoured to coax herself up the staircase, but overall, their long passage up the stairs was a silent affair.

Just at the point when Jehenna starting suspecting that the staircase actually had no end, she found herself standing out on a landing. Opposite her an arched doorway revealed a moonlit panorama that very few Myrrans had ever seen. They were high. The spiral staircase had wended its way up the insides of the mountain range to the very top of a nameless peak. Beyond the door the summits of ferociously steep mountains shone ominously in the distance. Slivers of white clouds floated by like wayward spirits wandering over a graveyard. The world outside was still. There were no trees to be ruffled by the wind. Everything was rock or sky.

Jehenna lay Lilith down upon the landing. The Morgai shivered in the cool night air. 'I'm sorry Lilith,' Jehenna said softly. 'I have no cloak to keep you warm.'

Lilith smiled appreciatively then closed her eyes as she waited for Sela and Bormanus to join them.

Jehenna decided that they would sleep on the landing before venturing further. Sela was so exhausted that she did not even look out

through the doorway when she reached the top of the stairs. She curled up in a corner of the landing and promptly fell asleep, innocent to the terrible sight that awaited her when she woke ten hours later.

On the other side of the doorway, the mists of dawn lay across the world below. Here and there the tips of mountains breached the surface, like islands in a sea of milk.

Jehenna stepped through the doorway to find herself standing at the foot of an extraordinary bridge. It was so long not even her keen sight could see the other end. It stretched out over the yawning space between the mountain peaks, curving in a gentle arc to a pinnacle at least five leagues away.

The bridge was neither suspended from above nor supported from below. It was the single most impressive feat of engineering Jehenna had ever seen. Try as she might, she could not understand how it could have been built. Despite the mountains winds swirling around her, the bridge itself felt secure, albeit incredibly thin.

Sela felt her senses fall over themselves when she woke up and looked out through the doorway. The bridge across the sky made the stairs encircling Cessair Tower seem insignificant. It was little more than a narrow slab. It had no railing and was only wide enough for one person. It seemed designed to induce vertigo. Shaking terribly, the Tamuan sank to her knees. Had she eaten that morning, she would have vomited. 'I can't walk out there,' she groaned.

'Why not?' asked Jehenna who comfortably stood upon the bridge despite the vertiginous outlook it commanded.

'It's this thing I have about dying,' Sela scoffed. 'I don't enjoy doing it.'

'You'll be fine,' Jehenna said unconvincingly.

'No, I won't!' Sela retorted. 'I can't walk upon such a splinter of rock.'

A hand touched her gently on the shoulder. 'You will be fine, Sela. I promise you.'

It was Lilith. She had woken from a long sleep and looked much refreshed. She was standing behind Sela, gazing out across the unique vista. Her face contained a vitality Sela had not seen since the Morgai assumed her true form.

'Can you make such a promise Lilith?' Sela asked as she turned to face the old woman.

Lilith's eyes twinkled. 'Yes I can. I have seen your future Sela. It stretches out beyond my sight. You do not die any time soon.' She said it with such certainty that Sela was left with no choice but to believe her.

Lilith pointed out across the span. 'This bridge was built thousands of years by Morgai much more powerful than me. The bridge's construction is a feat of magick not engineering, and much of that magick still exists. Even if you tried to fall off, the magicks surrounding the bridge would not allow it.'

'If it's all the same to you Lilith, I won't try to fall off,' Sela said dryly.

Lilith's old eyes shone. 'Sela, your home lies on the other side of this bridge. Do not focus on what could happen on the way. Focus on the destination.'

'Are you being metaphoric?' the Tamuan asked curiously.

'Not at all,' Lilith replied. 'Let's go.'

Whilst the march across the bridge was spectacular, it passed without incident. Jehenna went first, lightly stepping across the bridge enjoying the striking view without any fear in her heart. She was followed by Sela who walked crouched over with her arms spread wide apart for balance. Although Lilith's reassurances that she could not fall did much to build her confidence, the sheer height of the drop was such that it pounded away at her resolve to reach the other side. She spoke incessantly to herself, partly to coax herself onwards and also to make her time out on the bridge pass by quicker. She was followed by Lilith who stayed close, like a mother watching her young walking for the first time. Bormanus made up the rear. In contrast to Sela, he said nothing. He neither seemed daunted by the impossibly high bridge, nor particularly interested in the view it afforded them.

It took the best part of the day to cross the structure. The four did not stop to eat, drink or talk. Their task was simple – to reach the other side. There was no need to consider anything else until that was done. They were blessed by a perfect day for the crossing. The sun shone on them for the entire transit, keeping them warm but not so much that it made things uncomfortable.

By late afternoon, even Jehenna was beginning to tire, but the spirits of the group quickly picked up when the landing on the other side of the bridge came into view. There was no doorway framing this landing – just a steep path that twisted off over the saddle of the receiving peak before it was lost in the twilight gathering in the air.

Sela lay down exhausted, ignoring the astounding view the landing presented. Jehenna and Lilith crossed the landing to look out upon the plains of Tamu. Though golden in the daylight, the grasslands far below appeared grey in the fading light of day. To the north, the plains stretched on forever, flanked on their left by the Mahatmahog Mountains and on the right by the Tamtu Ocean. At the base of the incredibly steep slope before them, about a league inside the savannah, lights could be seen flickering in the dusk – the village of Nuadu.

Jehenna turned to Lilith and whispered, 'I have to know – that bit about the Morgai magick preventing us from falling. Was that true?'

Lilith paused before answering. 'In a sense... yes.'

A broad smile crept across Jehenna's face. She lifted a hand to her mouth so that Sela couldn't see. 'I don't believe it!' she laughed in astonishment. 'You lied to us.'

'I wouldn't call it a lie,' retorted Lilith her voice little more than a whisper.

'Oh really, Lilith? What would you call it?'

'Encouragement.'

Jehenna's smile did not fade as she nodded and returned her gaze to the savannah far below. 'Is that Nuadu down there?'

'Yes,' said Sela, overhearing the comment. She lifted her head and sat up. 'I have never seen it from this vantage point, but that's home.'

Jehenna walked over to the Tamuan and sat down beside her. 'We'll sleep here tonight. We should be there by midday if we don't stop for breakfast.'

Sela smiled. Jehenna rarely let them *stop for breakfast*. Sela couldn't remember the last time she ate a proper meal.

Suddenly, the Acoran cocked her head to one side and said, 'Oh, that's pretty.'

'What is?' Sela enquired. 'Do you hear something?'

Jehenna nodded but didn't explain.

'Well. What is it? We don't all have ears like yours.'

Jehenna wasn't sure whether the comment was a compliment regarding the incredible hearing possessed by the Acora, or a commonplace jibe about her race's slightly pointy ears.

'Bells. I hear the sound of hundred of little bells.'

Underneath her mask, Sela's face paled. 'By the gods, no! No. No. No!' She hunched down and clasped her hands to her ears even though she couldn't hear the sound Jehenna was alluding to. Her body was taut as if preparing for a collision no-one else could see.

She lifted her head and stared at the tiny speck that was Nuadu many leagues below. She stood, took one look at the steep slope beneath her and leapt from the platform.

## Chapter Three The Marid, Khepera

The Marid stretched before them like an open wound, red, raw and full of pain. It was early morning and the sun had not yet risen.

‘Well, what are we waiting for?’ asked Gerriod. ‘If we’re going to do this, we better get started.’

‘No, we must wait until nightfall,’ urged Sefar. ‘We cannot cross in the day. The heat alone would kill us.’

‘Alone? You mean there’s something else.’

‘Yes. The sun-springs.’

‘I was right,’ muttered Gerriod. ‘I knew this was going to get worse.’

They wandered along the line of cliffs that lined the western edge of the Marid until they came to a copse of wandering palms that sat on the very edge of the precipice. The broad leaves of the trees provided ample shade for the company, but this was spoilt by the fact that every few minutes one of the trees would pluck its roots out of the sandy soil and shuffle to another position within the copse. No-one knew why the trees did this, but Gerriod quickly found himself growing increasingly annoyed with the fact he could not lie down to sleep for any reasonable period of time.

‘Have a look at this,’ Sefar said as he pointed down at the edge of the Marid. ‘Down there.’

On the edge of the red rock plain they were intending to cross, a herd of shelp had gathered to eat the grasses growing at the base of the cliffs. One young shelp had been playing with a baby tumblethorn, chasing it about on the grasses. In trying to escape the gambolling shelp, the tumblethorn had rolled away out onto the Marid.

‘Let’s hope the little shelp isn’t stupid enough to follow it,’ said Sefar.

But as far as intelligence went, the shelp’s lack of it was renowned. As soon as the tumblethorn wound its way out onto the red rock of the Marid, the playful shelp followed.

Trypp looked down at the strange scene with a look of distress upon his face. ‘If it’s in danger, shouldn’t we –?’

‘There’s no way we could get down there in time,’ Sefar said nodding towards the east. In the centre of that broad horizon, golden light billowed, heralding the arrival of the sun.

‘I could get down there in time,’ Trypp said, placing one leg over the edge of the cliff.



Sefar squatted down on his haunches and took hold of Trypp's wrist before the Sapphyrran could go any further. 'No Trypp,' he said softly. 'You can't.'

A moment later the sun cut itself free of its moorings and set sail across the sky. Light spilled across the Marid's flat surface. The shelp was disoriented by the brilliant light and panicked, running further into the barren plain.

A subterranean rumbling could be felt. The shelp stopped and looked around, frightened by the sound that shook the pebbles that bounced around its hooves. From the desert grasses at the fringe of the Marid, the other shelp bleated loudly but they could not be heard over the rumbling that continued to build.

And then the entire landscape of the desert plain was turned on its head. As far as the eyes could see, thousands of geysers erupted across the Marid. Although they varied in height, the smallest spout was at least 500 foot tall. As the morning light hit the desert, it transformed into a fantastic and dangerous steaming forest of water. There was no pattern to the relentless eruptions. All was anarchy out on the previously arid plain.

Trypp knelt down, peering over the edge of the cliff. The shelp had miraculously avoided the nearest spouts but was still a long way from the grasses where its agitated flock watched on helplessly.

Sefar put a hand on Trypp's carapace. 'Do not hope my friend. It will not make it.'

Suddenly the ground beneath them shifted and directly before them, a boiling wall of water filled their vision.

'Get down!' Sefar shouted, and everyone instinctively shielded themselves as the gigantic fountain shot up into the sky. The heat was incredible. A light breeze cast searing droplets of boiling water across the cliffs and the very air around the company sizzled as the fountain continued to rage.

And then it stopped momentarily. The heat. The sound. The nearest geyser had ceased its angry climb into the heavens. Trypp lifted his head and then pulled it in again as something dark fell from the sky. It landed with a resounding thud on the ground before him. He knew what it was before opening his eyes.

Caught in the geyser, the shelp had been boiled to death. Its skin had peeled off its body and all that was left was a steaming lump of pink meat.

'The springs are only active in the day,' Sefar informed them once they had retreated into the copse that had edged back from the brink of the cliff.

'The thermic caress of the sun must cause some sort of tectonic reaction, opening up passages for the splenetic water spouts,' suggested Mulupo.

'But so much water?' said Pylos as he looked across the hazy vista. 'Where's it all coming from?'

'I can guess,' Gerriod said. 'Think of Caliban's End – every moment of every day the waters of Lake Erras are sucked down into the Worldpool. That water's got to go somewhere doesn't it?'

'But the Marid was bone dry this morning,' Trypp noted.

'It always is,' said Sefar. 'The Marid is a desert that is hot even at night. Its heat is so intense that the water from the spouts evaporates before it collects on the desert floor.'

Pylos stood up and leant against a wandering palm which shuffled a few feet away as if annoyed by the Helyan's presence. Looking out across the vast space to the east, he asked, 'How long will it take to cross it? I don't want to be strolling through there when these things start shooting off around me.'

'Yes!' nodded Gerriod. 'Has anyone crossed it before?'

'One person I know has crossed it,' Sefar replied.

'Who?' said a low voice from the deeper shadows in the middle of the copse. It was Maeldune. His tone suggested he didn't think much about the route they were about to take.

Sefar put a thumb to his chest proudly. 'Me.'

'Why would you do such a thing?' Gerriod said incredulously.

'For a bet. With my brother. I was young and foolhardy. Saul was of the opinion that the Marid could not be crossed. I held a contrary view.'

'You obviously won the wager,' Remiel noted.

'I made it with across with minutes to spare.'

'*Minutes!*' cried Gerriod. Daunted by the prospect of having to cross the Marid, the added pressure of the time limit was just too much for his nervous heart to bear. 'You made it with *minutes* to spare?'

'This is insane,' added Maeldune. 'We will die in the attempt.'

'We are crossing the Marid, Maeldune,' Pylos stated indefatigably. 'If you don't have the nerve, you can turn back now.'

Maeldune glowered at Pylos but said nothing more.

Sefar ignored the hostilities between Maeldune and Pylos. There were more important things to focus on. 'We need to rest. We will need it for the crossing. I suggest sleeping for the remainder of the day.'

‘How can we do that when these infernal trees keep shifting about?’ Gerriod grunted. ‘If I fall asleep here in the shade, I’ll wake up under a burning sun the colour of a lobbse!’

‘Then we’ll just have to make sure the trees stay put,’ Sefar said with a broad, knowing smile upon his face. He reached over his shoulder and pulled a flask of water from the supplies bag he had been carrying. He uncorked the flask and walked around to the base of each palm in the copse, tipping a few drops onto the roots of each tree as he passed. The roots reacted immediately, digging deeper into the sandy soil as if to stake a claim upon the land. ‘They only need a little water to be content,’ he explained. ‘They’ll stay put now, as should we.’

It was late afternoon and beyond the palms the sun pounded down on the land like a mallet. Even in the shade it was blistering hot.

For Gerriod, the day passed slowly. He doubted his ability to make the journey. The torturous trek through Khepera had taken a toll upon his body and all he wanted to do was sleep. His back ached terribly. His legs felt like they were about to crumble. He was also troubled by his left hand. It had been tingling for a few days and he found that he was scratching it more than a simple itch should demand. Now it just felt numb and that did not bode well.

Remiel Grayson sat down beside him. ‘Can’t sleep?’

Gerriod nodded. ‘I’m terrified I won’t make it across.’

Remiel clasped his hands together and sighed. ‘Let us hope that the gods smile upon us this night.’

After a moment’s awkward silence, Gerriod twisted his head around to face Remiel. It was clear he had a question to ask, but he was struggling to find the right words to express it. ‘Father Gideon, may I ask you something?’

‘Of course, but please... it’s just Gideon out here.’

‘I am curious... why are you here? I understand that you were chosen to represent Nessa but... why you?’

‘Perhaps the Chamberlain felt I had something to give. After all, I am not the only one on this expedition who isn’t a consul or a soldier.’

‘That is true, but I was chosen because I have lost my father to Caliban. Mulupo was selected because he has lost his entire race. And Trypp... well, who knows how many Sapphyrro have fallen since he left Skyfall Town.’

Remiel dwelt on the comment before answering. ‘Perhaps, Gerriod, perhaps I have lost someone too.’

Gerriod's curiosity got the better of him. He had to ask. 'Who have you lost Gideon?'

'I lost a brother.'

Something in Gerriod's memory flashed...

*He was on a boat. The Melody. He saw a dark shape – the figure of a tall man with a cowl drawn over his head... reaching out to him. Hands were placed upon on his shoulders. He looked up. It was...*

Gone. There was a blank space in his memories. A place in his mind where something once existed, but was now no longer there.

The sun was low in the west, hidden by the cliffs the company had descended. The water spouts had not ceased their activity for most of the day, but as if anticipating the departure of the sun, their eruptions became infrequent.

'Here's the plan,' Sefar said with poorly suppressed excitement in his voice. 'We travel fast and light. Anything we don't need on the run we don't take. That means weapons, food, and belongings. The Marid cools quickly so we start shortly after sundown. If we keep up a good pace and do not stop, we may make it. Any questions?'

'I have one,' Mulupo said, raising his hand like a child in school. 'As we make our acronychal crossing of this calorifacient plain, how shall we know we are running in the correct direction?'

'There's a constellation called Heliope's Necklace that will lead us across the Marid. If we run towards the middle star in the constellation, we will be heading due east. However, the first star in the necklace doesn't appear until midnight so we have to make sure we run in a straight line until then. One degree either side and we're done.'

'We won't lose our bearings. I'll make sure of that.' Gerriod said with grim determination. He had spent so much time sailing the vastness of Lake Erras that navigation by the stars was the last of his worries.

'Then let's get ready.'

Pylos placed his knives down on the grass at the edge of the desert. He then pulled out his sword and gazed at its dark, glistening blade. For a while, he seemed frozen in time but then a decision was made. 'No,' he said staunchly and sheathed the blade. He then turned to face the Marid,

staring it down as if he were trying to intimidate an opponent on the battlefield.

‘Pylos, I did say we’d have to leave all our weapons behind,’ Sefar said trying not to sound critical of the Helyan.

‘You said to leave behind anything we don’t need. I need this. I’ll leave my knives but my sword will stay with me. I’m not going down into the Endless without a piece of shatterstone between me and the Ghul.’

Sefar asked the group to assemble on the very edge of the Marid. He seemed to be enjoying the leadership that had fallen to him for this part of the journey. He suggested to Maeldune and Mulupo to shed numerous garments that he deemed unnecessary for the run across the desert.

‘Sir, I am happy to divest myself of my waistcoat and become sartorially impoverished, but I must ask you to explain why you are still bedecked in your silken finery.’

It was a reasonable question to ask. Whilst his companions had taken off numerous items of clothes as suggested, Sefar still wore the long, flowing robes he had worn since departing from Cessair. ‘I plan to when the time comes.’

Pylos looked overhead at the darkening sky. ‘Hasn’t the time come now?’

Sefar grimaced and reluctantly dropped his robe. Silence fell over the group.

‘What are you staring at?’ said Sefar, clearly embarrassed by the attention he had just received.

It was Gerriod who spoke first. ‘Sefar, I don’t wish to be rude but, you... um... you have bird legs.’

The mariner was not being colourful. It was not his way to indulge in metaphor. Sticking out of Sefar’s breeches were thin yellow legs that ended in long talons, splayed out on the rocky ground like a fowl’s.

Pylos could not help but stare. At first his face showed nothing, but after long seconds, the corners of his mouth leaned upwards, his cheeks lifted and he snorted out a snigger that was a trigger for everyone else in the group. As the Marid’s water spouts fell silent as twilight covered the desert, the raucous sound of laughter rolled across the land.

‘I’m sorry Sefar. I think of all the times we fought marauding bands of Kheperans, how savage you seemed, but I doubt you would have had the same impression had I known what lay under your robes.’

‘Are you all like that?’ Gerriod asked curiously. ‘It’s not just you is it?’

‘What?’ exclaimed Sefar indignantly. ‘Do you think I’m some freak?’

‘No but –’

‘Well, for your information, yes, we are all like this. That is, all the males. Female Kheperans have legs just like yours.’

‘But why keep it a secret?’ Pylos asked, still chuckling over the revelation.

‘Because of reactions just like this one. It’s embarrassing. It’s bad enough we have a damn horn sticking up from our heads, but –’

‘I actually like the horn,’ Pylos said as he threw an arm around Sefar’s broad shoulders. ‘I’ve even wondered what it would be like to have one of my own. It would be handy in a battle.’

‘Trust me – you don’t want the horn,’ Sefar said, managing a smile. He swung around to face the desert. ‘Now let’s get this done.’

And there they stood, on the edge of the Myr’s most inhospitable region, seven Myrrans all committed to the job they had to do – but not the same job. The shadow of night spread across the vast expanse of hot rock and steam.

They waited for Sefar’s signal.

‘Go!’

As one they stepped onto the Marid. Gerriod could feel the warmth of the rock seeping through the soles of his boots. He told himself that if all he had to worry about was warm feet, he would be alright.

Trypp was also surprised by the heat rising up from the ground but unlike Gerriod, he wore no boots on his feet. Fortunately, a thick layer of skin on the soles of his feet protected him from the heat. Whilst the desert floor radiated enough heat to keep the company uncomfortable, it was not enough to stop them in their tracks.

Within a few steps of the edge of the desert, the marching pace moved to a jog, and after a few more steps, they were running into the night as though they were chased by marroks.

They had not run 200 yards when a rumbling emanated from beneath their toes. Sefar screamed ‘Halt!’ and the company slid to a stop. Suddenly a great spout of steaming water broke the surface of the Marid not fifty feet in front of them.

‘Would you like to explain that Sefar?’ Gerriod hollered.

‘It just the Marid settling down. I forgot to tell you it did that.’

The geyser quickly disappeared and they moved off again.

Pylos was running shoulder to shoulder with Sefar. He turned to the Kheperan and grinned. 'You forgot, did you? Is there anything else you forgot or is that it?'

Sefar smiled back. 'There's probably more. I'll let you know when I remember them.'

Despite the danger, Trypp felt at peace out on the desert rock. He was not troubled by the pace of the run, so he could actually enjoy the silence of the land. Although the Marid was devoid of any distinguishing features apart from the fissures caused by the day's eruptions, it was beautiful in its own way. Desolate and foreboding as it was, it was also strangely engaging. He wished he could just sit on the desert floor and embrace the haunting loneliness of the landscape. '*Perhaps I shall return here one day,*' he said to himself. '*If I survive.*' He would survive. He was not ready to let go of the beauty of the world just yet.

The stars began to swell in the eastern sky and out on the Marid, the stars were more brilliant than anywhere else in the Myr.

Gerriod's lungs were screaming but he gritted his teeth. He did not look up. It took every ounce of energy he had just to put one foot in front of the other. He focussed on two things. The first of these were Sefar's incredible feet. As the Kheperan ran, his talons scratched up small clouds of dust. Gerriod watched the dust balloon up into the air where it hung for a moment before dissipating. It was not that Gerriod was particularly interested in the dust – or Sefar's feet – but he had decided that the only way he would avoid slowing down the company was to stay on the heels of the only one ever to have crossed the Marid. Occasionally his mind would wander and at these times Sefar's feet would slip from view. It only took seconds, but these lapses in concentration were quickly rectified by another image – that of an old mariner strung up on a monstrous crucifix living every sunless day a breath away from death. This image thrust Gerriod forward and soon the Kheperan's talons dominated his view once more.

Pylos just stared straight ahead. He was battle-hardened and did not doubt his ability to meet the challenge of the Marid, but he was a warrior, not an athlete, and he felt each step almost as much as Gerriod. But as a

warrior, his resolve was forged in steel and he stared straight ahead like a good soldier should.

Mulupo's pace was erratic, much like the Spriggan himself. When the ran began, he sprinted ahead, like a domesticated snorse set free from its harness. But then he dropped back as his thoughts rolled on to other things. Every now and then he would gallop ahead, only to fade to the rear of the company in a pattern that would have exhausted anyone else in the group.

Maeldune was struggling. Years of political life meant he was poorly prepared for such an arduous journey. His face was awash with sweat though it was a cloudless night. As he ran he spoke to himself. His words were unintelligible but their tone was not. There was much anger in his mutterings. It seemed he was chiding himself. He regularly flicked a glance up at the horizon to see whether anything had changed. Upon seeing it hadn't, he would curse the situation and return to the litany of private thoughts that he articulated in harsh-sounding whispers.

By contrast, Remiel was not finding the run difficult at all. He frequently cast his head around to see how the others were faring. His gaze occasionally lingered upon Gerriod.

Thirty years had passed since Remiel had betrayed his brother, betrayed Gamelyn Blake and betrayed the red-headed cabin boy who had grown up to be a decent man in spite of the hand that had been dealt him. Not for the first time on the mission, Remiel pondered whether he should tell the mariner the truth – that he was the man whose actions had condemned Gamelyn to the Endless – but the enormity of the confession was more than he could bear.

Sefar's eyes anxiously roamed the skies to the south-east and north-east. 'We should be seeing Heliopé's Necklace by now. It should be dead ahead. I'm worried we've veered south.'

Gerriod lifted his eyes from their downcast position and briefly scanned the sky. He did not look for a specific constellation or guiding star. A fleeting glance was all he needed to confirm what his instincts knew. 'No, we're heading due east. We're right on course.'



Pylos had absolute faith in the mariner. He knew that Gerriod was not the type to speak up unless he knew he was correct. 'Let's keep going then.'

'Wait! Wait!' cried Maeldune. Over the last five leagues he had dropped back considerably. He was limping as he ran. His pale complexion had been usurped by a ruddy colour that highlighted just how close to exhaustion he was. As he approached the waiting group, he was breathing so hard they all expected he would collapse any second.

'Very well,' Pylos said reluctantly. 'Let us break for water so Minister Maeldune can get his breath back.'

Though they were all excruciatingly aware of what would happen to them if they did not reach the other side of the Marid by daybreak, no one argued against the prospect of taking a drink.

Pylos moved aside to confer with Sefar and Remiel. 'He's not going to make it.'

Remiel looked over to where Maeldune was stooped over with his hands upon his knees. He had taken a drink but quickly vomited it back out. The pool of liquid sizzled upon the hot ground like an egg upon a frypan. 'I agree.'

'We have to leave him,' Pylos said bluntly. 'It's nothing personal but he'll kill us all if we don't.'

'Nothing personal, General? Are you sure about that?'

Pylos swivelled around to see Trypp's large eyes peering back at him. The Sapphyrran would not agree to leaving anyone behind and Pylos knew it. 'We don't have any other options,' Pylos said in response to the look he was getting.

'We could carry him,' Trypp proposed. Before Pylos could reject the idea, Trypp continued. 'Between you, me, Remiel and Sefar, we could manage it. He is tall, but I doubt he weighs more than we could bear.'

Pylos wanted to tell Trypp that Maeldune was undeserving of such support, but it would have been pointless. The Sapphyrran was so kind-hearted, he would have carried Caliban himself across the Marid.

The idea was put to Maeldune who surprisingly agreed to it without a moment's hesitation. Pylos thought that the self-important minister would not have allowed himself to be demeaned by such charity, but that was not the case. The race across the desert had either changed Maeldune – broken his spirit – or the Acoran had larger plans and was far too dispassionate and calculating to let personal pride interfere with his designs.

A short time before midnight, Heliopé's Necklace appeared above the horizon and Gerriod was right – they were facing due east.

'We just might make this,' Gerriod said with more optimism than he had shown in weeks.

'Perhaps,' said Sefar who was worried about the time. He had no point of reference but he felt they were not as far along as they should be.

Though he did not voice his concerns to the others, Pylos could tell that Sefar's confidence was waning. 'Do you think we're going to come up short?' he whispered.

Sefar did not answer with anything more than a nod.

Pylos swung his head around to the company who were beginning to spread out. Gerriod remained closest, followed by Remiel. Behind them ran Trypp carrying Maeldune and some distance behind them, Mulupo brought up the rear.

'Come on!' Pylos called but they were all running as fast as they could. He could not expect them to give more.

As the night drew on, the company maintained a solid pace, but the landscape before them had not changed significantly. The cliffs on the far side of the desert had not yet appeared though the sky in the east was slowly growing lighter.

No-one had spoken for hours. It did not seem anyone would speak until the sprint across the Marid was done. Pain had silenced them.

'We're not going to make it,' Pylos whispered to himself.

'Put me down,' said Maeldune.

Pylos had been so absorbed in dealing with his pain, he had forgotten he had been carrying Maeldune on his back. The Acoran's voice in his ear startled him and the shock to the system felt like adrenalin in Pylos' veins.

'Gladly.'

They said nothing more than that. Maeldune ran off at a pace that Pylos could not match. Maeldune had rested for several hours and was now fresh. By contrast, the rest of the company were spent.

Sefar did not know what emotions to feel as he watched the Acoran sprint past him. It would have been easy to hate him, but exhaustion was consuming his system and emotions such as hate and loathing seemed to tax to even consider.

The eastern cliffs came into view shortly before morning. The company stopped when they saw them and tried to measure their distance against the time they thought they had before the sun graced the Marid.

It was Gerriod who spoke first. 'We've run out of time, haven't we?' He was heart-broken. In order to push himself across the Marid, the mariner had concentrated so hard on the mental image of his father upon the cross, waiting for his son to rescue him, he was emotionally drained and in no condition to cope with the prospect of failure. He fell to his knees, ignoring the pain of the ground burning the skin under his trousers.

'It's not over,' Pylos said, but everything apart from his words suggested otherwise.

'Where's Maeldune?' asked Trypp who had noticed the Acoran's absence for the first time.

'He ran on ahead,' Pylos snarled.

'Then let us catch him,' Remiel said. He walked around and slapped his companions on their shoulders, trying to stir in them whatever energy still lay inside. 'There is far too much at stake here for us to fail because we didn't run fast enough. I realise you are all drained but that's nothing compared to what Caliban will do to the world should he triumph.'

Gerriod looked up at Remiel amazed by his vitality. 'Why aren't you exhausted like the rest of us?' he gasped. 'You're just a priest.'

Remiel smiled. 'Gerriod, I am exhausted but I can see the end. Let us run like fury and madness, and reach the other side. Let us show Caliban exactly what he faces.'

And so they ran, faster than they had that night. They were racing the sun. They had driven themselves to a point where pain had lost its meaning. It was just a part of them; they had lungs, they had limbs, they had pain. It did not matter anymore how much they hurt. All they had to do was run. All thoughts ceased. All emotions disappeared. They weren't even conscious of the light of dawn approaching.

But then the sun broke away from the horizon and everything changed.

'No!' screamed Sefar as the Marid became awash in searing light.

They had failed. Despite their best efforts, the company was still two leagues short of the eastern edge of the desert. Death was only moments away.

A subterranean rumble could be felt under their feet. There was no point running any more. They were trapped. The prelude to the violent overture of the sun-springs had begun.

'Follow me!' shouted Remiel.

‘What’s the point?’ Gerriod screamed back. ‘We’re all going to die.’

The rumbling grew louder. Soon they would not even hear one another’s screams.

‘Trust me!’ Remiel bellowed. ‘We can get through this.’

Suddenly the ground before them split apart. With speed beyond that of any other man, Remiel threw out a hand at the splitting desert floor. As the boiling water burst from the fissure, it changed. At first, it seemed to turn to ice, but a second glance revealed that it had actually turned into crystal.

Everyone but Pylos looked at Remiel in amazement.

‘You... you’re Morgai!’ Sefar gasped.

‘Yes. My name is Remiel Grayson.’

Gerriod’s face twisted up as anger poured out of his heart. ‘You... Caliban’s brother?’

Another geyser erupted from behind them and Remiel shot out his hand. He was slower this time and the water spout was at least 200 hundred feet high by the time he turned it into crystal.

‘I am Caliban’s brother,’ he said softly to Gerriod, ‘and we have much to discuss, but now is not the time. We need to get out of here and I need to focus on keeping us alive. Do you understand?’

Gerriod didn’t respond. He just stared back at Remiel with eyes burning with hate.

They started running for the eastern fringe. Remiel led the way, transmogrifying any geyser that threatened them. Most were turned to crystal before they had broke from the ground but as the eruptions grew more frequent, more and more escaped his attention. They ran in a straight line for safety of the cliffs, and the route they took began to resemble an avenue, lined with long crystal columns carved into impossibly elegant shapes.

The ground beneath their feet continue to heat up and so they ran harder to reach the edge of the unforgiving wasteland. Although sanctuary lay within sight, Pylos felt as if he were running through a bog. His mind told his legs to move faster, but his limbs refused to cooperate. Hours of carrying Maeldune on his back had taxed him to the limit and for a brief second he entertained the thought of lying down on the burning ground rather than running the last league to safety.

He was not alone. Every man with him considered the same thought. Every man except for Remiel. His stride was long and confident. He threw out his arms whenever a spring appeared and turned the hostile force of nature into a thing of beauty. He paved their way in a fashion beyond imagining. As unexpected as his revelation was to

everyone but Pylos, it couldn't have come at a better time. Although some associated the name of Remiel Grayson with the tragedies that had befallen the Myr, on this cloudless night out on the Marid, he was a saviour.

On the grasses lining the Marid, nothing moved. The five men lay as still as stone on the ground. Their panting had ceased but not one of them could summon up the energy to rise.

Gerriod lay looking up at the deep blue sky wondering what his next move should be.

*'Because of what he did to me. Gerriod, Remiel Grayson had a chance to save me, but it also meant saving Caliban. It was he who ultimately condemned me to this wretched realm..'*

It was not the first time he has dwelt upon his father's words. Thoughts of vengeance had always accompanied his recollection of his last conversation with his father, but now vengeance seemed so small a response to the actions that had influenced and destroyed so many lives.

'You have questions to ask of me?'

'Yes.'

Remiel led Gerriod aside to a spot under the cliffs where their conversation could not be heard by the others. His face looked ashen. 'Gerriod, before you say anything, as meaningless and hypocritical as it may seem, let me apologise for all you have endured these years. I have done you great wrong and there is nothing I can do or say to rectify that, but you must know what I did, I did for the good of the Myr. Or so I thought.'

Gerriod's face did nothing to indicate whether he accepted the apology or not. His eyes bored into Remiel's. 'If you had a chance to relive that day upon *The Melody*, would you still do what you did back then? Would you cast my father loose?'

Remiel frowned. As much as he had rehearsed the conversation they were having, he had not expected that question. It was a reasonable question to ask, but he had to think deeply before answering it.

'Well?' said Gerriod after a minute had passed.

'No.'

'No?'

‘No. Knowing what I know now, I wouldn’t do the same. I wouldn’t have poisoned my brother. I wouldn’t have sent him away. I would have talked to him about what the seer foretold.’

‘What about my father?’

‘Now that I have met you, I can honestly say that I wouldn’t wish harm upon anyone you cared about.’

It was a disarming answer and Gerriod could not think of anything to say in response to it. He stood up and walked away. He spent the next hour sitting on a rock, watching the massive water spouts reach up into the sky. In his head he replayed every word Remiel Grayson had just said. He had more to ask and more to say, but he needed time to digest everything. In the back of his mind he knew that his greatest hope in rescuing his father lay with the very man who had sent him to his fate.

A westerly breeze was blowing and it sent a hot mist from the Marid across the fringes of its eastern border. Sefar suggested that the company climb the bluff lining the desert and head inland to sleep off their weariness. He knew of a shady place not far from the edge of the cliff where they could sleep until the day’s heat had passed. They quickly agreed to the plan and after two hours of toiling up a steep path, they soon found themselves lying peacefully in the shade of a grove of kor-kor trees.

Sefar was the first to wake. He was still tired and could have slept for another six hours but his muscles ached and he needed to stretch them. The sun was low in the sky but the water spouts across the Marid were still in full fury. From its position in the west, the sun shone through the geysers and the effect was breathtaking. The Kheperan looked out across the incredible wasteland with pride. He had conquered it twice, although the second crossing would have been a disaster without the priest’s help.

The priest. Father Gideon was Caliban Grayson’s brother. It was an astounding revelation, so amazing that he was not sure how he felt about it. He knew he should have experienced anger over the deception, but he did not hate Remiel Grayson – he was a good man who had made mistakes. It would be easy to lay upon him the blame for all Caliban’s crimes, but that was not how a Kheperan thought. Ultimately each man is accountable for his own actions and it was neither right nor fair to ascribe to Remiel the horrors that had been committed by his twin.

Sefar thought about the fact that they had been accompanied by one of the Morgai. It made sense. He had suspected Pylos of being

Morgai but the thing that had led him to such a suspicion – the Helyan's recovery from the poison-tipped spiked ball he had been struck by when fleeing Murdertown – must have been as a result of Remiel's actions. There were other signs he failed to notice. Their survival at the Scarlet Rock Theatre was one. Remiel had shielded him from Argas' blows, saved his life, and yet in the chaos that ensued, he had failed to question how. And then there was the miraculous turn of events in the middle of the Nessian Sea. The bright light that had finished off the Ghul – it had been Remiel Grayson's doing.

As Sefar looked out across the scorching desert, he realised that Remiel had saved his life at least three times. In recognition of this, he would not deny the Morgai his right to atonement. He would march proudly by his side all the way to Caliban's doorstep. Remiel had kept them alive and that was not something he could ignore – life was far too precious.

It was at that moment he felt Maeldune's knife slide across his neck.

Sefar's chest became soaked in blood in less time than it took for him to turn around and see the smiling face of his assassin. Maeldune had not wasted his opportunity. He had cut deeply.

'I'm so glad I held onto that knife,' the Acoran said flippantly.

Sefar sank to his knees. His hands clutched futilely at his throat trying to stem the flow of blood. He was dying and he could not even scream out to the others and warn them of the villain that lay in their midst once more.

Mulupo was thirsty and for the first time in his adult life he yearned for water rather than wine. His tongue flickered across his parched lips and he groaned softly to himself. Against Pylos' advice he had drunk all his water and now his waking thoughts were centered upon quenching his thirst.

He opened his eyes and rolled over to find Sefar no longer by his side. The Kheperan had left his flask of water where he had slept and Mulupo decided that Sefar wouldn't mind if he took a drink or two. He quietly uncorked the flask and poured its contents down his throat. With a guilty but contented sigh, he wiped his mouth and looked about for Sefar.

The Kheperan could not be seen. '*He's gone back to the cliffs,*' Mulupo thought to himself. It was a logical conclusion. Sefar's attachment to the Marid had been apparent from the moment they arrived at the desert's western fringe and it seemed likely to Mulupo that he

would look upon it one last time whilst he waited for the rest of the company to wake.

The Spriggan made his way through the boulders that lined the escarpment. He would have called out for Sefar but he did not want to wake his sleeping companions.

The spray of the geysers floating through the air told Mulupo that he was close to the cliff's edge. He rounded a boulder to witness one of the most shocking and callous acts he had ever seen.

Sefar was lying on the ground in a pool of blood. Maeldune stood above him, delicately wiping his knife as he placed a booted foot upon the Kheperan. He then pushed forward with his foot and the limp body of Sefar Hadith rolled over the edge of the cliff.

Rage filled Mulupo's head and heart. He ran forward and launched himself at Maeldune.

'Pylos!'

The Spriggan's cry for help wrenched Pylos from a heavy sleep. Within moments he was on his feet.

'Get up!' the Helyan screamed at his companions. 'It's Mulupo. Something's wrong.'

When they reached the cliff's edge, Maeldune was waiting for them. He had gained the upper hand in his struggle with Mulupo. He held the Spriggan by the throat and lifted him up so that Mulupo's hooves kicked futilely in the air. He then swung his arm back so that Mulupo was suspended over the precipice behind him.

Maeldune gazed coldly at Pylos. 'Your suspicions were correct General. I am not to be trusted.'

'Give him to me.'

Maeldune laughed. 'It seems that my wife is not the only thing I have that you desire, General.'

'You don't deserve your wife Maeldune. You don't deserve anything but a painful death.'

'I'm sure you can arrange that Pylos.'

Pylos unsheathed his blade and stepped forward. Maeldune shook his arm, threatening to drop Mulupo to the floor of the Marid, hundreds of feet below.

Remiel stepped forward, placing a gentle hand on Pylos' arm. 'We've suspected your lack of loyalty for some time, Maeldune.'



‘Loyalty is a confused idea. It all depends upon perspective. From your brother’s perspective, I have shown nothing but loyalty. Do you see my point? Sooner or later you have to betray someone – isn’t that right Grayson?’

‘But to blindly follow the orders of someone so consumed by –’

‘*Blindly follow?*’ Maeldune yelled with surprising ferocity. ‘Do you take me for a lackey? You fool! I was there from the start. Whilst you were doting on your father, Caliban and I were delving into mysteries that your tiny minds could not comprehend. It was I who studied the ancient texts with your brother and learned the secrets of the Endless. What you see happening before you was as much by my hand as it was by Caliban’s.’

Remiel looked like he had just been struck in the face. ‘You’re... you’re his friend.’

‘I have known Caliban for almost thirty-five years. I was there the day his child was born. I was with him weeks before you shipped him off to Sanctuary.’

Remiel could hardly breathe he was so shocked. ‘Caliban has a child?’

‘Yes and you left her without a father.’

*On the other side of the chamber Remiel Grayson leaned forward, staring intently at Lokasenna’s face. It was not the distinctive dark brown birthmark that lay across her left eye like a patch. It was something else. He couldn’t nail it down but there was something compelling about her features, something familiar, as if he had met her before but could not put his finger on where.*

The tall Sessymirian he had seen in the Cloud Chamber, the one with the birthmark. It was her. She was Caliban’s daughter. He wasn’t sure how he knew, but he was convinced of it.

‘All this time Caliban has been confined to the Endless, who did you think was orchestrating all that occurred on the surface? It was I who decided upon the memberships of the companies that have been sent on this futile quest. And know this – they are destined to failure, just as you are.’

It was Pylos who understood the significance of Maeldune’s claim. ‘You’ve placed one of your own in each of the companies.’

‘Yes. Each company has been blessed by the presence of someone who is sensitive to Caliban’s plight.’

Pylos was enraged. 'Your own wife is on one of those squads. Would you have her slaughtered as well?'

Maeldune raised an eyebrow. 'How do you know she isn't on my side?'

'I don't believe it.'

'I don't care what you believe Pylos. You are inconsequential. You lack the intellect for this conflict.'

'You chose the wrong side Maeldune. The Ghul are weak. We will purge them from the world and —'

A snigger left Maeldune's thin lips. 'Perhaps you are referring to the Ghul's vulnerability to shatterstone. You fool! Did you think I would let your message about the shatterstone get out? Your sword may be sharp Pylos, but you are dull. That poor wretch you freed from the stocks in Murdertown now lies decomposing in a stable.'

Remiel stepped between Pylos and Maeldune. 'Enough! You will put Mulupo down.'

'Unfortunately Grayson, mind control doesn't seem to be one of your Morgai talents. Why would I put him down? He's the only thing that is stopping you all from killing me.'

Mulupo strained against the hand around his throat. 'He... killed... Sefar!'

The horror of the realization hit them hard. For a second, no-one said anything. And then Pylos unsheathed his sword.

'Another step Pylos and the Spriggan gets tossed over the cliff and the plague of Spriggans that has infested our world is finally ended. You're fast, but are you fast enough to get to me before I let him go?'

Pylos immediately backed down.

'Good boy!' Maeldune sneered. 'Now listen carefully. At nightfall we will be met by the squad of Ghul I have requested to join us here. You seek passage into the Endless? You shall have it. The Ghul will accompany us all the way to Caliban and the Grayson twins shall be reunited. Of course, I cannot give the rest of you any guarantees as to your treatment at the hands of the Ghul once Caliban has seen you, but at the very least, you will be given an audience with this poor man you have set out to kill.'

Mulupo struggled in Maeldune's fierce grip. He was not trying to free himself. He was trying to speak. 'Don't...'

'Silence!' Maeldune shook Mulupo like a rag doll. He turned back to face the others. 'You will wait back at the camp for the arrival of the Ghul. I will stay here with the Spriggan. Should any of you come within 100 yards of us, he shall be slaughtered.'

Mulupo's eyes widened in terror. He was not scared of dying. Rather, it was the pivotal position Maeldune had placed him in that filled him with dread. He knew what his companions would do. They were honourable. Too honourable. They would acquiesce to Maeldune's demands to avoid another casualty. In a capitalistic sense, it was a poor bargain. They had nothing to gain by agreeing to Maeldune's demands. He was not prepared to be a part of such an unprofitable arrangement.

He twisted his body around and lifted his legs as high as he could. He then thrust out with his hooves and kicked Maeldune in the temple. Maeldune reacted just as Mulupo knew he would – he let go.

Pylos was on Maeldune before the Acoran had any sense of what had happened. But he was far too late to stop Mulupo from falling over the edge.

Trypp rushed to the brink of the cliff to see Mulupo's limb body sliding down a section of the cliff wall before disappearing behind an outcrop of rock.

Maeldune shuddered under Pylos' embrace. His smug expression faded as he looked down to see the shatterstone sword Pylos had thrust through his chest. He opened his mouth to say something but no words came out. The dead don't speak.

## Chapter Four The Slith, Sessymir

Everything happened so quickly. Suki rolled to her right just as the Ryugin slammed into her. The sharp teeth lining what was left of the Ryugin's mouth scraped the air sac but did not perforate it.

Enraged that its attack had not succeeded, the Ryugin struck out with its claws and tore a long gash in one of Suki's wings. For a moment, all was shrouded in the inky blood that floated out from the deep wound. And then the ocean floor fell away and they were bathed in a bright orange light that blazed from below.

They had reached fissure Matsuo had told them about, the deep rent in the ocean floor where a thick thermal current pushed up in the cold waters around them. Dense clouds of krilla filled the waters below them feeding on the phytoplankton that lived in the warm, sulphuric water rising up from the molten rock at the base of the fissure.

Suki folded her wings against her body and plunged headlong into the rift. The Ryugin was momentarily surprised by the manoeuvre but wasted little time in following the trail of blood that spewed from the leviatha's side.

Suki's fluke was carving the water like a scythe through long grass. Down, down, down they sped and still the Ryugin kept coming. Each sweep off Suki's tail provided a glimpse at the closing monster through the thickets of tiny crustaceans that swarmed about the rift. The intensity of the red glow from the undersea vent grew the deeper they went. Even in the vacuum of the air sac, Lara and Sumi could feel the pressure of the water build up as Suki pushed deeper and deeper into the rift.

On all sides orange walls flew past. The rift was not particularly wide and a growing feeling of claustrophobia weighed down upon Lara as they continued to dive. She cradled Tagtug in her coils, as if he were asleep.

Sumi could see that the Ryugin, relentless in its pursuit, was only yards away from Suki's fluke. Fortunately, it was struggling to get any closer where its savage claws could rip into Suki's hide. It seemed to be having difficulty swimming. For the briefest moment, a tiny hope was kindled in Sumi's heart but this delicate ember was snuffed out by the realisation that Suki was also struggling. She was slowing down.

The depth of the water was exerting incredible pressure upon the two great beasts. The heat pouring out of the fissure had also grown exponentially. Lara placed a hand upon the walls of the air sac and recoiled when she felt how hot the thin membrane had become. Oblivious to the heat due to her thermanaesthesia, Sumi pressed against

the air sac, absorbed in the Ryugin's attempts to kill them. Blood continued to pour from the rent in Suki's wing. She was losing strength. The question was which of the two behemoths of the deep would falter first.

The Ryugin drew closer. Sumi stared into the eye she hadn't blinded and saw that it had lost the piercing malice that had been there since she first saw the beast back off the shores of Kompira. Instead the eye seemed unfocussed and blurred. It began to bulge. Veins billowed across its surface and then the entire orb twisted back into the creature's skull.

The pressure of the deep was crushing the Ryugin and as great a beast as it was, it was not equipped to deal with the tremendous force around it. Its body shuddered and in the red glow of the fissure, Sumi witnessed the most shocking and gratifying death she had would ever see. The Ryugin's body broke into frenetic spasms. Its right eye clouded over as blood vessels burst. Its internal organs were crushed and liquefied under the weight of the waters surrounding them. The convulsions that had wracked its body were so violent that it broke its own spine as it twisted around uncontrollably.

And then it stopped.

Suki swivelled around in the tight space and pushed past the dead beast and made her way out the rift.

After what seemed like hours, they broke the surface of the Oshalla Ocean. The storm that had been raging had passed and a ghostly light surrounded them as the morning sun tried vainly to break the low clouds to the east. In this bleak seascape they said good-bye to their dear companion Tagtug whose body they gave to the cold bosom of the ocean.

Two days later, they stepped out of the air sac and stood on a floe of ice that extended all the way to a snow-covered shore to the north. This was as far as Suki could take them. Although her wing had stopped bleeding, she was weak. Sumi was doubtful that Suki would make it back to the cavern under Toshi Station where the Keelii would tend to her wounds.

For a short time, Lara and Sumi just stared out across the ocean they had just crossed. Somewhere out there floated the body of the Mabbit who had saved their lives. He would never return to his homeland in the Briar Patch. No-one would ever take back news of his heroic deeds to his

family and friends. The tragedy of his death hung in the air like a thunderstorm. Tagtug had hardly understood the darksome events in which he had been embroiled and the senselessness of his passing was overwhelming.

‘He played a larger part than any would have expected,’ Sumi said as she picked up her rucksack and slung it across her back. ‘I’m sorry he had to die.’

Lara nodded. ‘We had to leave the station. I don’t blame you for Tagtug’s death.’

‘Thank-you.’

‘That doesn’t make it any easier to accept.’

‘I won’t accept it,’ Sumi said with sudden bitterness. ‘I will add it to the vessel of hate that has replaced my heart.’

Lara did not know how to respond so she just said nothing, reached down and picked up her own supplies. She also shouldered the tattered hempen bag that Tagtug had carried every step of his journey. It was a sentimental gesture but Lara had decided she would take the bag all the way to the Endless.

They turned around and began their march across the icy wastes of Sessymir.

Although the desolate, white landscape around them had led Sumi and Lara to believe that they were all alone, the sound of marroks’ howling and hissing quickly made them feel otherwise. The presence of the marroks was enough to make Lara redouble her efforts to cross the frozen wastes quickly, but the sheer enormity of the undertaking was beginning to impact upon her. Physically she was exhausted. The pair had spent five days travelling inland with little to guide them other than Tagtug’s compass which still pointed towards the Briar Patch.

Days were spent slogging up and down the endless sastrugi, parallel ridges of snow that ran east to west. Their route north made their crossing of the white hills all the more taxing. Each time they reached the top of one of the dunes of snow, they would be buffeted by chilling winds that would not leave them alone until they were deep in the valley between the two ridges.

Nights were spent in snow caves that Sumi built with such skill that Lara wondered whether the Susanese princess actually had some Sessymirian blood running through her veins. Although Sumi was also finding the journey difficult, she was not suffering at all from the brutal cold and Lara envied her thermanaesthesia terribly.

Sumi seemed to be well aware of Lara's hardships and in the darkness of the snow caves, despite being exhausted, she would do her best to keep her companion's spirits up. She was surprisingly talkative, and often told tales from her youth that intrigued the witch.

On the sixth day across the snow, the sound of distant marroks had become constant. Their presence unsettled Lara and in the confines of their snow caves, she asked Sumi to tell her a story to take her mind from the malevolent carnivores that slithered somewhere out among the snowy hills.

'I will tell you one that Trojanu had told me when we were first courting,' she said. 'It is an old Kompiran tale about a young boy who wanted to impress his aging father who was a loving parent but a hard man to please.'

Lara smiled and snuggled into her coils, hoping the story would be long enough to lull her into a sleep free from the barking and hissing of marroks.

'One day, the boy asked his father to send him on a quest. The old man thought long and hard about the request and the next day came in with five scrolls. "I have agreed to send you on a quest," he said. "You are to fetch me the Sword of the Night from the hidden Citadel of Mandicos deep in the jungles of Ankara. I have five scrolls all containing valuable advice to help you in this task. You may choose four of the five scrolls now. The fifth one you may read upon your return."

'The boy was pleased with the challenge and he stared at the five scrolls for a long time before he selected the four he would use to assist him. The first scroll was a map, a choice that was met with much praise as his father believed it would be of tremendous benefit on the difficult quest. The boy chose a second scroll and listed upon it were the names of three people who would help him on his quest. The father nodded pleased with this choice as well. The third scroll was selected and contained within was a promissory note to the effect of five hundred gold coins. "Again you have chosen well," his father said. "You will need this money to finance your journey." The boy's face beamed, not because he had chosen well, but because his choices had been met with such approval.

'The boy found the choice between the remaining two scrolls a most difficult one. They looked the same but they could mean the difference between success and failure. "Do not trust the riverboat captain," read the scroll he finally chose. The boy couldn't help but feel disappointed in this choice. He never liked the riverboat captain and would not have trusted him anyway. His father could see his son's

disappointment. "Sometimes it's not what we choose that's important; it's what we leave behind."

"This comment was too cryptic for his son to decipher. As it turned out, the riverboat captain tried to rob him but he was ready for him and dispatched the man to an early grave. His quest took many years and he faced innumerable dangers, some too ghastly to mention. Many times his life hung by a thread but he persevered and eventually succeeded in retrieving the Sword of the Night from the kingdom of Ankara.

"Upon his return to Kompira, he proudly presented the sword to his father and was received with great warmth. A close bond had formed between the two men – for the boy was indeed now a man – and they lived together for many happy years before the old man fell sick. Upon his death bed, the father looked at his son and said, "You never asked what was on the fifth scroll. Would you like me to tell you?"

"The son nodded. The old man reached under his pillow and pulled out the scroll in question. He gave it to his son who opened it and read it to himself. After a moment, he started laughing and he took his father in his arms and held him lovingly to his chest. He placed the scroll on the old man's bedside table. It read: "You cannot succeed. The quest is impossible."

Sumi looked down at Lara who had fallen asleep. The Moraen had nuzzled her head against Sumi's shoulder, like a child who had dozed off during a bedtime story. Sumi smiled as she stroked Lara's head. 'It's probably best that you don't know either. Our quest is impossible.'

Lara looked to the north. The sastrugi was behind them, which would have been a relief if what was ahead of them was not a long, steep slope that ended at the base of an even steeper cliff made of ice. 'Well done, Sumi,' Lara moaned. 'After a week of making us climb and down hills you've finally managed to find a hill that only goes up!'

Sumi smirked. 'I'm sorry. There are no more hills that also go down around here. Unless you turn around and head south.' Despite her weariness, she smiled. Although Lara's speech over the past week had been heavily laced with complaints, sarcasm or both, she had grown incredibly fond of the Moraen. In light of all that had happened to them, Sumi could think of no better companion than Lara Brand.

Suddenly the growling sounds that had accompanied them across the snows became much clearer. Both women swung around to see the shaggy figures of a pack of snow marroks slithering up the slope towards them. The marroks' slathering jowls declared the beasts' intention – they



were hungry and a rare meal of Myrran meat had made its way onto their table.

Sumi's arm shot out and the closest marrok dropped with a throwing star wedged in its head.

Lara turned to her companion and said, 'Where did you get that?'

'Matsuo gave me the keys to the armoury back at Toshi Station.' Sumi opened her tunic to reveal a dozen other stars tucked into a satchel on her belt, alongside some knives, a bola and pair of sai.

'I can see you didn't waste the opportunity!' Lara said dryly.

'Head up the hill,' Sumi said with a flick of her head to the vast ice wall they had been heading towards. 'I'll join you shortly.'

'This is no time for last stands,' Lara scolded.

'I'm not planning to die here. I can run faster than you can slither. I'll take down as many as I can and meet you at the base of the cliff.'

Lara decided not to argue the point. She hugged Tagtug's bag to her chest and slithered up the snow-laden slope, leaving her companion to deal with the marroks.

It wasn't long before thirteen marroks lay dead on the hill. Their rich red blood seeped out of the deep wounds in their skulls and formed intricate patterns on the snow. When she had thrown her last star, Sumi turned and sprinted up the hill.

Lara was coiled at the base of the sheer ice wall, shaking with the realisation that they had nowhere to go. 'When you said to head up the hill, did you think of where we would be going next?' she asked Sumi who was looking up at the precipice with a look of consternation on her face.

'I had hoped that the pack would flee if I killed enough of them,' she replied.

'Perhaps you should tell *them*,' Lara said, indicating the serpentine forms making their way up the slope towards them. There were now at least fifty marroks.

'Look – they're coming from everywhere!'

Further down the slope, more and more marroks were swarming across the snow. They howled and hissed as they came and there seemed to be no end of them. There were hundreds of them. It seemed as if every marrok in Sessymir had found its way to the hill, all desirous of a piece of Myrran flesh.

Sumi's eyes flicked across the squirming landscape of fur and teeth. The very hills seemed to be alive as the marroks crowded in around them, all smelling the stench of fear that emanated from the two women at the base of the ice cliff.

'I'm sorry Lara,' she said as she drew the two knives she had acquired from Matsuo's armoury. 'I didn't think it would end this way.'

Lara couldn't hear her. She was too paralysed by fear. Images of her mother being devoured by the albino marrok flashed across her terrified mind. Her hands shook as the significance of the moment saturated her being. She was about to die, killed by the very creatures that had torn apart her mother. She would die on this lonely hill and no-one would ever know. Birren would be left to live out her days in the Endless. It was an entirely unacceptable situation.

Her whole body was shaking. The marroks edged closer, relishing the terror they had awakened. Lara closed her eyes, unwilling to look upon the beasts' leering faces. Her hands juddered so uncontrollably it looked as if she were having a fit as a result of the fear that was consuming her. A searing noise emanated from her body, high-pitched and pure.

Sumi covered her ears, but it did little to stifle the dissonance that sliced into her brain like a knife. She dropped to her knees, vaguely aware of the sounds of yelping around her. Before long, even the harsh yelping was drowned out. The sound was unlike anything Sumi could have imagined. If the noise had been light, she would have been staring at the sun with her eyelids fixed open. The world swirled about her and then, as suddenly as it had begun, the noise stopped.

She slowly opened her eyes to find Lara slumped in a heap, panting heavily but unharmed by what had just transpired. The same could not be said for the marroks. As far as she could see, the bodies of dead marroks littered the land before them. The hill that had been so white and pristine was now a vibrant red. Every single marrok had exploded, sending blood and viscera over a landscape that had never known colour.

Sumi approached Lara slowly, unsure of what to make of the carnage surrounding them. 'Did you do that?'

'Yes,' Lara replied breathlessly. She seemed even more amazed than Sumi. 'I think so.'

'I didn't know you could do that.'

'I didn't either.'

They looked at each other, almost too stunned to speak. Their bodies were coated in the warm blood of the marroks. Though a sense of relief slowly ebbed across their stunned minds, the shock of what had just occurred did not fade quickly.

'What was that spell called?' Sumi asked as she dabbed the blood off Lara's face with her cloak.

'I don't know.'

'You don't know.'

‘There are times when witches stumble across magick that has not been learnt. It comes from within, but those occasions call for highly specific elements to fall into place. They require an extremity of emotion almost impossible to reach.’

‘Really? Which emotion did you use? Anger? Pride? Or was it simply bloody-minded determination?’

Lara shook her head. ‘None of those. It was fear. Pure, unadulterated fear.’

‘You should get terrified more often!’ Sumi joked. ‘Do you think you could repeat it... if you had to?’

‘I never want to be that scared again.’

Lara had to rest. The spell had taken so much she was prepared to fall asleep amidst the bloody detritus that blanketed the slope. Sumi quickly carved out a snow cave with her knives and made it as comfortable as she could for her exhausted companion. Lara asked her to tell another story but fell asleep before Sumi had begun.

The daylight outside the cave faded. Sumi watched the stars wheel about in the sky whilst Lara slept. She thought of all they had gone through, all they had suffered and wondered how much more they could endure. They had thwarted death by the narrowest of margins, sometimes through the courage of some of the noblest individuals she had ever known, but mainly on luck. She realised how tenuous her existence was. The difference between living and dying seemed so slight that whether they survived the mission depended less upon tenacity and willpower and more on random factors such as whether the sun was shining, which had saved them in Providence, and the ebullition of emotion that had led Lara to invent a spell.

She wondered whether Caliban Grayson, the architect of their miseries, gave any thought to the men, women and children that had died so that he may quell his desire for revenge. She thought of all the people who had died on *The Princess Orani* that day when she had lost her husband. Their killer, the Ryugin, was now dead, and whilst Sumi did enjoy seeing the beast crushed by the pressures of the Oshalla Ocean, the feeling was fleeting and now all that remained was the hollowness of the knowledge that nothing would bring her husband back. Nothing would bring back her sister Mai. Nothing would bring back Stoops, Edgar or Tagtug. The only thing that would give any of it any meaning was completing the mission. Suddenly the thought of failure became a lot more significant. She was not afraid to die, but if she did, all the lives

that had been lost on the way to the Endless would count for nothing and that was not something she could permit to happen.

When Lara finally awoke, she found Sumi standing over her with a cup of hot javo in her hand. At the mouth of the snow cave roared a blazing fire upon which roasted one of the marroks Lara had killed. The thick smell of the cooked meat filled the snow cave and made Lara feel dizzy.

'Drink up,' Sumi said. 'You'll need your strength for what I have planned for today.'

Lara stretched and smiled. Normally, the thought of eating roast marrok for breakfast would have made her nauseous, but her growling stomach bullied the rest of her senses into consensus and when Sumi passed her a chunk of steaming meat dripping with fat, she almost ripped it out of her hands. The piece of meat disappeared within seconds and Lara stuck out her hands for more.

When she had eaten her fill, she looked at the fire with a puzzled expression. 'How can you light a fire without wood?'

'Knowing we would be travelling through ice and snow, I took the liberty of taking some oil from Matsuo's storehouse.' She held up the small vial she had procured. 'Just a few drops of this can burn anything, and you left me with ample dead marroks to set alight.'

'Well don't plan on me doing it again,' Lara warned. She slithered out of the snow cave to find the morning had brought a fresh layer of snow which returned the landscape to its previous state. There were mounds scattered around the slope which she knew to be the bodies of marroks, but all the blood had disappeared under the veil of snow. The sun blazed down upon the white land and Lara had to squint to look around.

They had camped at the base of a cliff which reached up so high above them, Lara almost fell over when she craned her head to see the top of the precipice. 'So how do we get to the top of that?'

Sumi stepped out of the snow cave and followed her gaze to the summit of the cliffs. 'We climb.'

Lara gave her a look of ridicule. 'No. We don't. I can't climb that.'

'Of course you can. If it's just the height that's worrying you, remember, it's all in your mind.'

'Actually, it's not,' Lara retorted. 'You may have noticed, I don't have legs. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't climb that.'

'You'll have to use your arms.'

Sumi pulled out her knives and slammed them into the ice face and pulled herself up the wall in a demonstration that did little to give Lara any confidence that she could use the same technique to follow her athletic companion.

‘You are joking aren’t you?’

‘No. We have no choice and I know what you are capable of.’

‘Sorry Sumi,’ Lara sulked, ‘but that sort of insincere flattery will not get me up the cliff. Besides, I don’t have a pair of knives handy.’

Sumi reached under her tunic and drew a pair of sai. She handed these to Lara who reluctantly accepted them.

‘You’re a walking arsenal aren’t you,’ Lara huffed.

Sumi shouldered her rucksack and handed Lara her own sack and Tagtug’s hempen bag. ‘I wasn’t being insincere. I know you can do this.’

‘I don’t have the strength.’

‘There will be places where we can rest. By the looks of it the first hundred feet are the worst. We can rest on the ledge up there when we get past that.’

Lara gripped the sai like a hammer and thrust them into the cliff face. The sting of icy splinters upon her face as the sharp blades drove into the ice wall made her yelp. ‘Oh, this is going to be fun,’ she groaned.

Sumi was wrong about one thing. It wasn’t all in the mind. Lara had never felt such pain in her arms and shoulders. The muscles in her forearms had cramped up and felt so tight they felt like rocks under her scaly skin. She had lost all strength in her hands and was amazed she hadn’t dropped Sumi’s sai. Fortunately, there were places where she could wedge her tail in the ice wall, and though this was never comfortable, it did afford her enough rest-time to drop her arms so that the blood could flow back into them.

Sumi by contrast was having no trouble at all. She would scamper up twenty or so feet and then stop to guide Lara up. The ease with which she traversed the steep wall was staggering.

She looked over at Lara who was grunting and cursing as she slammed the sai into the ice and hauled herself up another foot. ‘Try not to lean out so much,’ she advised. ‘If you can, place more weight on your tail and try to keep your backside closer to the wall.’

Lara thought of asking her to be quiet. Climbing a wall of ice was difficult enough to do without a barrage of other things to remember. She gritted her teeth and grunted as she edged another foot closer to the top.

'I think you're thinking of the pain too much,' Sumi commented. 'You'd do much better if you tried to ignore it.'

Lara recalled a spell that could transmogrify someone's voice into the sweet song of birds. Arinna had shown Lara how to cast it but it was a difficult spell and she had never mastered it. Perhaps that was a good thing. It was unlikely Sumi would appreciate having her well-intentioned instructions replaced by bird noises.

Halfway up the difficult first stage of the wall, Sumi could see Lara was faltering. She lashed a thin length of rope around her companion and tied the other end around her waist, *'just in case'*.

'But if I fall of the wall, won't you fall off too?'

Sumi gave a mischievous grin. 'You'd better not fall off the wall.'

The sun rose in a clear blue sky which was a blessing for them. Sumi doubted Lara could have managed the climb in inclement conditions. She edged closer to Lara so that the two of them climbed alongside one another.

Lara thrust a sai into the wall as if she were stabbing at the heart of an enemy. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed her companion had moved in beside her. 'Where'd you learn to climb like this?' Lara asked begrudgingly.

'On the Skyfall,' Sumi answered as she pointed to a good spot for Lara to place her sai.

'The Skyfall? You've actually climbed it?'

'Yes. Many times. Not all the way to the top, mind you but –'

'Now, wait a minute. You mean you voluntarily place yourself in this sort of precarious activity regularly?' Lara asked pulling herself up to match Sumi's movement up the ice.

'Yes. Every year I journey north to Skyfall Town and spend the autumn climbing.'

'Every year? Don't you have a job or something?' Lara swung high and rammed a sai into the ice as she spoke. She was moving more confidently now and the grunting that accompanied her every move had ceased. 'I spend my days gathering food from the coven's vegetable patch. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't head off to the Skyfall to go climbing for the autumn.'

'It is not expected that I work as you do.'

Lara was surprised by the comment but she didn't stop climbing. 'And why is that Sumi?'

'I am the Emperor's daughter.'

Lara swivelled her head around. 'I forgot. You don't talk about it much.'

'Well, I don't see a need to.'

'But it's significant, don't you think? Why do you strive to keep such a thing secret?'

'It's not a secret. I just don't bring attention to the fact. I... I don't want anybody to think I'm pampered.' She hammered her blades into the ice and moved up past a ledge. She could have chosen to rest upon it, but Lara was moving swiftly now and didn't seem to require a break.

'Sumi, the one thing you are not is pampered!' Lara laughed. In fact, I think you're the least pampered person I have ever met.'

'I'll take that as a compliment.'

Lara turned her head to face her companion. 'You know, back in Cessair when I saw that you were on my squad, I was a little disappointed.'

'Really?' Sumi said, surprised by the admission. 'Why was that?'

'You know, the Susanese stoic thing.'

'The Susanese what?'

'Arinna once told me that the Susanese weren't great conversationalists. I remember thinking back in Cessair what a long journey it was going to be if you weren't going to say anything. I'm accustomed to talk.'

'Well, I'm talking now.' Sumi smiled to herself, as if enjoying a private joke.

At first Lara couldn't see what her companion found amusing, but as they pulled themselves up onto a ledge wide enough to stand on, it dawned on her. They had climbed the most difficult part of the ice wall. From this point on, they could scramble up the face without the need to use knives or sai to assist them. Lara now understood why this stoic Susanese princess had suddenly been so garrulous. Sumi was cunning. She had kept Lara talking the whole way up the precipice. 'You sly beast, Sumi. You kept me distracted.'

'I told you it would be easier if you didn't focus upon the pain so much,' Sumi chided in a friendly way.

Lara could see that she was right. Although they still had a long way to go, she knew that the worst part of the climb was behind them. She knew she could do the rest and the confidence that knowledge brought was like fuel in her veins.

Sumi and Lara were standing at the top of the ice cliff facing north. On either side of them two impossibly tall mountains reached up into the

charcoal coloured-clouds that had drawn in as the day had grown longer. Between these monolithic mountains lay a blue, shadowy valley completely covered in ice. They were standing at the head of a dark glacier that stretched out for many leagues before it was lost in a grey blur that Lara assumed was one of Sessymir's infamous blizzards. To the east where one of the mountains met the glacier, indigo shapes slowly moved across the ice. It was difficult to focus upon them as their colouring matched the colour of the ice under the overcast sky, but Lara was sure they had antlers.

'They're kanevvluk - snow staggorns,' Sumi said following Lara's gaze. 'They live in herds on the glacier.'

'What a lonely place to live!' Lara commented sadly. 'I guess they're safe from hunters up here.'

'No. Not quite. Once a year, hunters gather up here in response to the massive bounties the fur traders place upon these beasts. Fortunately blizzards keep the hunters out for most of the year, but in summer they swarm over this valley like Moskita.'

'I'm glad it's not summer now,' Lara sighed. 'Where exactly are we?'

'This great glacier is called the Slith. It is a frozen river of rubble and ice. The black rock far below its surface gives it its dirty colour. It's not pretty but it will be useful to us.'

Lara smirked. 'I didn't expect to find gentle fields and babbling brooks in Sessymir.'

'This glacier paves our way to Caliban,' Sumi continued. 'It goes all the way to Nilfheim.'

'This goes all the way to Nilfheim?'

'Yes. We're exactly where I hoped we would be. It's all downhill from here.'

'I don't suppose you're being figurative as well,' Lara said meekly.

'I'm afraid not. The Slith is one of the most dangerous places in Sessymir and Nilfheim is still over three hundred leagues away,' Sumi said ominously.

'Of course, it would be,' Lara said throwing up her hands dramatically. 'It would be far too much to expect things actually got easier on this journey!'

Sumi smiled. 'The Slith also offers us the fastest road to our destination. The route we will take runs down the glacier. The hunters use it to take the staggorn pelts back to Nilfheim. Fortunately, this cruel trade can work to our advantage. It can furnish us with what we need to finish this mission.'



Lara was not optimistic that anything the Sessymirians had to offer could be beneficial to them. The image of Lokasenna burning Sumi's face upon the charred earth of the Hollow Hills came to mind.

Sumi pointed to the west where an arm of the mountain on their left reached out across the icy valley before them. Lara could make out a square mound capped by snow in the dim light under the white ridge that extended from the forbidding mountain. 'It's a hut. A lodge for the hunters who come up here for the kaneevvluk. We can rest there before continuing on our way.'

'But won't someone be there?' Lara said nervously. 'The last thing I want to run into up here is a Sessymirian hunter.'

Sumi strode off towards the distant hit. 'Oh there are much worse things out here than Sessymirian hunters.'

Lara looked about as if expecting to see the sort of beast Sumi was talking about. Although she was relieved to find no such animal in sight, she quickly slithered across the snow to catch up to her companion.

It was a building, but it was not really a hut. In Lara's mind, the word *hut* gave rise to images of stone chimney stacks and deep brown log walls. When Sumi had mentioned the hut, Lara had imagined a fireplace where hot poddoo soup was bubbling away in a big black pot.

What stood before her was nothing like her imaginings. It had no quaint chimney stack – just a metal pipe sticking out of the roof like an arrow standing in the corpse of a beast. The '*hut*' was not even made of wood. The building was a square block of metal comprised of rusted beams of iron and greasy sheets of steel. In the centre of it lay a small hatch that looked more like an entry into a ship's cargo hold than it did a doorway into a cabin in the mountains.

'It doesn't look particularly cosy,' Lara commented.

'Oh, you'll find it's a lot more comfortable inside,' Sumi said as she took hold of the ice-encrusted circular handle that lay in the middle of the steel door. The frozen metal made the handle difficult to turn, but eventually the hatch fell open to reveal a dark, silent room beyond.

'A little light would be good,' Sumi suggested to Lara before heading into the hut. Like most Susanese, she had no love for the Sessymirians and even less trust. It would not be beyond the hunters that ventured up the Slith to have set up traps inside the hut for anyone thinking of entering the place in their absence.

Lara began the *El Illumina* incantation whilst Sumi listened for sounds coming from within. Moments later a ball of purling golden light rested in the witch's hands.

Sumi looked at the shining sphere Lara had conjured up and raised an eyebrow. 'Is it me or are you getting a lot better at this sort of thing?'

The look on Lara's face indicated that she was just as surprised as Sumi. 'It's getting easier. Before setting out from Cessair, it would have taken me much longer to cast this spell.'

'You're growing more confident.'

'I don't feel more confident,' she shrugged.

'You've had to grow up quickly.'

Sumi was right. In the space of six weeks she had witnessed more dreadful things than she could have dreamt of. She had seen so much death it clung to her, like a sticky film across her scales. It had started with the death of Bannick Landen followed shortly afterwards by the grisly discovery of the orphanage in Scoriath. Then there were the repeated attacks of the Ghul and marroks, as well as the gruesome pile of bodies in the cellar in Providence. All these things were shocking, but she also had more personal losses to contend with: Edgar, Stoops and Tagtug. Add to this the corruption of the Pryderi, the treachery of Lokasenna and the complete change in Arinna... Lara was amazed she hadn't lost her mind. She was astounded that in the face of so much adversity, she had endured. It seemed odd that she had survived when so many other brave souls had not, and then she realised it was because of them she had persevered. It was because of them she remained alive.

Her hands wandered to her waist where hung Tagtug's tattered bag. It seemed strange that she had clung to this – she had no reason to keep it. She did not even know what Tagtug had carried inside it. Perhaps she had been unable to let go of the Mabbit. Of all the victims of Caliban's war on the Myr, he was one of the most innocent.

Suddenly an image of Birren floated up through the pool of thoughts in Lara's head. She quickly undid the top of her blouse to see the reassuring blue glow of her Birthstone. Her daughter was still alive.

'Let's go in,' Sumi said quietly, 'but be ready for anything.'

Lara braced herself but nothing could have prepared her for what lay within the cabin. As she slithered into the hatch, a repulsive smell filled her head. It was like nothing she had ever experienced before. It was pungent and made her feel dizzy in the small confines of the room.

She placed her glowing sphere upon a table that lay near the door and looked around the hut. She was met with the leering faces of over a dozen animals, all mounted upon the greasy steel walls that surrounded them like a prison. The stuffed beasts ranged from a tiny twin-headed flummox to a mighty male staggorn whose antlers were almost as wide as the room. Lara scanned the other heads assembled around the room and was unnerved by the same manic stare and idiot grin on each creature's

face irrespective of their species. It was as if the taxidermist had captured each dead animal at its most foolish. She followed the hideous line of heads around the room until she saw something more shocking and depraved than anything she had seen since leaving Morae – above the door she had just entered was the head of a Mabbit.

Lara screamed when she saw it and rushed outside for fresh air. A cold wind blowing in from the north slapped her in the face pushing her back towards the hut. Lara dropped her head and slithered over to a small outcrop of rock that sheltered her from the gathering wind. She curled up into her coils and wrapped her arms around her head.

Lara's stomach gurgled, her shoulders shook and her head twisted. Before she had any idea what was going on, her vomit sprayed across the snow before her. The image of the Mabbit's head remained at the forefront of her mind. It was too horrible for her brain to put aside and ignore. Her body convulsed again and again.

'Here let me help you,' said a soft voice behind her.

Lara glanced up to see Sumi's concerned face looking down at her. She then looked at the mess she had made on the snow and felt ashamed. 'Please go away, Sumi,' she begged. 'I was sick.'

Sumi put out a hand and said, 'It doesn't matter. Come on. Let's get inside.'

'I can't go back in there Sumi.'

'It's okay. I've taken the Mabbit's head down. It's gone now.'

'How could they do such a thing?' Lara cried. 'How could they be so barbaric?'

'People can do terrible things.'

'It's not the Cabal who are the monsters, Sumi,' Lara exclaimed in a forlorn voice. 'It's us. People. We're the real monsters. We know better and yet we still hurt one another.'

Sumi shook her head. 'No. We're not all bad. Most of us are actually good, I think. There is still much kindness in the world. There's still much beauty.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'Because I wouldn't be fighting so damn hard to protect something that didn't exist,' she said proudly. 'Come on. There's a storm coming.'

The ball of light Lara had created was still sitting on the table when they entered the metal hut. The room was filled with the miscellany required to survive on the Slith during its summer months. Empty barrels that once contained ale were in abundance as were numerous thick pelts the Sessymirians had acquired in the course of their hunts. These pelts lay

over the floor and piled up by the walls. Against the walls, there were bunks interspersed between the mounted heads and each bed was covered in pillows and thick blankets.

Crates that had held stores of food lay to one side of the room. Nearby stood a bench with unwashed plates and dirty cutlery piled upon it. Lara caught sight of tiny red maggots crawling across the surface of chunks of uneaten meat that lay on some of these plates. The bench also held a box that contained hunting knives used for skinning the beasts that hunters caught. Few of these blades had been cleaned.

In the centre of the room was a round fire pit still full of blackened shards of Cold. An iron chimney was suspended above this, casting a small patch of natural light upon the pit. A bag of Cold lay beside the fire pit and of all the things in the room, this captured Sumi's interest the most. 'You'll find temperatures much colder up on the Slith,' she said as she placed a few blocks of the petrified ice into the middle of the hearth. 'We'll see if we can get a fire going.'

A crate containing some lengths of Acoran ironwood lay close by. There were only a few blocks of the slow burning wood, but it would be enough to last the night. 'This is good wood,' she said looking at a length of timber. 'At least we'll be warm tonight.'

Sumi placed her hands into the middle of the pit and slapped two pieces of Cold together until they ignited. Lara grimaced as the resulting flames wrapped around Sumi's arms but her companion ignored the fire, piling up the wood around the Cold until a roaring blaze filled the pit.

Once the fire had established itself, Lara lay back on a grey and black fur. She didn't know any animals that had such a coat and this made it easier to lie upon the skin. The fur was soft on her scales and she felt drowsy as soon as she rested her head upon it. The familiar sound of wood crackling in the fire was calming. She could feel her heartbeat slowing down. Her eyes closed.

It was then she realised that they weren't alone in the cabin. The breathy noise of the flames licking the air was not enough to hide the sound of something creeping across the floor. Whatever it was, its nails scraped against the metal floor at the far end of the cabin. Lara shot up and opened her eyes.

Sumi had already drawn her knives and was squatting on her haunches, her head slightly cocked as she tried to locate the source of the sound. It had disappeared, but Sumi had a feeling that whatever they had heard was still moving across the room. It had probably crept onto a rug where its footsteps could not be heard.

Lara pointed to the far wall where she could see a small shadow merging with the darkness under the bench. There was something moving there.

Sumi saw it too and quietly made her way around the room so she was next to the wall alongside the bench. Lara slithered over to the other corner so that the bench was between them, as well as whatever hid beneath it.

The two of them slowly moved in closer, Sumi with her knives extended, Lara with her hands twitching as if she were about to launch into an incantation like the one that had killed all the marroks at the bottom of the cliff.

The creature under the sink was aware of their approach. Sumi could see its dark shape shaking as she neared. It seemed the other occupant of the cabin was much more scared of them than they were of it. Before Sumi could take another step, it darted out of the darkness under the bench and scurried under a thick black fur that lay on the floor in front of the bench.

Sumi dropped her knives and dived at the shape that skittered under the fur. She landed in the middle of the rug and her hands clamped down on the wriggling lump of the creature underneath her.

‘Not so fast, little fellow,’ she said with a smile. It was plain to Lara that her companion did not fear whatever it was she had caught. Wrapping the fur up into a ball, Sumi tucked the bundle under her arm and walked over to the fire so she could get a good look at it. ‘Let’s see who has come to visit us,’ she laughed as she unfolded the furs on her lap.

‘Sumi, perhaps you should be care –’

The folds of the fur dropped aside to reveal a small creature with large, beautiful, blue eyes and a tiny pink nose that twitched as it stared back at the two Myrrans. The creature had long green feathers but it was not a bird. It had short arms that ended in chubby, clenched fists. It had no legs that they could see but two large, flat feet stuck out of the base of the creature’s stout feathery torso.

‘What is it?’ asked Lara tentatively.

‘I’m not sure what species it is,’ said Sumi, ‘but it sure is cute.’ She reached out a hand to touch the creature, but it backed away from her. ‘It’s alright. I know my face looks bad, but I’m not going to harm you.’ She smiled tenderly and after a long, quizzical look, the creature smiled back. It lifted its hand like a small child wanting to be picked up.

Sumi obliged. She placed her hands under the creature’s arms and lifted it to her chest. It was at that point, the beast chose to strike.

Its name was Uguku and it was one of the Cabal. Indeed, it was one of the worst of them.

The first thing Uguku did was attach its small hands to Sumi's neck. It was not trying to strangle her. It was biting her. Uguku had sharp fangs in the palms of its hands, fangs that could easily strip flesh from bone. On either side to Sumi's neck, blood exploded. She screamed in pain and sank to her knees. Her hands came up and grabbed at Uguku's tiny arms. Despite the beast's diminutive size, it was strong and Sumi failed in her attempts to remove it.

'Lara!' she screeched as the fangs sank deeper into her neck and gnashed at the meat it found there. 'Burn it off me!'

Lara was already in the final stages of the incantation. Her hands shook wildly as arcane energies built up in her body. She had never mastered *En Pyrrha* before, but the incident with the marroks earlier that day had emboldened her. It was more than confidence. It was insight. For the first time in her life, she felt she intuitively understood the way magick worked. A ball of searing flame grew in her palms. She wasted no time in hurtling the fireball at the creature on Sumi's neck. The knowledge that the flaming sphere would not hurt her companion did not offset her fears that the spell would probably burn her skin, but fortunately Sumi managed to twist the right side of her face away as the fireball splashed across her body.

Sumi's clothes caught fire but Uguku continued to grip her neck in its grotesque act of feeding.

A high-pitched noise filled the air. Lara had managed to replicate the explosive magick she had employed to kill the marroks. The intense sound rose and Lara prepared herself for the sickening sight of the creature bursting apart. The noise intensified to a point that Lara felt she would lose control and harm Sumi and herself with the magick. The creature tearing at Sumi's throat seemed oblivious to the spell.

Twisting violently under Uguku's grasp, Sumi knew that it would not be long before she lost consciousness. She figured she had a few seconds of life left. She would die a horrible, painful death. It was inevitable.

Suddenly, the gnashing stopped. Uguku's expressive blue eyes opened wide as it realised it had been attacked from behind. Lara had abandoned her attempts at spell-casting and turned to sharp, uncompromising steel for a solution. She had rammed Sumi's knife so far into Uguku's back that the blade pierced its feathery belly which lay upon Sumi's chest.

Sumi grunted as the knife cut across her breast, but it was nothing compared to the pain of the creature's teeth upon her neck. With its grip

loosened Sumi shoved Uguku away from her and rolled across the furs to her left in the hope of extinguishing the flames consuming her clothes.

Uguku slowly turned to face Lara. It gave no indication that it was actually in pain despite the fact she could see the tip of the knife protruding from its stomach. It regarded the knife that was sticking out of its torso with mild curiosity. It tried to swing its short arms behind its back to pull the weapon out but was unable to reach the knife's handle. The beast frowned a little but other than this it did not seem the least bit perturbed about the blade Lara had wedged in its body.

Lara slithered back away from Uguku. Anything that could ignore such pain was not to be trifled with. As she moved her antagonist swivelled around to face her. It lifted its hands and she could see its two mouths were smiling at her revealing small, sharp teeth that were red with Sumi's blood. Lara was stricken with fear as the mouths opened wide in a menacing display of contempt. Uguku's eyes narrowed and its body shuddered as it spat a wad of sputum from each mouth directly at the witch.

Lara managed to duck the disgorged material. It splattered on the wall behind her and the metal surface sizzled and a noxious smell drifted across the room. It was the same mordacious smell they had smelt when they first entered the hut. Lara gagged as the fumes of the creature's spit filled the room. She slithered across the furs to her left but Uguku continued to face her, its cruel intentions hidden behind its beautiful blue eyes. It drew back its arms and prepared to launch another volley of its acidulent saliva at its prey.

Lara quickly invoked a shield of magick around her as the spit flew across the room but it did her no good. The wads of green phlegm simply passed through the protective barrier and slapped against her shoulder. Lara's agonized scream reverberated across the metal hut and she fell back into the furs near the doorway.

Despite her knowledge that her magick had absolutely no effect upon her attacker, she lifted her hands to begin another incantation. Her left hand became entangled in something. A quick glance revealed that she had caught her hand in Tagtug's hempen bag. Her fingers were touching something smooth and round, and whether it was by instinct, curiosity or mere luck, Lara pulled the object out of the bag.

It was a large, purple fruit. With the malevolent creature hurling its burning spit at her, it may have seemed strange that Lara would pause to look at the odd fruit, but something in the back of her mind told her that what she held in her hand was something she should not ignore.

Sumi lifted her head from the furs and was at once delighted and horrified to see the object Lara held in her hands. 'It's a boomberry Lara!'

'What?' she screamed, ducking another volley of spit that hit the door behind her and hissed as it burnt a hole in the metal.

'Throw it! Throw it now! It's explosive.'

'Where?' Lara yelled, panicking at the thought of holding something so obviously volatile.

'At *that*!' Sumi barked as she pointed at Uguku whose eyes were narrowing as it looked upon the strange purple ball in the witch's hand.

Lara threw the boomberry. Moments later Uguku's insides were on the walls, floor and ceiling of the hut. With Tagtug's help yet again, Lara and Sumi had survived.

It was late by the time Lara and Sumi finally settled down to bed. They had spent a number of hours cleaning up the room and each other. Lara's growing skill in the area of magick couldn't have come at a better time. She was able to heal Sumi which was remarkable – the extent of the damage to her neck was severe but Lara had stopped the bleeding and mended the tendons and tissue that had been mauled away by Uguku.

Lara also wove a spell upon herself that quickly made her own injury nothing but a bad memory.

They inspected the area where they had found the creature. There were holes in the floor under the bench where the metal had melted away. A familiar pungent smell floated up from the holes.

'What do you think went on here?' Lara asked confounded by the presence of the holes in the floor.

'The creature must have been waiting for us here. I imagine anticipation of its meal may have made it salivate and this is where drops of its spittle fell upon the floor.'

Lara shrugged and shook her head. 'It makes total sense when you explain it.'

'It's just logic.'

'But you're always right, Sumi!' Lara laughed. 'You must get tired of being perfect.' She meant it as a compliment.

Sumi walked away, found a couple of skins that had not been stained with Uguku's entrails and placed them down by the fire pit. She sat down on one of these and proceeded to undress herself in preparation for a much-needed night of rest. 'I'm far from perfect, Lara,' she muttered as she pulled off her boots.



Lara slithered over to her and coiled up on the skin next to her. 'No. That's not true,' Lara contended. 'I've never met someone so accomplished. You're smart. You know about things I've never heard of. You've been everywhere, done incredible things. And you're so confident and self-assured. You can fight. When I think of the way you fought by Stoops' side when we were attacked crossing the Assipattle, or the way you went to Edgar's aid in the Hollow Hills, or even the way you dispatched the Pryderi when we were escaping Providence... I'm in awe of you. At first I found you intimidating, but now, you're just inspiring.'

Sumi put a hand to her burnt face. 'I'm hardly inspiring now,' she said solemnly.

'The Keelii will be able to mend your face. And look at the rest of you. If I had legs, I'd want legs like yours. You have those beautiful brown eyes. And those freckles. I always wanted freckles when I was a child.'

Sumi looked away unsure of what to say. Lara caught a glimpse of her face and laughed. 'Sumi, I don't believe it. You're blushing!'

'I'm not accustomed to receiving compliments.'

'Nonsense. I bet you had every man in Susano and Kompira lining up to meet you. I'm sure you had a thousand boyfriends.'

Suddenly Lara noted a shift in her companion's demeanour. 'Well... maybe not a thousand, but at least a hundred.'

Sumi turned from her, clearly not interested in pursuing the conversation further.

'Um... fifty? Ten? Sumi?'

Sumi's head sank into her hands.

'One?'

And for the briefest of moments, Lara stopped talking and all that could be heard was the wind howling outside, the fire crackling inside and the sobbing coming from the deepest part of Sumi's heart. Lara moved over to where Sumi could see her. She gently put a hand to her face and lifted it ever so slightly.

'I know I've said the wrong thing, but I'm stupid. We both know that.'

Sumi smiled the smallest smile and sniffed. 'You're not stupid.'

Lara reprimanded her softly. 'Now don't tell me about what's stupid. I am an expert on what's stupid. It's one thing I do know and—'

Sumi put a finger on Lara's lips and the Moraen stopped babbling.

Tears were perched on the edge of Sumi's eyes, about to run down the long black lashes. 'I'm sorry. It's just... there's only been one man in my life. I've never known another.'

'I'm sorry,' Lara said. 'That was thoughtless of me.'

'Trojanu Sato and I were married only a few days when our wedding boat was attacked by the Ryugin.'

'I'm sorry. And here's me asking about how many lovers you had.'

'One.'

'What?'

'The answer's one. In Susano, we take one husband for life.' She held up her forearm to display her magnificent armband.

'I understand.' Suddenly a terrible realisation dawned on Lara. The skeletal figure lashed to the Ryugin – adorning the remains of its right forearm was a replica of the golden band Sumi wore on her forearm. Trojanu.

Sympathy of the deepest sort swelled up in Lara. She could not begin to imagine what it must have been like for Sumi to face the Ryugin in light of what it had already taken from her.

'So you see,' Sumi said quietly, 'I don't really have everything. I miss him terribly. Whenever I think of him, I feel sick to my stomach, and yet I think of him all the time. They tell me that time heals such wounds, but I don't believe it. And so I just count the days until I see him again.'

'Again?'

'Yes.'

'You want to die?'

'No. Why would I want to do that?'

'To be with your husband.'

'That we will be reunited is inevitable.'

'But you said you were counting the days until you see him, as if you know when that will be.'

'I do. When this mission is over, I'm making the journey to Usnach.'

'What's Usnach?'

'Usnach. The Empty Isle. You've never heard of Usnach?'

'No – should I have?'

'Well, yes.'

'Our culture has always been a little insular. We do not know much of the world outside Morae.'

'I understand that but I had imagined that all Myrrans knew of Usnach.'

Lara lay down into the fur she was sitting upon. She put her hands behind her head and closed her eyes. 'Please, Sumi, tell me about it.'

Sumi turned around so that her back rested on the small ringed wall surrounding the fire pit. She crossed her legs in front of her and

stretched, preparing to tell the story just as she had told her companion stories in the snow cave on their way across the lowlands of Sessymir. 'Usnach is the Arnakki world for emptiness, but the island of Usnach is anything but empty. The souls of those who die before their time inhabit the island, waiting for the day when their loved ones grant them leave to go.'

'Go?'

'Go into the great beyond. The only place that could truly be called *endless*.'

'And they wait all that time?'

'The dead have no sense of time and will wait until they are farewelled at Usnach. When a loved one finds his or her way to the island, the dead they knew appear and bid farewell to this world.'

'What if no-one comes to see them away?'

'Eventually everyone finds their way to Usnach. Whether it be in life or death, sooner or later we will all end up on the Empty Isle.'

'It's unbelievable.'

'No more unbelievable than the magicks you invoke.'

'And you're sure of this?'

'Yes. I am sure and I know Trojanu waits for me.'

Lara sat up so she and Sumi were face to face. 'Do you think my mother waits for me? Do you think she could be on Usnach?'

'There is every chance.'

Lara was astounded at this news. Her cloistered environment had kept too many things from her and she felt as if the world had just passed her by. This was no snippet of geographical detail that had eluded her – this was a complete epiphany. Her mother was waiting for her. Lara's mind reeled at the possibility of seeing her one last time. 'Would she recognise me?'

'Yes. Undoubtedly.'

'Even though I was but a child when she was killed.'

'She would recognise you Lara.'

'Will I recognise her?'

'Without question.'

'Would we able to communicate?'

'Yes, just as we do now.'

'You've been to Usnach before haven't you?'

'Yes. Once, last summer, three weeks before the Assembly of Nations. My younger sister had been rock-climbing the Skyfall. They found her body floating in Lake Erras. After the Ryugin's attack upon *The Princess Orani* I made the journey to Usnach. There were three others on the ferry out to the island – a Sessymirian woman and her

daughter, and a Sapphyrran. By coincidence, all of us had lost our loved ones on the same day.

‘You’re talking about the Morrigu’s attack on Skyfall aren’t you?’

Sumi nodded.

‘And your sister was killed by –’

Sumi nodded again. ‘So you see, I have great reason to hate Caliban Grayson. The creatures he has unleashed have stolen from me a sister and a husband.’

‘What was it like – seeing her?’

‘To be honest, at first I felt a little stupid, standing in the ruins of an old Tuirrenian fort on a frozen island, waiting for ghosts. As the hours passed, I began to lose faith and doubted the veracity of the stories about Usnach. But just before the sun set, I felt a familiar warmth spread over me, as if I had been dipped into a warm bath. I closed my eyes as the feeling covered me from head to foot, and when I opened my eyes, there was Mai, standing before me, her eyes shining in the fading light, smiling as she had done when she said goodbye to me a month before she died.

‘And you talked to her?’

‘Yes, for almost an hour. And then we both knew it was time for her to leave. It felt... natural. I still grieve for her, but I accept her passing.’

‘But why didn’t you see your husband there?’

‘I had hoped to. A small part of me dared to pretend that he had not died and that was why he was not there to say farewell, but in my heart I knew he was gone. Sometimes it takes time for certain spirits to find their way to the Empty Isle. My husband was defiant. I would imagine he would not willingly speed his way to Usnach. There were times, after his death, when I would sit in my room in the palace in Kumoku and I had a feeling that he was near, watching over me. But I haven’t felt that way for a long time now.’

‘And so you know he waits for you – on Usnach.’

‘Some day soon I will be standing on the white plains of Usnach, my husband at my side. He was torn from me, Lara. I... haven’t yet adjusted to his absence. I need to see him, speak to him, so I may start living once more.’

Then, there was no more need for words. They had arrived at a place that only hardship revealed to people. There was an intimacy between them that would never be broken, and each woman was grateful for the presence of the other. With a fire burning in the hearth, they lay down under the furs and Lara watched the dance of shadows on the ceiling.

After a few minutes, when Lara was on the verge of sleep, Sumi asked, 'And you really think I'm pretty?'

'Uh-huh,' Lara murmured as she slid into slumber.

'Freckles and all?' Sumi asked.

'Freckles and all,' Lara replied, and then she was asleep.

Sumi woke first. Lara lay fast asleep, her tail swinging back and forth contentedly as she enjoyed her sabbatical in the land of dreams. When she finally woke, Sumi had everything ready for their departure.

'Look at this. I found a storage box outside. Warm coats. Gloves. Dried fruit and nuts. Even flasks of wine. Who would have thought that the Sessymrians would be so generous?'

'Sumi you know they'd kill us if they knew we were here,' Lara said as she stretched and yawned. She slithered over to the stores Sumi had lined up by the door. 'I'm not sure I can wear a fur. I feel guilty having slept on them.'

'These coats have been woven from pullok hair. They're light but they will keep you warm.'

Lara wrapped the soft coat around her body. It felt no heavier than her blouse but she immediately felt as if she had been wrapped up in a warm blanket.

'Are you ready to go?'

'I think so. How's your neck?'

'As good as new thanks to you. How's your shoulder?'

'As good as new, thanks to me,' she grinned. 'I think I'm ready for the long trek to Nilfheim.'

It was Sumi's turn to grin. 'Oh, I don't plan on walking there.'

'What do you mean?'

'Come outside. I'll show you.'

They walked around the hut to another smaller building that lay behind it. It was a storeroom containing all manner of things, ranging from hunters' weapons to machines and tanning chemicals used to convert animal hides to leather. One object had caught Sumi's attention and she had dragged it out onto the snow in front of the storeroom.

'What is it?' Lara asked, perplexed by the strange metal construction. It resembled the carriages she had sometimes seen travelling through Coldbrook, but it was smaller and had long flat beams of wood where a carriage had wheels.

'It's a sled of sorts. The Sessymrians call it a slidoo.'

'Sumi, you're talking like a Spriggan.'

'It's a snorseless carriage. A wagon of sorts but on skis.'

'What are skis?'

'These long, thin beams underneath are called skis. This *vessel* is going to take us down the Slith.'

'Sumi, the Sessymrians will hang us when we arrive in Nilfheim on this. We're stealing.'

'Then we'll just have to make sure we don't get caught.'

'You're really not a typical princess are you!' Lara laughed as she slithered onto the seat of the slidoo. It was not designed with Moraens in mind, but it was more comfortable than sitting on a snorse.

Sumi loaded the supplies she had gathered into leather satchels fixed to the side of their strange conveyance. When Lara saw her place a long coil of rope into the bag, she groaned. 'What's with the rope? Surely, we aren't doing any more climbing?'

'You can never have enough rope,' Sumi said earnestly. 'This is good rope. I found it in the storeroom. Along with this.' She pointed down at some blocks of Blue Cold she had carefully placed alongside the sled.

'What is that?' Lara asked, her curiosity heightened by the delicate manner with which Sumi leant down and picked up each piece and placed it in a chamber in the centre of the slidoo.

'This is Blue Cold. It's highly volatile.'

'You mean it explodes?'

'Yes, it does,' she replied with a grin. 'You've never seen an explosion till you've seen this stuff go up.'

'I think the boomberry was enough for me,' Lara said nervously. 'Can I ask why we are carrying the *highly volatile* Cold on this sled?'

'It's fuel and we need all the fuel we can carry if we're going to get to Nilfheim by tomorrow morning.'

'Tomorrow? Didn't you say it was over three hundred leagues away?'

'I'd hold on if I were you.'

'Huh?'

Sumi climbed onto the slidoo and punched the black iron plate in front of her. The slidoo's engine exploded into life. A tail of flame melted the snow behind the vehicle and it shot out onto the black ice of the Slith. Lara, not fully comprehending the significance of Sumi's comment had not held on to anything and she went flying from the back of the slidoo and fell gracelessly in the snow. When she lifted her head, she saw that the slidoo was just a glowing dot almost a hundred yards

away. She watched the sled arc around and within a few seconds was back at her side. Sumi killed the engines which quickly spluttered to a halt. She looked down at Lara lying in the snow. 'What are you doing?'

Lara scowled. 'I think I burnt the tip of my tail as I fell off that thing.'

'I'm sorry. I did say to hold on,' Sumi said meekly.

Lara's frown faded. 'Well, at least we know the slidoo works.' She slid in behind Sumi and clutched her around the waist, just as she had held Edgar when she had ridden with him when they were crossing the fens of Scoriath. 'Shall we go?'

'Perhaps I should describe the route we are taking before we begin. It's not going to be easy. The first fifty leagues, we'll be hurtling through the Shears, an icy wasteland filled with icy monoliths as sharp as knives. Then we have an area called the Lattice which is at least 120 leagues long.'

'The Lattice? That sounds a lot more appealing than the Shears. What is it?'

'It's an intricate series of natural ice bridges over bottomless fissures and chasms. Some of the bridges are not much wider than the slidoo, and they are prone to collapse, so we'll have to be careful.'

Lara's face turned ashen. 'Wonderful – what's next?'

'The next section is about 150 leagues from start to finish. It is a flat, barren region called Gormhaard's Run.'

'Flat? Barren? That doesn't sound too bad.'

'Well, it's much worse than it sounds.'

'Of course. It couldn't be easy could it? That would just be too boring.'

'Gormhaard's Run is populated by huks.'

'What's a huk?'

'It's about the same size as a grizzum, only with huge tusks, sharp claws and a voracious appetite. It's quite an amazing creature really. The huk's tusks are almost longer than its body. When it is in pursuit of its prey, it tucks its hind legs up behind its ears and uses its tusks as skis. It pulls itself along with its four powerful forelegs. It can build up to phenomenal speeds.'

'As phenomenal as this sled?'

'Hard to say,' Sumi replied, placing the truth before Lara's need to have her fears allayed. 'Once the huk is on the hunt, its berserker rage is such that it can withstand an unbelievable amount of pain. I have heard of a huk that continued to attack a group of Sessymrians long after they had cut off its limbs.'

'That's incredibly reassuring Sumi. At least I now understand the *run* part of Gormhaard's Run. Who was this Gormhaard anyway?'

'He is Sessymir's greatest hunter. In his day, he was the most famous man in the land. Apparently he had bagged seven huks in one day. The beasts' tusks are prized among the Sessymirians. You can see huk ivory on the masts and prows of Sessymirian ships. It has been carved into all manner of things. Look at the scabbard of this dagger I found in the storeroom. It's been carved out of the finest huk ivory you could find. This alone is worth more than —'

'Terrific. Now they have a reason to hate us – you're wearing one of them. Don't you have enough weapons already?'

'Do you think so?' Sumi said with a wry smile.

Lara sighed. 'How are we going to get past the huks? They sound worse than marroks.'

'Apparently, the only way to stop one is to strangle it. It can't attack when it can't breathe.'

'Oh this just keeps getting better and better,' Lara moaned sarcastically. 'And we have 150 leagues of the beasts do we? This route sounds impossible.'

'It can be done. The Sessymirians have travelled upon the Slith for centuries.'

'Let's not celebrate stupidity, Sumi.'

'Lara, if we keep our wits about us, we'll get through this.'

'Whatever happened to Gormhaard anyway?'

'Oh he got killed by a huk.'

'That figures. So we've got razor sharp rocks, bottomless drops, and crazed animals. What's left?'

'Snow slugs. Sixty leagues of them. And then we've made it.'

'Snow slugs doesn't sound that bad at all. Can't we just squish them with the slidoo.'

'Well we could if they were two inches long.'

'I take it they're not two inches long.'

'No. They're a bit bigger.'

'How much bigger?'

'See the hut?'

'As big as that hut?' Lara exclaimed. The hut was at least fifty feet square.

'No. About five times bigger. There are rumours that the mother slug is much bigger still.'

'You'll stay away from the mother slug, won't you?'

'Oh you can't stay away from the slugs. They know you're coming. They can feel the vibrations through the snow.'



‘And do you have a plan for getting past the snow slugs?’

‘I thought you could cast your fireball spell.’

‘*Cast my fireball spell?* It’s not exactly that easy Sumi.’ Lara looked out across the dark ice of the Slith. It looked like a scar upon the landscape. In light of all Sumi had just said, it seemed appropriate that the glacier looked so unwelcoming. She imagined all the horrors that lay between them and Nilfheim. She didn’t know which of them she feared the most. ‘Tell me, how do the Sessymrians that don’t have a Pryderi witch on board get past the slugs?’

‘With these.’ She pointed down at two harpoon cannons mounted towards the front of the slidoo.’ As intimidating as they were, they did not fill Lara with confidence.

Sumi pointed at the thickening clouds above. ‘We best be off before we get caught in a blizzard. Hold on.’

This time, Lara held on with all her strength. Now Sumi had outlined all the things that could kill them on the trip, the last thing she wanted to do was to die by falling off the slidoo.

The journey through the Shears was more horrifying than Lara had imagined it, but they had survived. As each sharp-edged block of ice whizzed past, Lara learnt that it was better to close her eyes and put her faith in Sumi’s ability to weave through the maze of projections.

Closing her eyes spared her the harrowing view that Sumi had of the forest of fifty for ice shards. In many places these were clumped so close that the slidoo threaded them with only inches to spare.

After fifty leagues of twisting, braking and sliding Lara thought she was going to be sick, but she managed to stifle her nausea by trying to remember the names of all the flowers that grew in the Bregon Woods. When she ran out of flowers, she moved onto birds and then to beetles. When she had exhausted all the flora and fauna she knew, Lara resorted to remembering her favourite songs but was asked to stop by her companion who was finding it hard to concentrate with Lara’s nervous humming in her ear.

As frightening as their passage through the Shears was, it simply didn’t compare to the terrors of the Lattice. Sumi wasn’t joking when she mentioned how thin some of the ice bridges were. Whenever Lara chanced to look down, she did not see snow and ice rushing by – only darkness filled her view as the yawning chasm of the Lattice reached out to embrace her.

The cracking sounds of the bridges made Lara feel as if the ice would break at any given time. She wondered how long they would fall

until they hit the bottom. As far as she could see, the chasm of the Lattice had no bottom.

It amazed Lara that Sumi could actually navigate the countless bridges. Her companion's steely determination provided Lara with a glimmer of hope that they would survive, but each time the slidoo sped onto a bridge, a crushing sense of mortality weighed down on the witch.

This feeling of dread was at its worst when she realised that night was approaching.

'Sumi, shouldn't we be out of the Lattice by now?' she called into her companion's ear above the cold air rushing by. 'You said we'd be in Nilfheim by morning but were not even halfway yet.'

Sumi nodded. 'The first stretch is the slowest part. We should make up a lot of time when we're out on Gormhaard's Run, but...'

'But? There's a *but*?'

'But I hoped to be out of this section by nightfall. If we're still here in the darkness, we're dead.'

'Sumi, it's getting dark now!'

Lara was right. Night fell quickly out on the Slith and the light that surrounded them was quickly fading.

'We should have reached the end of the Lattice by now,' Sumi muttered just loud enough for Lara to hear. 'Unless...'

'Unless what?'

'Unless I made a wrong turn.'

'You can't have made a wrong turn! Do you think you made a wrong turn?'

'We should be through it by now.'

They climbed to the top of a wide bridge and Sumi brought the slidoo to a complete halt. Lara leant over her companion's shoulder to see why they had stopped and the view before her told her everything she needed to know. A massive gulf yawned in front of them. The far end of the bridge they were on connected to a column of ice that was completely surrounded by the abyss. Another bridge ran out from the column to a dark grey expanse of snow and ice that stretched out to the misty horizon – it was Gormhaard's Run.

Lara felt an unsettling mix of joy and despair bubble up inside her. After hours and hours of precipitous drops, it was a rapturous feeling to behold flat land, but it sickened her to see what lay between them and the relative security of Gormhaard's Run. The last bridge, the one that connected the ice column to the land on the far side of the abyss, seemed little more than a thread of ice. It was at least five hundred yards across and did not look wide enough to carry the slidoo.

‘You’re not planning to cross that are you?’ Lara said horrified by the thought of speeding across the fragile looking bridge.

‘I don’t believe we have a choice,’ Sumi replied. ‘It’s getting too dark to go back and find another way across.’

‘Can’t we just stay here until morning? Perhaps we will be able to find another way tomorrow.’

‘It’s too risky. There’s no protection should a blizzard come in. You’d freeze to death long before morning.’

‘So what do we do?’

‘We have to cross that bridge.’

‘Can you do it slowly? It doesn’t look very wide.’

Sumi stared at the span trying to get a sense of its structure. After a long, heavy pause she said, ‘The only way we’ll get across that bridge is to go as fast as we can. It’s not the width that bothers me. I can keep the slidoo straight.’

‘So what bothers you?’ Lara said, her voice distorted by the sense of doom that had enveloped her.

‘I don’t think it’s strong enough to support us.’

‘Could we walk across it?’

‘We could try but the winds blowing around the abyss would probably wipe us from the bridge.’

Lara gripped Sumi hard. ‘Then let’s just do it! If we keep talking like this, I think I’ll die of fear. Let’s be done with this!’

It was all the encouragement Sumi needed. She punched the iron plate in front of her and the slidoo’s engines roared like an angry beast woken from a deep sleep. Sumi jammed down on the gears by her feet and the slidoo shot forward. They hurtled down the bridge they were on, gathering speed at an incredible rate. By the time they slid onto the ice column, they were moving faster than they had travelled all day. It only took a second to cross the top of the column and then they were shooting their way up the thin bridge that spanned the last chasm they had to cross.

Lara dared to look down and her heart almost stopped when she discovered that she could not see any ice below her. The bridge wasn’t even an inch wider than the slidoo. Sumi’s margin for error was non-existent. As they reached the top of the span, a mind-numbing cracking sound filled their ears – the bridge was weakening.

‘We’re too heavy!’ Sumi hollered to Lara. ‘If you know a spell they can save us, now’s the time to cast it!’

Lara’s face dropped. There was no magick that would save them. She closed her eyes and waited for the fall.

Sumi pushed down one of the gears by her side and the slidoo groaned as its engines were pushed to their limits. The entire bridge was

shuddering. The terrible cracking sounds became deafening as massive sections of the bridge dropped into the dark abyss below. Lara could feel the ice beneath the slidoo shifting but Sumi kept the vehicle steady as it slid down the last part of the bridge. It picked up speed on the downward slope and – miraculously – it was enough. They shot out onto Gormhaard's Run as the last bridge of the Lattice disappeared behind them.

Night wrapped around Sumi and Lara before they had a chance to catch their breath. A brilliant starscape shone above the dark, flat plain of ice before them. Aldra had not yet risen, so the stars had no rival in the heavens to detract from their magnificence. Out here in the crisp air above the Slith, the sky above achieved a breathtaking clarity. The stars made mockery of any jewels the world below could provide.

As they sped across the ice, Lara leaned back and gazed at the shining orbs. The stars were the same stars that shone over the Grove back in Morae but out here on the freezing plains of Sessymir they were larger and more beautiful. Unexpectedly, Lara thought of little Birren, captive in a darkness where the stars never glowed. Her heart ached, and the pain of her thoughts was such that she let out a small groan.

Hearing the mournful sigh, Sumi slowed the slidoo and swivelled around to see Lara frantically pulling at her pullock-hair cloak and tearing at the laces of her tunic. Her hands pulled the cloth back to reveal a radiant blue light emanating from the centre of her chest.

In the soft blue light, Sumi's brow furrowed, trying to comprehend what it must be like for Lara, to have the gnawing uncertainty of her child's future eating at every hour of every day. Birren was still alive, but still far, far away. 'We'll get her back, Lara. On my life, we'll get her back.'

Lara looked up but Sumi had turned back to the front and was pushing a lever down to return the slidoo to its maximum speed. The engine behind them growled responsively and the sled lunged out into the empty, dark-blue plain.

After a few hours, the icy ground below started changing, softening and the slidoo started slowing down. Sumi kept looking down at the skis and muttering to herself. Lara scanned the land around nervously, but there was no sign of the fearsome huks Sumi had told her about.

'What's wrong?' she yelled into Sumi's left ear. 'Why are we slowing down?'

Sumi tilted her head around so Lara could hear her above the billowy, cold air pounding upon them as they raced across the expanse. 'It has snowed here recently.' She paused. 'The wind has shifted. It's moved into a southerly.'

'Thank-you for the weather report, Sumi, but it doesn't answer my question,' Lara grunted indignantly.

Sumi, who was now accustomed to Lara's occasional ventures into sarcasm, just pointed to the ground below. 'We have been travelling over flat ice for the past eighty leagues. Now we're on fresh snow. The slidoo is carving through the snow rather than skating over the top of it.'

'How slow are we going?'

Sumi inferred Lara's meaning immediately. 'Too slow. The huks would catch us easily.'

Lara glared at the snow on the ground and for the second time in a minute scanned the starlit plain around them for huks. 'But maybe the snow thins out ahead,' she said trying to wish the idea into reality. She looked to the north where the stars had vanished, hidden behind thick, pregnant clouds. 'Actually, I don't think it's going to get any better,' she said despondently.

A sudden gust of wind brought with it a thick flurry of snow and this was the precursor to a snowstorm that enveloped them in seconds. 'I have to agree,' Sumi remarked. 'It's not getting any better.'

Lara gritted her teeth and in a show of unrestrained frustration, hammered her fists upon her temples, moaning, 'Why can't it be easy for a change? Why? Why?'

The slidoo pulled on through the storm. Sumi occasionally tapped the glass of the compass she had taken from Tagtug's neck before they buried him at sea. Lara could sense something was wrong and leaned over Sumi's shoulder to find out what was to be added to the litany of woes that beset them.

'The compass keeps losing its bearings,' Sumi shouted over the gale. 'I've heard such things happen this far north. We can no longer use it.'

'Is that bad?'

'In weather like this, it means we're lost.'

'Lost! Please tell me you're joking!' Lara screamed furiously. 'How long have we been lost?'

'For about two minutes!' Sumi screamed back, her voice tinged with tension. She was trying to control the slidoo, navigate a way north and develop a plan for avoiding the huks, whilst keeping Lara's anxieties under control. It was proving to be a challenge even for her.

The snow was coming in almost horizontally, stinging their faces. Everything was dull grey as the blizzard closed its hands upon them. Morning was still some way off.

'Don't move!' Sumi whispered harshly as she brought the slidoo to a stop.

'Why are we stopping?'

'Shhh!' Sumi hissed as she stepped down from the slidoo. She pulled her bola from her waist and with a subtle flick of the wrist started spinning it above her head. The thin sound of the weapon slicing through the air grew louder as she spun the bola faster and faster.

Lara peered out into the swirling darkness but could see nothing.

The whining sound of the bola continued.

Lara whispered harshly, 'What are you doing Sumi? You're going to get us killed.'

Sumi ignored her. The *thwip thwip* sound of the bola suddenly cut away as Sumi released it. Lara spun around following the sound to see what she assumed to be a huk being throttled as the line of the bola wrapped itself around its neck. Gurgling sounds broke from its shattered windpipe as the creature clawed in vain to remove the band of steel cord from its neck. After a frenzy of snatching and scraping it stopped moving and slumped against its massive tusks with the bola still wound tightly around its neck.

Lara was aghast. 'How did you know it was there?'

'It has been following us for at least three hours. That was when the wind shifted and I caught its scent.'

'*Three hours!*' Lara cried. 'And you didn't tell me?'

'I didn't want to worry you.'

'Oh, I'm worried Sumi! The huk – it's dead now, isn't it?'

With a sai in each hand, Sumi slowly approached the creature. The huk was motionless. No trace of breathing was evident. Lara was sure the creature's neck would have been broken by bola coiled around its throat but Sumi knew it was best to assume nothing.

Then she did something so violent and unexpected that Lara yelped in shock – she plunged her sai into the creature's chest. The huk bucked and twisted about, throwing its claws around wildly but Sumi had been ready for the reaction. She jumped back, pulling out the blades as she did so. Gouts of blood shot out, splattering all over Sumi's face. The huk slumped back into the snow in a bloodied heap and was still.

'Well,' said Lara, 'I guess it pays to be careful out here. I'm glad you didn't nudge it with your foot.'

Sumi wiped her blades on a clean patch of fur. She turned to scan the horizon, watchful of other huks that had picked up their scent.

‘Shouldn’t we be going?’ Lara suggested, her nerves frayed by the incident.

Suddenly, the huk burst from the ground and sprung at Sumi, its four claws extended. Taken by surprise, Sumi spun around to find her vision filled with claws and fangs. Lara thrust out a hand and cast a spell that sent Sumi flying out of the huk’s way. The beast fell to the snow with its claws outstretched. It was dead. It had summoned up its last remaining energy in a desperate act of spite, trying to kill Sumi before its life had completely faded away.

Both women were stunned – Sumi by the huk’s desperate attack and Lara by her ability to cast magick so quickly: ‘My powers are increasing. It’s a simple enough spell, to move an object a few feet, but I’ve never been able to do it so instinctively.’

‘You saved my life.’

‘Again,’ Lara corrected.

‘You saved my life *again*.’

Lara thought she could detect some admiration in Sumi’s eyes. It was a strange feeling – to be admired – but she liked it.

‘Marroks, huks, Ghul...’ Sumi unwound the bola from the huk’s neck. ‘You’re becoming quite the fighter, Lara Brand.’

Lara nodded. ‘I am, aren’t I!’ she agreed in a playfully smug way.

Sumi rolled over the body of the huk and shoved her sai into the creature’s neck.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Lara apprehensively. ‘It’s dead, isn’t it?’

‘Yes it is. Now it’s my turn to save our lives.’

Lara’s brow wrinkled in confusion but she decided not to say anything. She wrapped her long white cloak around her and watched as Sumi spent the next hour hacking away at the body of the huk. She stripped the hide from the creature’s back and cut the skin in two. The flesh under the hide was quickly chopped into fist-sized chunks and laid aside on the snow. Sumi then removed the skull and spine, extracting the brain and placing it to one side. After much hacking and sawing in the mouth of the beast, Sumi managed to remove the tusks. They were at least two metres long each and incredibly heavy to lift. She then delved into the deepest parts of the body, removing the huk’s two hearts and spleen.

After all this surgery had finished, Sumi looked up at Lara and then to the sky. Morning was still hours away but the Myr’s triplet moons shone down on Sessymir, lighting up the snow and ice in a ghostly blue

light. They had been so absorbed in the bloody deconstruction of the huk's body they had failed to notice that the snowstorm had passed. The monochromatic expanse of the Slith stretched out to the horizon. But it was not empty.

Fast-moving, hulking shapes could be seen sprinting across the landscape. There were at least twenty such shapes and they came at the pair from all sides.

'Huks!' Lara cried, but Sumi seemed unperturbed. 'They were always going to come. Gormhaard's Run is full of them,' she said calmly. Lara, by contrast, was a portrait of repressed terror. The nearest huks were only 500 yards away and closing fast, skiing across the fresh snow on their huge tusks.

'Sumi,' Lara said not taking her eyes off the fearsome predators bearing down upon them. 'They're very close now!'

Sumi threw one of the hearts up to Lara, who screamed as soon as she touched it. 'It's still beating!' she cried as she dropped it to the ground.

Sumi shook her head. 'That will stop. Apparently, they can continue to beat an hour after being ripped out of the torso of the beast.' She smiled wryly. 'I told you it was a tenacious creature.'

'So are they!' Lara nodded at the approaching beasts.

These huks were much bigger than the one they had just encountered. Their tusks alone were almost as long as the slidoo.

Sumi remained unfazed by the beasts' rapid approach. She held the heart above her head and squeezed it. Blood seeped out of five separate chambers, pouring over her head and down her arm.

'That is revolting,' Lara remonstrated.

Sumi shrugged. 'If you don't want to be eaten, you'll do the same. The huks hunt and attack by scent alone. The blood will confuse them and they'll leave us alone.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'It's an old Sessymirian trick. We're lucky that first huk attacked us when it did.'

'Of course we were,' sneered Lara. 'Really lucky.' She held the heart above her head and cringed as her fingers pushed into the spongy organ. 'Ewww!' she groaned as a small spurt of blood dribbled down her forearm.

'You'll have to squeeze a lot harder than that if you want to avoid being dinner,' Sumi taunted, gesturing towards the encroaching beasts with the hand that wasn't drizzling the huk's blood over her body.



The huks would be upon the pair within seconds. Lara closed her eyes, and clamped down hard on the heart. It exploded with a *pop*, and warm, thick blood gushed out over her. She felt as if she had been dipped in syrup. When she opened her eyes, she found she was surrounded by a large pack of huks, all sniffing the air, wondering stupidly where their prey had gone.

Sumi was on the ground fussing over the remains of the dead huk, unconcerned about the presence of so many ferocious animals only feet away. For Lara, the sound of the huks grunting as they tried to make sense of the situation was almost as unnerving as their vicious approach. Sumi had her knife out and she was carving away at the dead creature's capacious skull. She looked up at Lara, grinning. 'Their skulls make terrific pots. Let's eat.'

Sumi put the flesh she had stripped from the huk into the skull and placed it on a lump of Cold she had removed from the slidoo. She took some kindling from one of the leather pouches on the side of the slidoo and assembled it around the skull. Moments later a small fire rose up from the wood and the distinctive smell of meat frying rose up into the cold night air.

As the meat sizzled in the bony pot, Lara slowly spun around, her eyes apprehensively darting from one huk to the other, but the beasts had no interest in the immediate area, and gradually shuffled off on their tusks for less confusing places. She was amazed that they hadn't attacked. Even though the smell of burning flesh saturated the air, the huks continued to move away, their small brains being unable to associate the smell with anything they could attack, kill and eat.

The aroma of the sizzling meat crept up Lara's nasal passages and rested comfortably in her brain. She could not remember experiencing such a sweet, intoxicating smell. So overwhelmed was she that she completely forgot about the huks.

'Smells nice, doesn't it,' Sumi stated with a slight garnish of pride in her voice.

'Nice?' Lara exclaimed ridiculing Sumi's understatement. 'I think I have to lie down! How could something so mean and ugly smell so wonderful?' She was salivating as she watched the meat sizzling inside the capacious pot provided by the huk's head.

Whilst the meat was cooking, with a tremendous display of strength, Sumi heaved the slidoo over so that its underside was accessible. She then went to the dead huk and rummaged around in its body. She pulled hard and one of the huk's internal organs tore away in her hands.

‘What in the Myr is *that*?’ Lara exclaimed, quite revolted by the amorphous dark-red shape wobbling in Sumi’s small hands.

‘It’s a spleen?’ Sumi replied prosaically.

‘And why is it in your hands instead of lying inside that beast’s carcass? Please tell me we’re not going to eat that too!’

‘Eat the spleen! Are you mad?’ Sumi laughed as she made her way back to the upturned slidoo. ‘No, this is good for something else.’ Sumi held the organ up against one of the sled’s rails and squeezed with all her might. A viscous, yellow liquid oozed out through a ventricle at one end of the spleen. Sumi wiped this substance over the rail making sure that every inch was covered. She repeated the process for the bottom rail oblivious to Lara’s curious gaze.

‘And why you did that?’

‘To make us go faster. At these temperatures, the slidoo’s rails are sticking to the snow and ice, slowing us down. This secretion from huk’s spleen will form a resin that is so smooth and hard, nothing will stick to it.’

‘Well, that’s all very interesting, Sumi, but can we eat now?’ The aroma coming from the unique cooking pot was swirling around Lara’s head, taunting her, making promises to her tongue and stomach that seemed impossible to keep.

‘Here – enjoy!’ Sumi said playfully, flicking a morsel up into the air close enough for Lara to grab. In a single motion, her hand darted out, seized the meat and tossed it into her mouth. It took a moment for the riches of the flesh to be fully appreciated by her taste-buds, but once her brain understood the complex layers of flavour contained in the greasy sliver of huk meat, she did have to sit down.

‘Sumi,’ Lara gasped, ‘I can’t believe how magnificent this.’

The witch’s head was swimming. She watched Sumi put her knife down and wipe her hands on her breeches. She reached behind her and picked up a carafe of wine which she poured into two brass goblets that lay next to her on an ornate red rug. The sun appeared in the starry sky above and shone down upon them. The snow around them melted revealing a meadow of flowerfall that stretched on forever.

Sumi stood up and stretched, spreading her beautiful black wings as she did so.

‘I didn’t know you could fly!’ Lara said with great surprise. ‘Is there anything you can’t do?’

‘I can’t fly Lara.’

But she could. Lara was overjoyed when Sumi stepped across the lush rug and held out her hand in an invitation to join her.

They soared up into the starry, blue sky above. The dark ice of the Slith fell away. To the west she could see the Oshalla Ocean, its whitecaps shining in the brilliant sunlight. In the distance, she could make out a shining, golden object. As the object grew closer, Lara could see it was a man in brilliant golden armour, riding an armoured steed across the winds. He wore a rich, red cloak which streamed out from his broad body like a banner.

Next to him stood another man. His long, dark hair fell down across his powerful shoulders. He wore an ornate silk robe. On his left forearm curled a golden armband encrusted with expensive jewels.

‘Is that –’

‘My husband!’ Sumi cried joyously as she clasped her arms around his neck. A great ship rose up through the clouds to Lara’s left. Trojanu took his wife by the hand and led her up the gangplank that was being extended.

Lara’s hand was still outstretched in a gesture of farewell when the ship melded into the sun. The Moraen turned around to see the man in the gold armour waiting for her.

‘Edgar!’ she exclaimed. ‘But you –’

‘Died. Only for a little while, Miss Brand. I’m here to escort you.’

‘Where?’

‘Why, to your daughter, of course.’

Birren.

She wrapped her arms around Edgar’s torso and nuzzled her face into his cape. He still smelt clean.

When she lifted her head she found she was on a flying steed, like the ones in the stories her mother had told long ago. Edgar sat in front of her, guiding their mount through the deep blue skies. Beneath them the globe of the world wheeled by. To the south she could see a distant coastline. A peninsula came into view where a great city, larger than any she had seen before, stood proudly. Lara could make out expansive spaces filled with fountains around which the city’s people gathered. Edgar swung his head over his armour-plated shoulder and smiled. Over the noise of the rushing wind, he yelled, ‘That’s my home!’ and Lara smiled, touched that he had shared this moment with her.

They flew over the city’s walls and out into a great meadow filled with flowerfall. Here and there Lara could see veganistones in bloom. On the far side of the meadow, Lara could see trees swaying in the sunlight and as they approached, the trees bowed reverently. Edgar swung his head around as they passed the leafy boughs and stretched out a hand. As if in response, the branches of the largest trees touched his

face tenderly. A single leaf swirled in the wind before her and for some reason, it made her feel sad.

Edgar swung around in the saddle. 'I have something for you.'

'A present?'

'Yes, I found it and thought of you. I hope you like it.' He reached into the folds of his cloak and pulled out a large, rectangular gift. It was wrapped in paper the same colour as the knight's cloak and the ribbon glistened like his armour.

Lara pulled the ribbon and the paper fell away. A thick, old book lay in her hands. The leather was all cracked and frayed. Along the spine ancient runes glowed. 'It's the *Incanto*, isn't it?'

'Yes. I thought it would come in handy.'

A swirling vortex of water came into view. Lara could hear it moaning, its black maw growing wider and wider as they approached. She became nervous. Her hands trembled and the book slid from her grasp and fell into the blackness.

A look of dismay crossed Edgar's face, but Lara shook her head, dismissing his concern. 'It's okay. I don't need the book anyway.'

'You've changed.'

'I had to.'

Edgar pointed at the vortex. 'You're still going there? Into the Endless?'

'My daughter waits for me.'

'Then let me assist you, Miss Brand.'

They dived headlong into the whirlpool. The sound of the water crushing about them was deafening. They were enveloped in darkness then a shining ball of light appeared in Lara's hand illuminating a massive cavern. On the far side of the cavern stood a man leaning on a staff. He was bent over like the beggars she had sometimes seen in Coldbrook. Every time he moved, skin would fall from him in large, bloodless chunks.

The man was holding something wrapped in old rags. His gnarled hand pulled back the cloth revealing a beautiful Moraen child. It was Birren.

An incantation breathed its way through Lara's lips. A great white light erupted from her hands tearing the man's head clean from his shoulders. His headless body dropped to its knees and Edgar rushed in and caught Birren before she hit the rocky ground.

'My lady, I believe this is yours.' He handed her the bundle of rags and her heart leapt as she felt her little girl's arms wrap around her neck.

'Lara?'

The voice was not Edgar's. It was Sumi's.

‘Lara? Can you hear me?’

‘Sumi? What are you doing here? You should be with Trojanu.’

At the sound of her dead husband’s name, Sumi’s face darkened, but only for a second and she guessed what had happened to her companion. ‘Lara, do you know where you are?’

Lara gazed around her. She was surrounded by snow. ‘I’m back in Sessymir?’

‘The huk meat can have certain side effects. It usually gives me strange dreams but I have heard that some races use it as an hallucinogenic agent.’

‘A what?’

‘You’ve been hallucinating. Seeing things that aren’t real. It seems to have had a particularly potent effect upon you. It must be your Pryderi physiology.’

‘You mean I didn’t rescue Birren at all?’

‘No, not yet.’

The weight of her sudden understanding was almost unbearable. Birren seemed further away than ever. The dream state she had fallen into had seemed so real that she now felt as if her daughter had been stolen from her a second time. She was crushed with disappointment and wept bitterly. Although her journey with Edgar on the flying snorse appeared ridiculous in the cold light of day, the hallucination had been so intense, so palpable, that Lara struggled to see it as anything other than a memory. The smell of the knight’s armour, the feeling of the wind racing through her hair, the sound of the Worldpool’s torrent, the overwhelming sense of joy at seeing Sumi reacquainted with her husband...

Sumi made her way back to the slidoo where she made final preparations for their continued traversal of the Slith, allowing Lara the time and space she needed to synthesise what had just occurred. Overhead the sun tried vainly to pierce the deep grey clouds.

‘How long have I been out?’

Sumi looked up over the engine of the slidoo. It looked as if Lara had aged ten years. Her face was gaunt and her tears had carved pale tracks through the dried huk blood on her face. Her body was stooped as if all its energy had been taken.

‘At least six hours. It is close to midday,’ Sumi replied.

‘Six hours!’ Lara cried incredulously.

‘I could not pull you out of the trance you had fallen into. You were smiling throughout it and did not seem to be in any pain, so I just kept myself busy whilst you lay in a happy state on the snow.’

She had been busy. Lara could see that. Fearful of Lara's exposure to the merciless weather of the Slith, Sumi had stripped the huk of its skins and placed one pelt on the ground onto which she had rolled the hallucinating Moraen. The other pelt she had thrown over Lara, keeping her warmer than she had been in weeks. Sumi was still wearing her own clothes, but had fashioned boots for herself from the huk's skin.

'I see you have new boots,' Lara observed.

'Whilst you were out I noticed my old boots had holes in them. Making a new pair helped me pass the time.'

Lara smiled weakly, trying to return to a relatively normal state. 'It's a good thing then you can't feel the cold.'

For a brief second Sumi's brow furrowed into a strange display of concern, but then it was gone, and she happily returned the smile. 'We'll be in Nilfheim tonight. We'll need to change clothes lest we draw attention to ourselves.'

Lara looked down at her blood-soaked pullock coat. It wasn't exactly the sort of thing the people of Nilfheim would fail to notice. For that matter, nor was the long, green tail that stuck out the bottom of it. 'I see what you mean.'

'These furs will be useful for our passage through Nilfheim.' Sumi cut a slit in each of the huk blankets she had made and through the slit of one of these she thrust her head. She then took a strip of sinew she had taken from the beast and tied it around her waist. She placed another piece of skin over her head to form a crude cowl. Standing with her hands on her hips in a proud stance, she laughed loudly. 'Do I look like a Sessymirian?'

'Not quite as ugly, but you'll pass.' Lara pulled the other pelt over her head. Her fur was much longer than Sumi's and it was almost enough to hide her serpentine tail from any casual glances.

Sumi hit the engines and the slidoo shot off. Lara screamed – within a few seconds the sled achieved speeds the Moraen thought impossible. The world became a grey blur as the craft rocketed over the snowy plain. As monotonous as the view was, Lara could see it was changing. The dark ice under the sled remained the same but the landscape on either side of the glacier grew more rugged. The mountains lining the Slith grew increasingly steeper and more angular.

Lara could feel her skin being pushed back against her skull and she thought her eyes would pop out. At first she couldn't understand how the slidoo could be so much faster than it had been before but then she remembered the spleen Sumi had vented over the sled's rails. 'Are you

sure you can drive this thing?’ she shouted into Sumi’s ear but her companion was too focussed upon piloting the sled to give an answer.

Lara imagined what Nilfheim would be like. She pictured a tavern where she could curl up in a shadowy corner and sip on ale as she listened to the robust voices of the miners discussing the day’s events. She thought of a steaming bowl of poddoo soup being placed on her table with a loaf of bread that had been taken straight out of the oven. She moved deeper and deeper into the appealing daydream. When catastrophe struck, it took her a few seconds to refocus. By that time it was too late.

‘Snow slug!’ Sumi screamed, pointing up at the colossal white worm that had reared up from beneath the snow not more than 100 yards in front of them.

And as the slug crashed down on the slidoo, Lara simply thought how unfair and ignominious it was – after so many death-defying acts of bravery – to die under the body of a slug.

## Chapter Five Nuadu, Tamu Plains

The landscape of the savannah was magnificent in its simplicity. There were no trees, bushes or even hills to be seen. The only thing that grew on the wide, flat plains was the six foot high savannah grass that rippled as gentle zephyrs ran across the warm land.

A league from where the steep slopes of the Mahatmahog Mountains met the tall, tan grasses of the plains, a village could be seen. This was Sela's home, Nuadu, which in the old tongue of the plains meant *walking place*. The village was entirely built on stilts carved from timbers brought in from forests to the south-east. The buildings that sat on the broad platforms the stilts supported had been woven from the tan grasses, but so intricate and sound was their construction that they outlasted many buildings built with more conventional materials.

The most remarkable aspect to the village was the fact that the stilts upon which the collection of platforms rested were not fixed into the ground. Through a complicated system of cogs, levers and weights, the stilts could be manipulated so that the village could actually be walked across the plains. In the centre of each platform lay a steering tower where a Tamuan would stand and operate the mechanism that moved the stilts.

There was a good reason why the village had this form of mobility. The savannah was a dangerous place and it was perilous for Tamuans to venture far from the village in a search for food, water or any of the other resources their society required.

Death roamed the savannah in the form of shakku, the fifteen foot long predators of the plains. The shakku were shaped like a fish, but instead of swimming through water, they roamed the grassy sea that covered Tamu. The savannah grass was so thick that the shakku could swim through it by swishing its powerful tail from side to side. The creature had a high dorsal fin that it could raise or lower depending on its need for speed or stealth. The front of a shakku resembled the head of a mallet. Cold, grey eyes were situated at either end of the wide, rectangular head giving the savage beast 360° of vision. In between these eyes the shakku's mouth resembled a cluttered knife drawer. Its acute teeth stuck out at all angles, ready to tear apart the flesh of its prey. Although the shakku's golden skin effectively camouflaged it in the sun-soaked grasses it roamed, when in a heightened emotional state, the shakku's pigmentation altered, shifting to hues of orange and red. This bold display meant little to the shakku's victims who were usually only



made aware of the beast's presence at the moment its jaws wrapped around their flesh.

The shakku were cunning, often hunting in packs. These coordinated attacks were as sophisticated as they were savage. Occasionally, the beasts attacked the village, battering the thick stilts with their heads.

This was not to say the Tamuans were defenceless against these fearsome predators, but the nature of their defence was considered by many to be almost as brutal as the attacks they were meant to stop. The Tamuans learnt long ago that a shakku would not eat flesh that was already bleeding. They would not even eat another shakku's kill. This led to the defensive tactic the Tamuans knew as *the bleeding*. In the event of shakku attack, bells would be sounded across the platforms as a signal to commence the bleeding. No-one was exempt, not even children.

Sela landed on a ledge twenty feet below and without hesitation jumped from it to another below it. Her descent down the mountain seemed suicidal, but killing herself was the last thing on her mind. Her every thought was bent towards getting home as quickly as possible. Despite the gathering darkness, she pushed on down the slope, leaving behind the more secure path for a route that was more direct. All Sela's vertigo vanished as she ran, rolled and fell down the mountain's slopes. Jehenna managed to keep up, but Bormanus and Lilith soon fell behind.

Sela was cut and bruised but somehow she had survived her headlong sprint down the mountain. The sound of bells could still be heard across the savannah when the morning sun touched the plain. The tintinnabulation was beautiful. It would have brought a smile to Jehenna's face had she not been so perplexed by Sela's manic behaviour. The Tamuan ran as fast as the thick grasses would permit, with no concern for her own safety. She knew the shakku were near – the bells told her as much – but she ran on ignoring the danger. If they were alerted to her presence, they would come down on her like rain.

Though the grasses were much taller than she was, Sela could see her home through the thick yellow stalks. Something was definitely wrong. The southern corner of the raised town was bizarrely tilted towards the ground. One of the pylons that supported the massive village had been brought down, its splintered remains revealing that it had been chewed through by shakku. When Sela and Jehenna arrived, the crazed beasts were tearing at two pylons on the far side of the town.

The frenzied attack upon the structure granted Sela and Jehenna the opportunity to approach the village without being attacked. Sela clambered up onto the platform which sloped away from her like a great wooden hill. Closely followed by Jehenna, Sela made her way to the centre of the village where she stood surrounded by her kin and kind.

The village was one of the sorriest sights Jehenna had even seen. A number of Tamuan men, also masked like Sela, stood with bloody knives in the centre of the lop-sided town square. These men were dripping with blood, but not from any wounds the shakku had made. They had subjected themselves to the bleeding. Deep incisions had been made to their chest, arms and legs. At their feet, a line of children sat cowering underneath the dripping knives their fathers held. Behind their masks, the children's eyes were wide with fear. It was clear to Jehenna it was not the shakku that had instilled this fear – it was the practice of the bleeding. None of the children showed any signs of having been cut at that point, but the continual ringing of the bells suggested it would not be long before they were subjected to the most disturbing acts of protection seen in the Myr.

To the side of the square lay a number of corpses. Though Jehenna could not tell from the condition of the bodies, they were all women who had tried to fend off the first assault of the shakku. The defence of Nuadu fell to the women of the tribe who were the warriors and hunters of the small community.

Sela's eyes frantically searched the gathering for her husband. 'Where is Tomu?' she cried. 'Where is my husband?'

'I am here,' came a deep, sad voice from behind. Sela spun around to find her deepest fears had been realised. Her husband stood on the village square cradling a small, dark body in his arms. The masked child was still except for the slight rise and fall of his body. His limbs were caked in dry blood and the tunic covering his torso was also stained red.

'Oh Tomu, did you...?' The pain in Sela's voice made Jehenna shiver.

'I'm sorry Sela,' Tomu replied, his voice similarly wrenched by pain. 'I did as I was required. Seba had to go first.'

Sela ripped Seba from her husband's arms. She clutched her son's bloody body in against her chest so tightly, he gave a little yelp. She looked around for the women of the tribe. There were none to be seen in the square. 'Tomu, where is Kaniya? Mosi? Abeni and Monifa?'

Her husband shook his head. 'All dead. There are no women left.'

Sela staggered back. Her friends, her sisters, her mother – dead. Every nightmare she had ever had coalesced into one. Her head swirled and if it were not for Jehenna's firm hand upon her elbow, she would have fallen to the floor.

'Sela, your son needs attention,' said a kindly old voice to her left. She turned to find Lilith's aged face crinkled in an expression of concern and sorrow. Beside her stood Bormanus, his expression unreadable. Despite the fact, he had just run across the savannah with Lilith in his arms, he looked as fresh as ever. Jehenna raised an eyebrow, surprised that the two of them had arrived at Nuadu so soon after she and Sela had.

'Let me tend to this child,' Lilith said gently.

Sela tilted her head quizzically. 'Do you have the power to heal him?'

'No. I was never in possession of such a gift. It does not matter anyway – I fear my magick has left me now. I am just an old woman who wants to help you.'

Lilith placed a withered hand upon Seba's forehead. Despite the savage cuts across his body, he smiled when she touched him. It was all the encouragement Sela needed to hand him over to her. She stood frozen to the spot as she watched Lilith disappear into a nearby hut to treat her child, followed by the broken figure of her husband.

Jehenna looked down at her companion. She looked so small and helpless. 'I'm so sorry,' the Acoran said with great sincerity. 'I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am.'

Sela nodded ever so slightly. 'It was not his fault,' she said, her voice little more than a whisper. 'He had to do it. He had no choice.'

Jehenna looked over at the other men of the tribe, standing above their own children with knives drawn. 'What will happen to them?'

'They must follow Tomu's example.'

'Why have they... why did... why did your child go first?' She struggled to articulate her question. The bloody act of cutting children was so abhorrent to her, she found it difficult to discuss.

'There is an order they must follow.'

'An order?'

'Yes – for the bleeding. The children of the village leaders must be bled first. You of all people Jehenna must know the sacrifices of leadership.'

Jehenna twisted around and to see one of the Tamuan men trying to lead his daughter to a small dais that was drenched in blood. The Acoran leapt forward and tore the child from his grasp. 'Stay your hand!' she commanded.

A collective gasp went around the tribe followed by angered whispers that only ceased when Sela raised her hand. A moment later, all was silent. Sela stepped in front of Jehenna and spoke to her people. 'You must forgive the Acoran for her actions. It is the way of her people to assume their ways are correct.'

Jehenna moved to speak but stopped herself before the thoughts that ran through her mind were given form.

Sela decided she would intervene. 'My people! I ask you give us a moment to appraise the situation before continuing with the bleeding,' It was a bold request and it would have been disputed had someone else made it. But Sela Noye was the Consul of Tamu. Her words carried weight.

The men sheathed their knives as Sela led Jehenna away from the village square.

They were surrounded. Jehenna looked out into the grass sea and saw little more than the gnashing of teeth. Countless shakku chomped furiously at the remaining wooden pylons. Clouds of splinters flew out across the savannah as the ferocious creatures single-mindedly set about bringing the village of Nuadu to the ground.

Sela looked over the railing lining one corner of the village. Below her the shakku had almost bitten through half the pylon. 'Jehenna,' she called to her companion further down the railing, 'we don't have much time.'

She was right. The shakku would not take long before they finished the job they had started. In minutes, the village and all who dwelt within it would fall prey to the savannah's deadliest predator.

*'They have no choice,'* Jehenna thought sombrely. *'They will have to cut their flesh. We all will.'* She cast a look at the Tamuans assembled on the lopsided platform behind them. So many children. So many innocent people.

To her left she saw Bormanus. His face was fixed in concentration. He had hardly moved since the shakku had renewed their attack. Jehenna assumed he was frozen by fear. 'Nowhere to hide now Bormanus,' she sneered, hoping for a reaction but expecting none.

He slowly lifted his head and stared coldly at her. 'Do I really deserve that Jehenna? You should save your scorn for your enemies.'

'I'm not sure you're not one of them.'

He stepped forward. His eyes displayed an intensity of emotion she had not seen since she had met him. Something resembling anger

flickered in his pupils. 'Tell the Tamuans to stay their hands,' he said in voice devoid of inflection. 'There will be no more self-mutilation today.'

He drew a rapier from an ornate, leather scabbard by his waist. He had worn the weapon since they had left Cessair but as far as Jehenna knew, had never brandished it. 'It seems I will have to go to great lengths to prove myself to you and your cold heart, Jehenna Canna.'

With that he placed one hand on the railing and leapt over it, disappearing in the thick grasses below. He screamed loudly, not in pain but in defiance.

At once the shakku were alerted to his presence. The savage biting at the pylons ceased and the shakku spun around and moved in on Bormanus. They swam through the savannah grass with such swiftness that they were upon him in seconds. Jehenna was reminded of the praga and the feeding frenzies she had witnessed back in Acoran. She and Simeon would sometimes stand on one of the many bridges spanning the Naiyeni River outside Griflet and throw pieces of raw meat into the water just to watch the praga swarm over the morsels with a ferocity rarely seen.

The shakku leapt over one another to get at Bormanus, their swishing tails and snapping jaws little more than a blur. Hundreds of the savage animals descended upon him and Jehenna could hardly bring herself to watch.

However, if she had been surprised by Bormanus' seemingly suicidal display of heroics, she was absolutely shocked by what occurred next.

A spray of blood shot out of the deep grasses followed by another and another. Jehenna would have concluded that the blood was Bormanus' were it not vivid orange in colour. She could see the flash of his rapier amongst the bloody carnage. Jehenna had never seen a blade wielded in such a way. He swung and thrust it so quickly it was a blur but there was no mistaking its effect. Orange blood continued to fly up occasionally punctuated by a severed head or fin. The grasses around Bormanus were gradually flattened under the weight of dead shakku that piled up around the slightly-built Cephalonian.

The shakku continued to come. Their frenzy was such that they ignored the sight of the rest of their pack lying in pieces around the defiant Myrran. They continued to attack in thick waves but Bormanus fought on, undeterred by their weight of their numbers or the viciousness of their onslaught. Jehenna had never seen anyone move so quickly and gracefully. He seemed to be moving outside the laws of physics, unbound by time or entropy. Though he was covered in the viscera of the

shakku he had sliced up, he was beautiful to watch. Not a single movement was wasted.

Then, as swiftly as it had started, the carnage ended. The last of the shakku swam over the bodies of its kin and fell beneath Bormanus' blade.

Jehenna gazed down incredulously at the scene before her. Further up the railing Sela was similarly staring at the blood-stained savannah in awe. Hundreds of shakku lay under a blanket of orange blood. Mounds of the foul creatures lay all around, their large, dull eyes staring up stupidly at the sky above. Most had died with their mouths wide open. Sela found the display of pointed teeth fixed in ravenous smiles to be as disturbing as it was satisfying.

In the middle of all this sat Bormanus, casually cleaning his blade. He looked up at Jehenna nonchalantly and asked, 'Will you trust me now?'

Jehenna was too stunned to reply. Bormanus kept her within his gaze, his face once more a mask, concealing whatever emotion lay beneath.

Despite the urgency of their mission, Jehenna, Bormanus, Lilith and Sela spent the following week in Nuadu. Jehenna could not hasten them away from the place. Sela needed to deal with the loss of so many of her tribe. She also had her son to care for. Jehenna said nothing of the mission to kill Caliban and gave no indication that she was in a hurry to leave. It was the least she could do.

The time in the village did much to heal the bodies and minds of the remaining members of the company. Lilith especially benefitted from the long, languid days under the Tamuan sun. She looked younger by the day and it had nothing to do with Morgai magick.

Jehenna spent much of her time helping the men replacing the pylon the shakku had destroyed. She also ventured out into the savannah with Sela hunting for food for the tribe. Although they said little on these expeditions, it was clear to both that a bond had been forged between them.

Bormanus typically kept to himself. He neither wanted to discuss his show of heroics nor did he want to respond to the gratitude extended to him by the Tamuans. Whenever he walked past, the men of Nuadu would fall silent in awe. They revered him which bothered Jehenna for some inexplicable reason. She had no choice but to trust him after his breathtaking defeat of the shakku, but she still felt uneasy around him

Jehenna and Lilith stood looking out over the savannah. From their vantage point on the northern edge of the village, they could see for many leagues. Jehenna was struck by how different it was to her own country. She felt a long way from home.

‘Lilith, I have failed miserably.’

‘We’re still in this with a chance, sweet girl,’ Lilith replied with a grin. ‘I have faith in you.’

*Jehenna stood above her, the glaive poised above Lilith’s chest. It caught the sun on its golden surface and for a moment Lilith was blinded by the light.*

‘I don’t think I can do it.’

‘Jehenna, you don’t have a choice.’

‘But look how I have faltered every step of the way. Kali – killed within a week of starting the mission. Tawhawki – left to drown at sea. Rama – abandoned to the Endless.’

‘These are not things you could have controlled.’

‘I even involved my brother in it. That was my choice. I chose to go to Griflet. I chose to seek his help...’

‘And he chose to help you.’

‘Little good it did him, or us. We are nowhere nearer to completing the mission that we were on the day we started and he,’ – her voice shook a little – ‘now lies five fathoms deep.’

‘Do not give up now. It is your responsibility to get this company to Cephalonia and from there into the Endless.’

‘But Cephalonia is so far away. I’m not sure we can make it now.’

‘Perhaps I can help!’ Sela said, stepping out of the doorway with a smile on her face. It was the first time Jehenna or Lilith had seen her without her mask on. Her face was unusual when compared to theirs, but just as pretty in her own way. Long eye lashes fluttered self-consciously above large, child-like black eyes. Under these doleful orbs, a short fur-covered snout twitched above thick, white teeth. The light fur of her snout deepened to a rich tan colour around her cheeks, thickening as it radiated from the centre of her face until it merged with the dark brown bristles that lay around the fringes.

‘Sela!’ exclaimed Jehenna as she rose to face the Tamuan.

Underneath her light coat of fur, Sela blushed. Few Myrrans had ever seen a Tamuan’s face. Sela’s sense of vulnerability weakened the

grip her smile had on her face. 'What is it?' she said nervously, edging away from the Acoran.

Jehenna giggled uncharacteristically and slowly placed out a hand on Sela's face. She delicately lifted Sela's chin so that the two of them were looking into each other's eyes. 'You're smiling!'

The tension ran out of Sela's body. She had expected a derisive comment, or at least ridicule, but Jehenna's eyes only contained affection.

'My little one,' Sela said in a rush of happiness, 'he's alright. Thanks to you, Morgai.'

Lilith nodded modestly. Jehenna continued to stare curiously at Sela who subsequently frowned. Jehenna's gaze was making her feel uncomfortable. 'Please don't stare like that,' she muttered.

Jehenna looked away at once. 'I'm sorry, Sela. I have never seen a Tamuan's true face.'

'I think you have to spend many weeks with a Tamuan before you see her true face,' said Lilith enigmatically.

A look of puzzlement crossed Sela's brow and then one of understanding. 'You were being metaphoric weren't you?'

'Yes,' Lilith replied. 'I was.'

Jehenna and Sela sat with their legs swinging over the edge of the verandah and picked at a bunch of honeygrapes. 'You're sure you're ready to leave?'

'Yes. I am.'

'But there are no more women to defend the men. What if the Ghul come?'

'It is true, the Ghul could come. Or the Cabal. Or more shakku. Or the fierce Sedomo tribes of the north. Jehenna, I can't worry about these things, not whilst Caliban still lives. We have a mission to complete. Besides, I think it's time the men of this village learnt how to fight.'

Jehenna picked a grape and tossed it in her mouth. Her tongue was drenched in the fruit's sweet taste. She savoured the sensation. It would be a long time before she could enjoy such a luxury. 'We still have a long way to go.'

'Perhaps not as long as you think,' Sela said mysteriously.

'What do you mean?'

'I can get us to Amasis within a day or two.'

'But it's over 180 leagues to the north. Even if we ran...'

'What is it you say, Jehenna? There is always a way.'



Sela stood up and cupped her small hands around her mouth. A strange cry exploded through her lips, a long guttural noise. She took a deep breath and repeated the call. Her expectant eyes scanned the savannah grasses for a response.

Jehenna heard the creatures long before she saw them lumbering into view. They answered Sela's call with a similarly deep and mournful bellow. At first Jehenna only heard a couple of responses, but soon the air was thick with low, resonant cries as a herd of gorgomites came into view.

They were extraordinary looking creatures. They were massive, much larger than any land animal Jehenna had ever seen. The gorgomites shuffled across the savannah, crushing the grass as they shambled along on stubby legs that were dwarfed by the rest their slug-like bodies. Jehenna thought they resembled sacks of grain. Lacking eyes, ears and noses, the creatures were grotesque when compared to most Myrran animals. Their mouths consisted of an orifice hidden under fat lips that looked more like a claw.

'Our transportation awaits,' Sela said proudly.

'Sela, have one more night with your husband and child,' Jehenna said. 'We will leave for Amasis in the morning.'

Despite all that had happened and the desperate days ahead, Jehenna actually felt contented sitting on the back of a gorgomite as it lumbered along steadily. High up on its broad back she felt safe for the first time in weeks. The Tamuans had replenished the squad's stores and fed them well before their departure. With a full belly, Jehenna leant back on her elbows and took in the surrounding landscape.

She had travelled through many lands and rarely had taken the time to open her eyes to appreciate her surroundings. The sun was high and the sky was the deepest blue she had ever seen. A number of thick, round clouds ambled by overhead, the shadows of which glided over the wind-blown savannah grass like happy ghosts. The grass seemed alive as it rippled and shook in the warm breeze. Out on the savannah everything seemed so pure and clear. Even the clouds above looked as if they had been carved out of white marble. They did not change their voluminous shape as they roved across the sky and Jehenna was reminded of the flocks of fat shelp she had seen on her last visit to Nessa.

To the east, the white caps of rolling surf pounded the golden beaches lining the Tamuan coast. The blue and white of the sea was interspersed by the brilliant red of the palm trees lining the foreshore. These distinctive red-leaved trees ran for hundreds of leagues up the coastline like a fence that served no purpose. Above the bright crowns of the palms Jehenna could make out the shapes of thousands of gillygulls flying about manically, chasing each other with such playfulness, they made the bright world around them seem sombre and dull.

On the northern horizon, much darker clouds had gathered like a gang, loitering in the distance, threatening to change the mood of the day. The space between the flat bottom of these clouds and the shadowy plains beneath was streaked with soft, grey, horizontal lines of rain. Occasionally, a streak of lightning flashed, but it was so far away it was no more than filigree on the sky.

‘It’s beautiful, Lilith.’

‘What is?’ Lilith said absently, distracted by a shatterbug that had alighted on her sleeve. Feeling the heat of the day, the delicate crystalline creature swept its wings back and forth in an attempt to keep its tiny body cool.

‘The world. It’s a beautiful world.’

The Morgai smiled wistfully remembering a similar comment from years before.

*‘It’s such a beautiful world, Morgai. I’d hate to lose it.’*

‘You’re not the only one who thinks so Jehenna.’

‘I’m only beginning to understand what it is we’re fighting for.’

She lay back with her head in her hands and closed her eyes, lulled into a sleepiness by the heat of the day and the lumbering rhythm of the gorgomite. Her body felt heavy and it wasn’t long before her drowsy mind started drifting along with the clouds.

Under the secretive veil of her eyelids, a face appeared – a man, but not her husband. She knew his face well. He rarely smiled but there was a warmth to him that his gruff, exterior couldn’t hide. Even the long scar running down the left-hand side of his face was not enough to disguise the essential goodness that lay within.

Ordinarily, Jehenna would have thrust the image away, discarding the wayward dream like an unwanted gift, but the day was warm and she was tired, so she relaxed and let her mind escort her down untrodden paths where thought and sleep became entwined and all worries faded away.

## Chapter Six Nilfheim Mines, Sessymir

The snow slug's huge bulk enveloped the sled. Its wet, pungent skin smothered Sumi and Lara like an impossibly heavy cushion. Lara felt as if all her bones were on the verge of breaking into a thousand splinters. Then the scales on her skin began to scream as gastric juices oozed out of the slug's pores as its digestive system anticipated the meal that had appeared out of the icy wastes of the Slith.

Lara could feel Sumi writhing about on the seat in front of her, fighting for their survival. She had seen the slug before Lara noticed it and had tried to shoot it with one of the slidoo's harpoons but the firing mechanism on the right-hand side of the sled had jammed and the harpoon failed to launch.

Sumi was in pain but her bodily contortions were not her death throes. She wrenched her body around to reach the rope in the satchel by her knees. Despite the crushing weight of the slug, she managed to coil one end around the shaft of the other harpoon. Holding her breath as the gastric juices spurted out of the slug's underbelly, Sumi hastily thrust the other end of the rope through her belt and passed it to Lara who promptly looped it around her waist.

Sumi felt her scalp and exposed skin burning and the pain was greater than any imaginable, but still she kept to task. She fumbled around for the harpoon lever with her left foot. Finding the small metal footpad, she pushed down hard with her heel.

The harpoon fired. It tore through the gelatinous body of the slug as if it were not there. In front of the pair on the sled a sliver of light opened up followed by a savage jolt as they were hauled right through the body of the disgusting creature and slung out into the cold skies above the city of Nilfheim. Below them the slug writhed about as its vague nervous system tried to come to terms with what had just taken place.

Lara felt as if her spine had been snapped in half. After what seemed like hours but was no more than a few seconds, they reached the apogee of their movement through the heavens. The sun was low in the sky, shimmering across a vast sea filled with massive ice floes. On the fringe of this frozen sea, the black, iron city of Nilfheim lay like a stain on a fresh table cloth. It was a spectacular view but unfortunately for Lara and Sumi, a fleeting one.

Lara looked at the ground that was racing up to her. A thousand spells raced through her mind but not a single incantation relevant to their unique situation. The white ground grew whiter and closer and then all was black.

Lara lifted her head. They lay on a small icy hill – hummocks the Sessymirians called them. Underneath her, Sumi lay sprawled awkwardly in the snow. She was still unconscious, which was hardly surprising. A moment before the pair hit the snow bank, Sumi twisted herself under Lara to take the brunt of the impact.

The witch rubbed her head. A large lump had risen in the place her forehead usually occupied. It was very tender to touch and throbbed like another heart. Lara rolled Sumi over, muttering to herself. 'Of all the stupid ideas... ugh, slug spit all over me...' Sumi was limp in the Moraen's arms, but Lara could see her breast rise and fall. 'Now you stay alive... don't even think of leaving me alone!'

And there Lara stayed for the next half hour, cradling Sumi, all the time muttering half-finished sentences to herself, until...

'That wasn't so bad, was it?'

Lara looked down to see the pale face of Sumi grinning up at her.

'Now let's get on our feet. Well, let's get you on your feet. I'll –'

Lara's prattle was interrupted by a sharp cry from her companion. 'Aaugh! My leg!'

They both peered down at the cause of Sumi's acute discomfort. Sticking out of the leather pants was a sharp white shard. Lara almost fainted when she realised it was a bone. Sumi had broken her leg in half.

'Can you fix it?'

Lara could hardly even look at the limb, let alone repair it. She tried a healing incantation and whilst it numbed the pain and stopped the bleeding, it didn't mend the break. The injury was too severe.

'We'll put a splint on it. I can live with it.'

They found some discarded strips of timber on a mullock heap on the outskirts of the grim city and made a splint. Sumi set the bone and strapped the splint to her leg as if she were putting on shoes. Lara was astounded. It seemed there were no bounds to Sumi's stoicism.

They made their way through the outskirts of the city towards its centre where the entrance to Strom Mir lay. The dark streets were either deserted or occupied by Sessymirians far too concerned with their own troubles to notice the pair of strangers making their way through the city, one of whom left a long trail in the snow like that of a serpent.

It quickly became evident to Lara and Sumi that their passage into the Endless would not be easy. The Sessymirians had engaged Caliban's forces and the fighting had been furious. A number of miners carried wounded comrades on stretchers. Some of the mine's injured were still screaming by the time they reached the surface. Others limped along, the

blood of their battles in the depths of Strom Mir like a warning to any who would dare venture below.

Lara stared helplessly as she and Sumi slowly made their way past a group of men whose physical damage was so extensive, it was astounding they were still walking. One of them, a tall, sallow-faced youth with a bloody rag pressed against his head, had lost an ear. Another had his arm sliced off at the elbow. A third man who clutched at his eyes was led along by a grey-haired old man who had the long, white shaft of an arrow still sticking out from his shoulder. It was clear that all Sessymirians had been called to arms, irrespective of how young or old they were. As Sumi hobbled along on her broken leg, no-one gave her a second glance – amidst the remnants of so much violence, her injury made her inconspicuous.

Here and there Lara and Sumi noticed strange, snow-covered piles filling alleyways and cul-de-sacs in Nilfheim's maze of streets. It was only when they ventured closer that they realised that these were the bodies of those who had fallen. The people of Nilfheim were so sorely pressed, they didn't even have time to bury their dead.

'Did the Ghul do all this?' Lara asked, bewildered by what she had already witnessed in the dark city.

'Maybe, but I would now guess that Caliban is now using every weapon at his command. Ghul. Cabal. Even Pryderi.'

At the mention of her race, Lara gazed shamefully at the mound of corpses to her left. 'I hope we had nothing to do with this.'

'If by *we* you mean the *Pryderi*, I fear you will find that they will have had a hand in the carnage that awaits us.'

'I am no friend of the Sessymirians, but I would never wish this violence upon them.'

'It may work to our advantage. With all this bloodshed and confusion, we may be able to sneak into the mine unchallenged.'

'Sumi, how will we get down to the breach? By ladders? Ropes?'

Underneath her makeshift cowl, Sumi shook her head. 'No. This mine is far too deep for ladders. It does have a central platform which is lowered into the mine by chains and pulleys, but we won't be able to use that. We'd be seen.'

'So what's your plan? How do we get in?'

'We jump.'

The pair made their way down a long alleyway that led down into the congested centre of the city where the entrance to the mine lay. A large woman exited a dwelling that opened out onto the narrow walkway and

lit a lantern. She placed the lantern on the ground and took a swig of a bottle she pulled from a pocket in her coat. Having emptied the contents of the bottle down her throat, the woman growled something incoherent and threw the empty glass flask against the steel wall on the other side of the alley. The bottle smashed into tiny pieces that fell to the ground where they lay on the snow like jewels upon a white dress. To Sumi's dismay the woman turned in their direction and started stumbling down the alley, no doubt headed for a tavern they had passed earlier.

As she passed Lara and Sumi, the woman held the lantern high and her eyes scanned their faces. She stopped and stared as the pair hurried past. Sumi saw the woman's eyes drop towards the ground where her eyes focused upon the long winding trail that Lara's tail carved in the snow.

'You stinking witch!' she shrieked.

Lara spun around.

'I lost a husband and two sons in the mines,' the woman spat. 'One witch won't balance the scales but it'll make me feel a little better.'

She launched herself at Lara and tackled the Moraen around the waist. Both women fell to the dirty snow piled up against the wall of the dark alley. The woman managed to use her weight to her advantage and twisted around so she sat on Lara's stomach. She pounded down upon Lara's face with brick-shaped fists with no sign of stopping.

Sumi grabbed the woman by her dirty yellow hair and yanked her head back hard. The woman grunted at Sumi for a moment before returning her focus to Lara who she proceeded to pummel. 'Filthy traitorous witch! I'll kill you!'

Sumi slammed the palm of her hand against the back of the woman's neck knocking her out immediately. 'Somehow,' she said as she dragged the woman into the darkest part of the alley, 'somehow I don't think you're welcome in Nilfheim.'

Although Lara had lost count of the extraordinary things she had done since leaving the Bregon Woods on the back of a flying lobbse, there was little doubt that jumping into Strom Mir with nothing but a thin piece of silk between her and dying was one of the most terrifying. She was astounded to learn that many miners started every working day in this way. Sumi, who told her this, did not mention that hundreds of miners who had died when their chutes failed to open on the way down.

After the battle with the Kaggen months before, the breach in the floor of Room 391 had lain silent and undisturbed under countless tonnes of frozen rubble. The Kaggen's inadvertent destruction of the room seemed enough to keep the Ghul at bay. And then, on the day Lokasenna Hagen left Nilfheim bound for the Assembly of Nations in Cessair, a scratching sound was heard from beneath the fallen stone and ice. For ten days the sounds continued, never abating, always growing louder. Then on the third day the loose rubble on top of the mound blocking the breach started quivering as if something underneath was about to emerge. And then it stopped. All sound. All movement.

Gangs of miners were brought down to Room 391 and two hundred members of Nilfheim's shock troops stood in one line from cavern wall to cavern wall, all facing the buried entrance to the Endless, waiting. There were over three hundred Sessymirians at the base of Strom Mir when the chaos began. The mound of rock and ice imploded as it was ripped away from underneath and then from the darkness beyond came the Kobolds.

Though half the size of the Sessymirians guarding the breach, the Kobolds were more than a match for the shock troops. The ferocity of their onslaught was extraordinary. The Kobolds fought without fear. Many times in the attack, a Kobold would drop his guard, enticing an opponent into attack, just to give another Kobold an advantage. Their attack was beautifully coordinated.

Deep within the Endless, hundreds of leagues away, Succellos controlled the Kobolds like a monstrous puppeteer. She allowed her puppets just enough mental liberty to express themselves in the violent show, but not enough to question their actions.

Over the weeks that followed, countless Ghul poured through the breach and from the shafts above came every able-bodied Sessymirian to hold back the flood.

At first – despite the relentlessness of the Kobolds and Ghul – the Sessymirians had the upper hand. They had discovered the Ghul's susceptibility to fire and worked hard to exploit this weakness. But fires and mines did not mix and the Sessymirians were limited in how many blazes they could light in a place comprised of more ice than metal.

Nilfheim's small cadre of bowmen had been brought down to fire volleys of arrows dipped in oil and set alight. This tactic stymied the Ghul's attempts to infiltrate the mines, but it was – at best – a temporary solution. Wooden arrows were in short supply in Nilfheim; the Sessymirians could not hope to continue this defence for much longer.

In contrast, the Ghul seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of bone shafts that their archers used to whittle away the Sessymirian troops.

It looked bleak for the people of Strom Mir. Whilst the Sessymirians had no qualms about killing the Kobolds they were confused about the presence of a new enemy – the Pryderi.

Some of the miners had seen Moraens before, but most had only heard of them in stories. At first, the sight of the women with their long writhing tales and flowing skirts of silk intrigued the local Sessymirians who held their fire as the coven of witches made their way up into the shattered remains of Room 391. This cessation of hostilities did not last long. When all the witches had assembled amidst the frozen rubble of the cavern, accompanied by a platoon of Ghul infantry, they launched a mystical broadside that killed at least fifty Sessymirians in the space of a few seconds. Spells of all descriptions were hurled across the cavern resulting in an array of injuries, deformities and death that had never been witnessed before. The remaining Sessymirians fled abandoning Room 391 to Caliban's forces.

The miners made their way down long empty passageways until they arrived at a vast cavern known as Room 333 which was just over half a league from the breach. Here they had assembled a huge barricade that was one hundred yards across and fifty yards high – the last line of defence. If the Ghul, Kobolds and Pryderi got past the barricade, the only thing that separated them from the city of Nilfheim above was Strom Mir's entry shaft. Some Sessymirians had argued that the mine should be abandoned. They argued that the platform that brought the miners to the surface should be raised to the surface so that Caliban's army could be denied access to the city, but this idea was quickly dismissed for two reasons – firstly, the miners were fiercely proud and did not want to hand the ice colliery over to the invaders without a fight; secondly, no-one really believed that something as simple as a mine shaft would be enough to halt the progress of the Ghul.

And so the barricade was built across Room 333. The cavern was easily accessed from numerous sections of the mine which meant it provided numerous escape routes should the barricade fall. It was also one of the most established areas of the mine. Beams of iron criss-crossed the ceiling and all of the walls were plated with reinforced steel which meant the Sessymirians could light fires in the room without fear of melting the cavern around them. The area was well-ventilated which would vent the plumes of smoke that would inevitably rise out of the fires the miners would light to keep the Ghul at bay.

Since the departure of Lokasenna Hagen, Vila Helstrom had taken command of Strom Mir. It was he who had decided that Room 333 would be the most suitable place to stand their ground against the Ghul.



He did not assume the title of Foreman. The miners simply addressed him as *Captain* and this suited him. Behind his back many of Strom Mir's workers still referred to him as the Keeler – the distinctive scars running across his face where his flesh had been gouged by one of the Keelii made it difficult to ignore Helstrom's colourful past.

Despite their horrendous casualties over recent days, he had proven to be an excellent leader to those who believed in taking a stand against Caliban's troops. He had put out the call for every piece of flammable material that could be found in Nilfheim to be lowered down into the mine and added to the barricade. He had also arranged for vats of leviatha oil to be brought to Room 333.

As the last of the miners retreated behind the barricade, the Keeler ordered massive steel nets be strung up across the room between the barricade and the tunnel entrance that led to the breach. The nets were made of a thick steel mesh that could support the weight of tonnes of Cold. It would take the Ghul some time to break through them. The Keeler was not sure whether they would pose a problem for the Pryderi.

'When the enemy comes in here, take down the witches first!' he yelled to his troops from his position high up on the barricade.

Caliban's forces had not yet arrived in the cavern but the Keeler could hear their approach reverberating down the tunnel at the far end of the room where the steel nets had been placed. 'The nets should create a choke point, but do not concentrate your fire upon the Ghul. See a witch, kill a witch.'

'See a witch, kill a witch!' the Sessymirians shouted back with chilling fervour.

'We can take down the Ghul with fire, but the witches might not be so easy to kill.'

The Keeler had been to Bregon as a child and he remembered the Pryderi as being a timid race whose magick was similarly unimpressive but what he had witnessed back at the breach was a show of mystical power beyond anything he could have imagined. Something had changed. The witches had become powerful and were willing to use that power in the most uncompromising fashion. He was surprised at their preparedness to kill, but in the back of his mind he knew that the Sessymirians' treatment of the Moraens gave the witches no reason to consider the people of Nilfheim as allies.

'Captain, the bins are in place,' reported a young miner by the name of Lars who had climbed the barricade to join Helstrom. He

pointed at two massive iron containers that had been raised on winches and hauled across the ceiling so that they hung above the barricade.

'Yes. I see,' the Keeler replied looking up at the rectangular containers high above his head. Each bin was tethered to thick iron chains that ran back across the ceiling through a pulley system that was controlled by a panel of levers near one of the entrances to the room. 'Are the bins full?'

'Yes Captain. Every drum of oil we could find has been poured into them.'

'Do not tip them till I give the word. Do you understand Lars?'

'Yes Captain,' the youth responded. He quickly clambered his way back down the barricade and took his position by the levers.

The Keeler cast his eyes across the barricade with a sense of pride. Everything was in place. The barricade itself was lined with anyone who had access to a bow, slingshot or bola. Earlier, a number of zealous miners had also taken their place atop the barricade armed with lumps of Blue Cold. Though Helstrom was impressed with their desire to obliterate the enemy, he had to ask them to hand over the volatile Cold before they brought the entire mine down around their ears.

The Keeler looked behind him at the base of the barricade where hundreds of Sessymirians had gathered armed with axes, swords and clubs. These men and women could not see over the barricade to the tunnel from which would spill Caliban's army, so they waited in silence, preparing their minds for the battle to come.

Behind these brave, desperate people were the hulking shapes of five catapults that had been ripped from the city's battlements where they had performed nothing more than an ornamental role for the past fifty years. Each catapult had been lowered down the man shaft and trundled into the massive cavern where they had built the barricade. Many Sessymirians had laboured through the night to recalibrate the catapults so they shot over the barricade but not into the roof or walls of the cavern. Each catapult was armed with blocks of stone so heavy, it had taken almost thirty men to load them.

The Keeler scanned the room for possible weaknesses in the defence and finding none, he turned to face the tunnel at the far end of the room. 'We're ready,' he said to himself, and for a short time, he almost believed it.

They did not have to wait long for the enemy to arrive. The Ghul entered first and immediately set about trying to dismantle the steel net that covered the tunnel entrance like a sieve. Some Ghul tried to squeeze

themselves through the net but quickly found themselves caught in the tight mesh. The Ghul were followed by the Kobolds who wasted no time in trying to work their way under the steel net. The Sessymirians had fixed the mesh to the floor of the cavern with long iron bolts. The Kobolds set about digging up these bolts and worked with such industry that it would not be long before the net was little more than a decorative hanging.

Behind the Kobolds massed the Pryderi. The Keeler couldn't count the number of witches in the tunnel but he knew it was enough to completely wipe out the remaining miners if they were permitted to get closer.

‘Shoot the witches!’

The Keeler didn't have to give the command a second time. The cavern was filled with projectiles being fired into the tunnel on the other side of the mesh. He punched the air in satisfaction as a number of witches dropped to the frozen floor of the tunnel with arrows and knives in their scaly flesh, but his euphoria was short-lived. Within seconds, the projectiles started bouncing off an invisible barrier the witches erected.

The response was swift. From the mouth of the tunnel burst a colourful array of retaliatory spells. Most of these splashed against the barricade, but a number found their targets. The Keeler heard agonised screams shoot out from the lips of his comrades as they were hit by all manner of offensive magick. To his left, an old miner's head burst open like a pok pok fruit. To his right, a young boy shrieked as his skin was ripped from his body.

The Keeler quickly gave the signal for his troops to drop down behind the barricade. The *whoosh* and *thud* of five catapults successively launching in the confines of the room filled the air. The first four boulders slammed into the invisible barrier, unable to penetrate it, but their impact was felt by the witches trying to maintain the mystical wall. The last rock to be fired by the catapults pierced the weakened barrier and hurtled through the metal net the Kobolds had managed to release. It pounded into the tunnel killing all the Pryderi who had gathered there.

The Keeler scurried back up the barricade to assess the situation. If he thought that he had seen everything Caliban was willing to throw at the Sessymirians, he was wrong. The worst was yet to come.

It squeezed from the tunnel leading to the breach, giving no thought to the dead Pryderi that lay there, straining the rock and ice. It was the most astounding thing the Sessymirians had ever seen. It had two angular heads with only one eye on each. It had no mouth or nose or ears. Its skin was dark purple and glistened as if it had just crawled out of a lake. A thick coat of shaggy, purple hair covered much of the creature's

body, hiding its ten short legs and heavy paws. It reached up with one of these paws and tore the steel net down from the roof of the cavern. This done it shook its long body and out from underneath its thick coat sprang a thick pair of purple wings. The beast was called the Anthropog and like all its kin in the Cabal, it was deadly.

The creature flew over the barricade and wheeled around the cavern. A number of Sessymirians took aim at the beast and fired but it simply ignored the arrows which were lost in its shaggy coat. It made no attempt to attack the miners, but it didn't have to. From its wings a trail of tiny purple spores floated in the cold air, filling the space like dust motes in a ray of sunshine. These spores slowly made their way towards the floor below. Though the Sessymirians had no idea what the spores would do, they knew instinctively that it would not be good. Some of the miners made for tunnels that fed into the room, but the cavern was terribly crowded, a fact that contributed to the panic that quickly followed the Anthropog's arrival.

With the net no longer blocking their way, the Ghul raced across the cavern floor and scuttled up the barricade, followed by the Kobolds. The Keeler gave the signal to his people to light the fire. With the help of a number of strategically placed blocks of Cold, the barricade erupted in a brilliant blue blaze. Black smoke billowed around the chamber eventually finding its way to the ventilation shaft at the far end of the room.

Where the spores made contact with the miners' flesh, they altered what they touched, incredibly turning flesh to stone. The effect was highly specific as the miners quickly discovered when they put their hands out to shelter the rest of their bodies from the falling spores. Some of them watched in horror as their hands and forearms transmogrified into a heavy grey stone. These were the lucky ones. The more unfortunate miners died instantly as their heads turned to stone unable to be supported by their fleshy bodies. One of the miners dived out of the wayward path of the spores only to find his feet turned to stone. He tried to drag himself from the cavern but his feet were too heavy. If the Ghul broke through, he would be left at their mercy – and the Ghul had no mercy to give.

Lara and Sumi emerged from a small side tunnel which led into the room next to one end of the barricade. A number of Sessymirians were huddled on the floor of the tunnel but they were too panic-stricken to even notice the presence of the two strangers. Although she was shocked by the scene that filled her vision, Lara had enough presence of mind to

act. She could see the purple spores floating through the air, changing all they touched into stone and she realised that this posed the greatest danger to the miners. The two-headed creature that released the spores was not directly harming anyone and the barricade that was burning to her right would keep any Ghul in the cavern at bay until it had exhausted itself.

Lara closed her eyes and stuck out her hand as if she were clutching at the air in the vast chamber. Suddenly the cloud of spores was swept aside as if a mighty wind had entered the cavern and caught it in its grasp. The spores swirled about on an invisible current and then were sent from the room, disappearing up the ventilation shaft alongside the pall of smoke that poured out from the fiery barricade.

The Sessymirians who had survived the spores cowered against the walls of the cavern. Some pushed their way into the tunnels whilst other despondently wandered around the room picking up the stony remains of comrades who had fallen under the Anthropog's attack. In the middle of the room stood the Keeler. He stared out across the room watching his stunned countrymen searching amongst the rubble for pieces of petrified limbs that had broken off. In a perverse way, they looked as though they were collecting kindling for a fire.

In light of what they were opposing, the defenders of Strom Mir had not fared too badly, but as soon as the fire in the barricade died, any remaining Ghul would rampage over the ashes and slaughter the Sessymirians. They would be supported in their efforts by the Kobolds, not to mention the strange beast that continued to glide around the room. The Keeler had no explanation for the wind that had granted the Sessymirians temporary relief from the falling spores but he could not count on it continuing, nor could he hope for any other intervention. He had to finish the fight and do so quickly.

He lifted his left hand as a signal to Lars, the young man who had spoken to him earlier about the bins of oil suspended above the cavern. Lars had not been affected by the Anthropog's attack and remained focussed on his single duty – to release the containers when given the sign.

The Keeler dropped his left hand and a second later two massive levers were drawn back setting in motion a mechanical sequence that ended with the release of a thick latch holding the bins in place. The front edge of each bin swung downwards and thick leviatha oil spilled out over the barricade.

The dense black smoke that filled the cavern obscured the full impact of the Keeler's last desperate act. As soon as the oil met the fire on the barricade, it combusted. The resultant blaze swelled across the room and billowed out into adjacent tunnels and alcoves. No-one in Room 333 survived. The Ghul were incinerated instantly followed by the Kobolds. Even the Anthropog was reduced to ashes by the cloud of searing fire that swallowed up the entire cavern.

Whilst they Sessymirians had defeated their enemy and stopped the incursion of Caliban's forces into Nilfheim, it had been at terrible cost. Not a single Sessymirian who had gone to Room 333 that day would ever return to the city they had protected, including the brave keeler Vila Helstrom.

Lara and Sumi would have died had not Lara thrown up a bubble around them the moment the oil splashed down upon the barricade. The protective sphere was much larger than the one she had created when Sumi had set the Hollow Hills alight back in Scoriath.

'Thank-you!' mouthed Sumi as the flaming oil swirled around them, lifting the mystical bubble and pulling it out into the smoke-filled cavern. The oil had filled the room, turning it into a lake of fire. Through the flames the pair floated on the eddying black liquid, with no control over where they were headed.

Lara was deep in concentration. She knew if she faltered now, they would be engulfed by the conflagration just as the Sessymrians, Ghul and Kobolds had been. If the pair of them had any hope of survival, she had to maintain the bubble which bobbed on the burning oil like a gillygull upon the sea.

Within moments of the great bins being tipped upon the blazing barricade, Lara and Sumi found themselves being carried by the surging black tide across Room 333 and out into the tunnel leading to Room 391 where lay the entrance to the Endless.

Lara and Sumi quickly waded to the shore of a vast subterranean lake. It was lit by the soft red glow of the surrounding rock. Once their eyes adjusted to the suffuse light, they could see a path wending its way around the broad expanse of water to a Ghul camp. Thick shards of bone had been crudely fashioned into piers and tethered to these were strange, green boats.

'I was hoping we would find boats here!' Sumi said with a jubilant note in her voice. 'This is how the mariner Gerriod Blake made his way

out of the Endless. If we take a boat, we can make our way to Caliban.' She raced off towards the strange vessels.

'Sumi – they're not boats,' Lara cautioned. 'You know that don't you?'

'Yes, but these creatures didn't harm the mariner. We have no reason to believe they will harm us.'

'I hope you're right!' Lara grumbled.

As soon as they climbed into the nearest vessel, its long grey-green arms swung out from its sides and clawed at the surface of the lake. Lara sat at the back of the vessel, clearly unsettled by the fact they were entrusting themselves to such a bizarre creature.

Before long they were out in the middle of the lake, heading towards a point where the dark waters disappeared into a culvert at one end of the lake. 'That is the right way,' Sumi said with surprising certainty. 'It leads south-east and that is the direction we must take to Caliban.'

Lara was astounded but confused by Sumi's confidence. 'How can you be sure which way is north and which is south?'

Sumi shrugged. 'I don't know, but it feels right.'

'Sumi, we can't afford to risk everything upon a hunch now. We are far too close now to take risks.'

'Lara, this entire mission has been a risk. We have armed ourselves as much with chance as we have with weapons of steel.'

'That's all very poetic but –'

'Look there!' Sumi exclaimed, her eyes fixed on a figure on the far side of the great lake. Though the person was far away, her features were far too distinct for Sumi to have any doubts about who it was. Her skin was severely burnt but the dark birthmark surrounding her left eye could still be seen. Her left arm ended in a stump into which had been sewn a spike of bone, replacing the one of steel Tagtug had ripped from her flesh.

'Lokasenna!' Lara gasped.

A cold smile greeted them. Lokasenna's white teeth contrasted against her blackened skin. Her long, blonde locks had been burnt away leaving a bald skull that resembled a piece of coal.

A mirthless laugh exited from the Sessymirian's charred lips. 'Sumi Kimura!' she cried from the distant shore. 'We could be taken for twins!'

Sumi had forgotten all about her burnt face but now she was facing the woman who had held her head against the scorched earth of the

Hollow Hills, the memory of that night came flooding back. 'Lara, kill her for once and for all.'

'I can't, Sumi. I'm exhausted.' For a moment, Lara was fearful their strange boat would steer them towards Lokasenna, but it continued ploughing through the water, speeding towards the culvert at the far end of the lake.

'We still have your daughter, Lara Brand,' Lokasenna called contemptuously. 'You will stand down from this mission immediately. End this folly and you and yours will be permitted to live.'

Lara leaned over the bony side of the vessel and shouted defiantly, 'No! You have proven yourself to be utterly untrustworthy, spawn of Caliban!'

'Lara, my father has need of you. You know this. This is the only reason you have been kept alive. He has watched you grow into a formidable force.'

'Do you think at this late hour I would submit to Caliban?'

'You will find he can be very persuasive.'

Before Lara had a chance to answer, she and Sumi were swept from the cavern and down the torrent that flowed through the narrow culvert.

Sumi sat up in the strange boat and stuck a hand down the side of one of her boots.

'What is it?' Lara asked, concerned about the frown that had appeared on Sumi's face.

'My feet – Lara, I can't feel my feet.'

'Since when?'

'A few days ago. I fear I have frostbite – they're completely numb.'

'Let me see.'

Lara crouched down and cradled her companion's broken leg upon her coils. She unwound the leather band from Sumi's makeshift hide boots. A malodorous smell emanated from Sumi's foot and it took every ounce of self-control Lara possessed not to indicate how pungent it was. As she slowly slid the boot off, Lara prepared herself for the worst.

Sumi's foot was completely black. Flakes of darkened skin dropped across Lara's lap.

'Oh, Sumi!' Lara gasped.

'How bad is it?'

'It's bad.' The skin was loose and looked as if it had been flayed from her bones. Sumi had lost two toes on her left foot.



Lara checked the other foot. 'You have lost five toes altogether. The others are not far behind.'

Sumi took it in her stride. She gazed down at her legs. 'I imagine the gangrene has well and truly set in.' She pulled her boots back on, seemingly unconcerned over the terrible development.

'Sumi, take your boots off. I will try to heal you.'

'No Lara. The time for that has passed. I am beyond your magicks. I will complete the mission and I will make sure you see your baby girl again. Do not waste your energy on me – you will need it for the battle ahead.'

Sumi had analysed her position. She knew the frostbite was too far developed to stop its progress. There was no magick or remedy for such a malady. This was not a fight she could win. Her defiant spirit had been replaced by a sense of tranquility. She knew she would die before she saw her homeland again. She would die in the Endless.

'I don't understand,' Lara exclaimed. 'What about your thermanaesthesia? I didn't think you could be affected like this.'

'My thermanaesthesia is an inability to feel heat or cold but my body still reacts just as yours does. I can be exposed to extreme cold and die. It's my brain that doesn't understand, not my body. It's not a talent; it's a disability.'

'It helped get us here,'

'Perhaps, but it also means I'll be of little value to you in the fight ahead.'

'Sumi, you could never be of little value to me. You are the most valuable person I've ever met.'

Sumi didn't know what to say so she just rested her head upon Lara's shoulder and closed her eyes. She was happy. It would not be long now. She would be seeing Trojanu soon. Much sooner than she had expected to. It would not be long, but she had something to do first. Lara Brand would be reunited with her daughter. That was all that mattered now.

As they raced through the subterranean network of rivers, countless anxieties and fears began to crawl over Lara like a swarm of invisible insects. It was to be expected. The long journey was coming to an end and there was less chance of success than there had been at the start of the perilous quest. She hoped to be the one to repay Caliban for his horrendous crimes, but ultimately, she was far less concerned with his fate than she was with that of her daughter.

She loosened her blouse and saw that her Birthstone still shone brilliantly. Seeing the blue glow that signified her connection to her baby girl was as reassuring as ever, but it was not enough to quell her fears.

As she laced up her blouse, her hand brushed over a thin object she had secreted in her cloak weeks earlier. Her heart quickened as she pulled it out and examined it in the phosphorescent half-light of the Endless. It was the leaf she had picked up back in Scoriath, in their encounter with the Drasili.

*'Why do you keep the leaf?' she asked.*

*'I don't know. Perhaps... perhaps it's a reminder of what I must strive for: to persevere, to endure... to remember.'*

The leaf was still green although it had been weeks since it had fallen from the tree that sired it. It was an inspiring sign. In the dark, hard world of the Endless, where nothing grew but hatred and despair, she would be like the leaf. She would stay green. She would endure.

## Chapter Seven El Silat, Khepera

‘We shouldn’t have left him behind.’  
It was the first time any of them had ever heard Trypp Elan raise his voice. They understood why – he had every right to be upset – but to see his face display anything other than peacefulness was unsettling.

‘Trypp, we had no choice,’ Pylos responded in a soft voice. ‘The Ghul were upon us in numbers that we could not hope to defeat. We had to leave.’

‘We should go back now. Mulupo might be alive.’

‘He must have fallen hundreds of feet. There’s no way he could have survived.’

Trypp shook his head. ‘He survived spending a year with a needleback spine buried in his stomach. Spriggans are not as fragile as they look.’

Remiel looked sorrowfully at Trypp. ‘I understand that you would cling to such hope, but it would be pointless returning to the Marid. The Ghul would be waiting for us. We are close to Caliban’s End now. We cannot go back.’

‘We have turned our back on so many, Morgai. What about the people of El Khadir? You have the power to heal – you healed Pylos – but you turned your back on the Kheperans.’

‘Trypp, even I have my limits. I could not heal so many. I was able to save Pylos because the poison had not taken over his body. But the Kheperans were beyond my help.’

‘You shouldn’t have left them like that.’

‘I’m afraid I had to. And we had to leave Mulupo. We must march on, clinging to the hope that we will bring about that day when the evils that have been done to the world are redressed. If I could bring Mulupo back, I would, but...’ His voice faded and his eyes turned away. ‘I’m sorry Trypp.’

Trypp did not push the point further. He knew Remiel was probably right – Mulupo couldn’t have survived the fall.

And so it was with great misgivings that he continued walking the stony road to El Silat.

The hammer of the sun crashed down upon the fervid anvil beneath their feet. Gerriod’s feet felt numb which surprised him – he expected to feel the soles of his feet burning on the hot, dusty ground.

Eventually they came across a small, muddy oasis that provided little shade and even less water. Gerriod sat down on a rock and inspected his feet. He scratched at the sole of his foot with a sharp rock. Although the skin showed a long red mark where he had dragged the stone over it, Gerriod felt nothing. 'Oh dear,' he quietly said to himself. 'That can't be good.'

'What can't be good?' inquired a soft voice from behind him. It was Trypp.

'Ah nothing,' Gerriod said hurriedly as he pulled his boot back over his foot and quickly changed the topic of conversation. 'Have you ever been to El Silat before?'

'No, but I've seen it – from a ledge halfway up the Skyfall.'

'How much further do you think it is?'

'It cannot be far away. Our journey is slowly coming to an end.'

'Too slowly, I'm afraid.' Gerriod stood up and shouldered his pack. 'Let us finish this.'

When they arrived at the outskirts of the town, they knew something was wrong. Although El Silat was significantly smaller than El Khadir, the city was reputed to be a bustling, thriving metropolis but nothing moved on the streets before them. No sounds could be heard though it was midday and the city should have been at its busiest.

The company walked through the city gates. There was a large dark pile in the middle of the street that ran from the entrance of the city to its centre.

'What is it?' asked Remiel.

'The Ghul have been here,' Pylos answered. The glare of the sun shining off El Silat's shining white buildings made it hard to see but Pylos' nose explained what the pile was in no uncertain terms. Death. The dead bodies of countless Kheperans had been dumped in the city's main street and left to rot in the sun.

Gerriod grabbed the top of his tunic and pulled it up to cover his face. Trypp also turned away and attempted to compose himself in the face of so much death.

Pylos stared ahead, his jaw tightening. 'Why do they hate us so?'

'It is our nature,' said a voice behind them. A hollow voice. Sibillant and shallow.

They all swung around to see a tall, white-haired Ghul soldier standing before them. It was Drabella. There was nothing in her demeanour that suggested she had anything to fear. She stood proudly before them in the shadow of the doorway, only a few feet away from the

sunlight that would immolate her in seconds. In her hand she held the pommel of her whip. It seemed a rather poor choice of weapon when facing with one of Helyas' greatest soldiers and a Morgai of incredible power.

Pylos' hand went to the hilt of his sword.

'You don't want to do that!' warned Drabella.

Pylos rested his hand on the pommel of his weapon but did not draw the blade. 'Give me one good reason not to,' he hissed.

'Very well,' she said nonchalantly. Drabella pulled at her whip's handle and a small body lying at her feet jerked up with a sickening groan. It was Mulupo. The whip was wrapped tightly around his neck. He was still alive.

Remiel's eyes burned. The sight of Mulupo lying in the dirt at Drabella's feet filled him with such rage, his hands shook. This did not escape Drabella's attention.

'Don't think of doing anything, Morgai. I could snap this Spriggan's neck through before you could perform one of your tricks.'

'So sure of that are you?'

'Yes. I am. I must say your concern for him surprises me. After all, you did abandon him back at the cliffs overlooking the Marid.'

Remiel's stomach churned. He felt angry but he also felt weak. Leaving Mulupo behind had been another error of judgement in a succession of terrible mistakes. He had convinced Pylos not to kill Maeldune and now Sefar was dead and Mulupo was not far from it. There was also Jolon Bligh. And Cate Audrey – Remiel knew that somehow Maeldune had a hand in her death as well.

He stepped forward to address Drabella. 'What do you want? Why are you here?'

'Firstly to commend your companions on their progress. They have come much further than any of us thought they would.'

Remiel's eyes narrowed. 'What do you know of our progress?'

'Much more than you realise,' Drabella hissed with grim satisfaction. 'We have been watching this squad since it left Cessair.'

'*We*? You mean Caliban?'

'Yes, I do mean Caliban. He has monitored everything. He watched the Sapphyrran as he climbed up the Skyfall on the day the Morrigu attacked Skyfall. He watched Gerriod Blake's touching reunion with his father in the Endless. He watched Pylos drinking with the late Bannick Landen on the night the great hero was killed. He watched your valiant efforts in the Stone Forest of Tethra and your battle with Argas in the Scarlet Rock Theatre. And he was most impressed when the Helyan ran you through with his sword, Remiel Grayson. He has seen much of

you these past months. He has enjoyed your triumphs and revelled in your failures.'

Pylos turned to Remiel. 'What? Is your brother now a god? How can he see and hear these things?'

'He is now a god,' Drabella taunted.

Trypp considered Drabella's descriptions of all that had transpired. He looked for a pattern that would explain Caliban's knowledge. And he found it. 'It's the shatterbugs.'

Before anyone could respond, a desperate voice rang out in the still air of El Silat. 'Help me!' Mulupo had lifted his head.

Drabella shoved a foot down on the back of the Spriggan's head, burying his face in the dirt. 'Silence whelp!' she spat and she tugged quickly at the whip coiled around his throat. A long, gurgling sound cascaded out of Mulupo's mouth.

Pylos stepped forward his hand twitching above the pommel of his sword. 'Let him go.'

'In good time, General. Step carefully now.'

Gerriod looked up into the air around them. A small cloud of shatterbugs had gathered overhead and he eyed them suspiciously. 'Could it be true, Remiel? About the shatterbugs?'

'I... I don't know Gerriod,' he replied. His confidence seemed shattered.

'We have a message for you, Remiel Grayson. Whilst your brother has delighted in following your adventures, he now wants to bring matters to a conclusion. He will meet with you now and enter into a discussion.'

'Discussion?' spat Pylos. 'We do not seek a discussion, you vermin. We plan to kill your master.'

'What you intend and what you are permitted to do are two entirely different things, brash Helyan.'

'He must pay for his crimes.'

'You are confused. Caliban is the victim here. He has suffered much.'

'*Suffered!*' Pylos yelled. 'Suffered like Bannick Landen? Suffered like Sefar Hadith?'

'There is always a price General. Did you think Caliban would just hold open the door for your band of assassins.'

'Enough,' said Remiel quietly. 'We have nothing more to say to you. Release the Spriggan.'

'I have more to say to you. To you in particular, Remiel Grayson. You will listen because I demand it.'

Remiel's anger was stirred but it was overshadowed by his concern for Mulupo. He had to do what he could to safeguard the Spriggan and for the moment, that meant indulging the wretched Ghul female before him.

'Say what you must.'

'Firstly, we must give you our thanks.'

'For what?'

'For supplying us with the means to subdue the people of El Khadir.'

Remiel frowned, unsure of what Drabella meant and nervous about where she was going.

Gerriod's gaze fell upon Remiel. 'What does she mean by that?'

Drabella caught the look. 'Surely you have some sense of what your companion is capable of, Gerriod Blake? You of all people have seen what a treacherous piece of work he is.'

'Explain yourself, Ghul!' Remiel snarled. 'I have given you nothing. I am responsible for many terrible things but what has befallen the people of El Khadir can not be attributed to me.'

'Really?' remarked Drabella arrogantly. 'Can you be so sure of that? I am amazed that someone with your flair for guile is not canny enough to recognise his own handiwork. The people of El Khadir did not fall victim to an outbreak of leprosy. Their skin was corrupted by the very potion you poured down your brother's throat thirty years ago.'

Remiel staggered back to hear this. It was as if he had been punched in the stomach. 'How can this be?' he said drunkenly to Drabella who did nothing to disguise the thrill she was experiencing watching his confidence crumble even further.

'The potion that damned Caliban to the leper colony of Sanctuary was created by a Peline apothecary by the name of Garnett Shaw. We were able to track him down to the town of Marshmead deep inside the swamp of Mag Mel. Unfortunately when we entered the town, we were disappointed to find that Shaw had killed himself hours before our arrival, but we were more than compensated to find his notes and samples of his work. We killed many Myrrans on the day we arrived in Marshmead but luckily we found a few who were willing to help us recreate the poison you had used to infect your brother.'

Remiel was aghast. 'Recreated?'

'Yes. We poisoned all the wells of the city and now the people of Khepera suffer just as your brother does.'

*'It is agony, Sefar. Our skin burns every day.'*

'Then why did you send the Morrigu to drop the corpses of the lepers of Sanctuary upon El Khadir?' gasped Trypp, astounded by Drabella's revelation.

'Ah, that was Caliban's master touch. He has been toying with you. He knew that fear of contagion would turn you away from El Khadir. It delighted him to see you running for your lives across the Marid. And yes... he is watching you now, watching your faces drop as you realise that your journey across the burning plains was needless.'

'Is he truly that petty?' Remiel said exasperatedly.

'Caliban has taught us that it is not enough to defeat an opponent,' sneered Drabella. 'An enemy is only truly vanquished when he is humiliated. When he is broken.'

'But the people of El Khadir were not his enemy.'

'It is only you he seeks to break Remiel Grayson. Everyone else is...' – she looked down at Mulupo – 'collateral.'

'Has he no pity?' Pylos screamed. 'The lepers of Sanctuary have suffered enough. To send the Morrigu to slaughter them and desecrate their bodies – it is the stuff of madness.'

'There is no madness in Caliban. His mind is as sharp as your sword, Helyan. He despises the lepers almost as much as he despises his brother. He won't be compared to them.'

'So he disposes of them?' Remiel spat, amazed by what he was hearing.

'Is that not what you did to him?' Drabella retorted.

Remiel was trembling. The shock of the news had overwhelmed him. 'But... but they were innocent,' he murmured to himself.

'You seem to struggle with the fact that everything you have ever done has consequences. Are you a child Remiel Grayson? How can you be so blind to the trail of destruction that has followed your decisions.'

'Caliban had you infect an entire town to make a point? To get at me?'

'It seems to have had the desired effect. But it has not just been done for your benefit. It is for ours too. Take El Silat for example. This city was merely a reward to the Ghul for all we have done. Caliban is a most generous master.'

Remiel sank to his knees. The population of El Khadir exceeded fifty thousand. El Silat numbered almost thirty thousand. All of them dying or dead. It was a crime on such a large scale, his mind struggled to accept it.

Drabella grinned as Remiel brought his hands up to his face and wept. 'There you have it,' she said insouciantly. 'You have been presented with an offer to be taken directly to Caliban. There lies a



breach not far to the south of this city. If you accept this offer, you can be reunited with your brother in no time at all.'

Pylos had heard enough. For all Drabella's comments regarding Remiel Grayson, he still knew who his enemy was. 'We will not enter into contracts with the Ghul.'

From behind them, a rough, contemptuous voice was heard. 'How like a Helyan – stubborn to the last!' In the shadows of a deep veranda lining a tavern on the other side of the street two figures had appeared. Pylos could see one of the pair was Ghul; the other was a member of the Pryderi.

'You!'

Although he had only see her once before, Pylos recognised Defecious immediately. She was even more hideous than he had remembered her. Her skin was still torn, a result of the volley of arrows he had sent her way on the night the Ghul attacked Sulis. Her limbs were crooked, the result of the bones she had broken that night, but she was still alive and desirous of revenge. 'You were lucky last time we met, Helyan, but it means little. Your days are numbered, Pylos Castalia.'

Gerriod turned to Pylos and said, 'So you two know one another?'

'We have some unfinished business. Back in Sulis I had a friend by the name of Quintinius. This thing killed him.'

'Yes. I remember how he tasted. Perhaps I will dine on your bones before this day is done.'

'My sword will carve a different ending,' Pylos snarled.

Defecious took one look at the blade and blanched. She recognised the metal at once and like all Ghul, feared it. Shatterstone. It would kill her. She attempted to regain her composure. 'You think I fear you? My Pryderi pet here will not allow you to touch me.'

Defecious edged forward, careful not to step into the sunlight that carved a shadow as sharp as a knife across the veranda. 'You will find that she is as powerful as Caliban's traitorous brother. Witch, if the Helyan moves, kill him.'

Meggan Galley closed her eyes and began a soft incantation. It was a delicate spell, full of whispers and breathy syllables. Unsure of where this was headed, Pylos slowly raised his sword, his eyes fixed on the squat figure of Defecious.

'He moved!' Defecious shouted. 'Meggan!'

'*En Terragravis!*' the Pryderi woman cried and suddenly the earth around Pylos feet rose up like wave and crashed down upon him, burying him under three feet of orange clay.

'I believe that brings our meeting to a close,' said Remiel sardonically. In a blur of movement he lifted his right arm high into the

air and the roof above Drabella's head flew up into the sky. The harsh midday sun poured in through the empty space and embraced Drabella. Smoke rose off her body instantly and a chilling scream followed as her body erupted into flames. A burning hand fumbled with a needleback spike she had slung around her waist. Despite the agonies her flesh was wracked in, Drabella's hatred of her enemy was greater and she threw the spike with all her remaining strength at the robed figure before her. The spike speared into Remiel's shoulder and he teetered back, but did not fall. Refusing to cooperate with the paralysis shooting through his veins, Remiel lifted his left arm and Drabella flew up through the rafters into the blue sky above El Silat. He held her there, writhing in the honest light of day. Her body shook crazily as mortality was thrust upon her. In a violent shudder, she exploded. Pieces of burning flesh and brittle bone shot out in all directions.

Remiel dropped to the red dirt of the street and did not move.

Gerriod whirled around to face Defecious, whipping out a knife as he did so. It was the same knife Maeldune had used to slit Sefar's throat. Gerriod had taken it with the grim resolve to use it to avenge Sefar's death. Now he had his opportunity.

He threw the weapon with all his strength. Six months ago, the only use he had for knives was scaling fish, but a lot had happened in that time. Despite the weariness in his bones, Gerriod moved more like a Helyan warrior than a Tuathan mariner. His aim was good and the knife buried itself in Defecious' fat neck. Her eyes bulged as she realised what had happened.

She gasped to Meggan, 'Protect me witch! Caliban watches you still.'

Defecious collapsed to the ground as the pain from her neck flooded through her body. With some difficulty she extracted the knife from her throat. She groaned as burning air rushed in through the hole in her trachea bringing with it blood and dust.

The dull murmurs of another incantation could be heard above the sound of Defecious' gagging. Gerriod looked over at Trypp who had rushed to Mulupo's side as soon as the threat of Drabella had been removed. He had his hands full. Remiel lay still in the middle of the street with a needleback spine sticking out his shoulder. Pylos was twisting around under a blanket of dry clay, trying to free himself before his lungs gave out. The mariner knew that while Defecious remained alive, no-one was safe. She was down but not defeated. She had crawled

inside the tavern, a trail of green blood indicating which way she had gone.

Gerriod sprinted across to the tavern veranda and shoved past the Moraen whose voice was increasing in pitch and volume as she neared the end of her incantation.

Gerriod did not have to look far for the Ghul. Curled up in a ball under a table, the squat woman was clutching at her throat, trying to stem the flow of blood from the large gash Gerriod had made in her neck. So absorbed in her injury was she that she failed to notice him, failed to hear him pick up her knife she had pulled from her throat, failed to see him lift it high as he prepared to ram it into her skull. Gerriod figured that if he stabbed her enough, even a knife made out of common steel would kill her.

But he never got a chance to find out. Half a second before he was about to plunge his blade into his enemy, she vanished. Before his eyes, she disappeared and the shock of it was such that he momentarily forgot what he was doing. The knife just hung there in the dull light of the empty tavern, his outstretched arm ready to fall, but without a target to strike.

A shuffling sound at his feet brought him to his senses. Defecious was still there. Although she had vanished from sight, she had not vanished altogether. The witch's spell had made her invisible.

Gerriod's foot brushed something and he knew at once that Defecious was not incorporeal. If she had a body, she could be hurt – he just had to find her.

Gerriod swiped at the space before him, but connected with nothing. Defecious had rolled away and in that simple movement, Gerriod felt the odds shift from his favour to hers. She was alive. She could see him.

He swiped again and failed to hit anything. His heart rate increased. Again he thrust out his knife and again was met with disappointment. He bit his lip as he tried to think of a way out of his predicament. Defecious had stopped moving and was silent. All he could hear was his heart's pounding. He felt disoriented, scared to move and scared to stay put.

'You've wasted your opportunity,' a sneering voice breathed into his ear as sharp, invisible fingers wrapped around his throat. 'Now you will see what it's like to have a hole carved in your throat.'

Invisible fingernails pushed into Gerriod's neck. 'I apologise but I'll have to use my hands,' Defecious snarled and he felt his skin pop as her nails burst through into the soft tissue surrounding his larynx.

Gerriod howled as the fingers squeezed through the various tendons and muscles lining his neck. It was more painful than anything he could remember. Defecious delighted in his pain and whispered, 'I remember the times I spent with your father. He screamed much like you. Right up to the moment of his death.'

Gerriod stiffened. Defecious' comment sliced into him, wreaking more damage than her bloodied nails ever could. His head clouded and the world tilted. He was falling to the floor, only vaguely aware that he had been released. He had heard a dull thudding sound and footsteps on the wooden boards he was lying on.

He opened his eyes to see Pylos, covered in red dirt, dragging him away across the floor. In the middle of the tavern, Defecious clutched furiously at the shatterstone sword in her stomach and then exploded.

'That's the end of her,' Pylos said proudly as he wiped the dirt from his legs and arms.

'That was a *her*?' Gerriod said groggily as the Helyan helped him to his feet.

'I think so,' Pylos replied.

When they exited into the bright street outside, Trypp was pouring water from his flask into Mulupo's parched mouth. The Spriggan had not opened his eyes, but he was gulping down the water. His dehydrated body looked so frail that Trypp was afraid to move him into the shade.

Gerriod and Pylos ignored the Moraen witch who was now coiled up in a corner of the veranda with her head cast down, clearly unwilling to continue the conflict. They ran to the middle of the dusty street where Remiel lay as still as a corpse.

Leaning over his body, Pylos could see that Remiel was not dead. In fact, his eyelids fluttered and his mouth grimaced as he used his Morgai talents to heal himself. The needleback poison was powerful, but not enough to keep him down.

Within minutes he was on his feet. He staggered as he tried to walk over to Trypp and Mulupo. Suddenly his legs buckled underneath him and he fell to the ground for the second time that day.

'Take it easy, Remiel. You're spent,' Gerriod said as he bent over the Morgai. 'You need to rest a minute.'

Suddenly a groan from the tavern's veranda reminded them that not all their enemies had been dispatched. With one hand on his sword, Pylos approached the Moraen huddled up in the shadowy corner of the veranda.

She was in an anxious state, talking to herself in disjointed sentences as she fumbled around with her blouse. Pylos stopped. He had wanted to rub the witch's face in the dirt she had encased him in, but as he watched her frantically loosening the cords of her blouse, any animosity he felt was replaced by pity.

Her long fingers moved feverishly, tearing at the cords. 'No, no, no – wouldn't dare – I did what he said – Aggie – come here baby, come to me.'

Her words spluttered out her mouth as anxiety consumed her body. Frustrated by her inability to easily untie her blouse, she yanked savagely at the material, ripping it to reveal the pale grey scales of her chest. The Birthstone had faded. Meggan Galley's connection to her daughter Agatha was severed. Down in the Endless, the poor child had been killed.

Meggan sank to her knees and let loose a tortured howl.

'What is it?' Pylos said rushing to her and dropping by her side. 'Are you hurt?'

Tears exploded from her eyes and her body heaved forward wracked by sorrow. She toppled over onto the red dust that covered the veranda. Her hands rose up to the sides of her head and pounded her temples. Pylos had never seen anyone so overcome with emotion. 'Please tell me what is wrong,' he urged her, but his request fell on deaf ears. He recalled the name Defecious had mentioned earlier and used it in the hope she would respond. 'Meggan?'

Her sobbing increased in its intensity. Her tail shuddered and her fragile hands continued to strike her face. 'I am betrayed.'

*Caliban leant in close to her, deliberately making her uncomfortable by his nearness. 'You have served me well these past months Meggan. Your soothing magicks have done much to ease my pain.'*

*Meggan nodded respectfully. She acted as if the comment pleased her, but they both knew that the only reason Meggan did anything for her captor was for the welfare of the child he had stolen from her. 'I am glad I please you, my lord. May I be so bold as to ask to see Agatha again? It has been three weeks since I last saw her.'*

*Caliban smiled. Yellow teeth sticking out at awkward angles did little to reassure Meggan that he would agree to her request. 'It is a fair request,' he said with the benevolence of a priest, 'but I am considering a new arrangement. Something more... permanent.'*

*'Permanent?' she asked nervously. The word filled her with dread.*

*'How would you like to return to the world above? Return for good, with Agatha in your arms, left to live a life free of the Ghul, left alone as you were before all this began?'*

*Suspicion reared up in her eyes. She had not dared to dream such a thing in all her dark days in the Endless. She had resolved herself to a life of captivity, brightened only by the rare hours Caliban let her spend with her child. And now he, who had taken away all hope, was handing it back to her. She looked quizzically at him, failing to find the words he needed to hear.*

*He nodded, as if her silence were a reply. 'I understand your hesitation Meggan, but I have no quarrel with you. I would not see you suffer unnecessarily after all you have done for me.'*

*She swallowed. 'So I can just leave? With Agatha?'*

*'Not yet. There is one more thing I require you to do. One task you must perform and then you and Agatha will be free to return to the Myr, free to go where you will.'*

*As every second passed, the hope of a new life took form in the back of her mind, and as this new reality was realised in her imaginings, the likelihood of her denying Caliban in his request faded away.*

*'I will do whatever you require of me.'*

*'Well done, my dear.' He patted her on the arm, like a father pleased with the behaviour of his child. 'Excellent choice.'*

*As she exited Caliban's cottage, she caught sight of another witch approaching the house, slithering across the rock accompanied by two Ghul soldiers. This was hardly unusual. The numbers of Pryderi captive in the Endless had swelled over recent months. But the Moraen approaching the house was the last one Meggan expected to see in Caliban's realm.*

*'Arinna?' Meggan gasped.*

*'Remiel? What's wrong with her?' Pylos called as his companion made his way over to the veranda. 'She's won't respond to me. She keeps hitting herself and speaking nonsense.'*

*'It is not nonsense that she speaks,' said Trypp who had left Mulupo in Gerriod's care. 'Akampa Lodd told me about the Pryderi on our journey to Cessair. It is not common knowledge but the bond they share with their young manifests itself in a soft blue light that radiates from a stone above the mother's heart.'*

Pylos instinctively gazed at the forlorn witch's chest. 'But I don't see –'

He realised as soon as he said it. The bond had been broken. Her skin was pale. She had just discovered her child had been slain.

Remiel's face was frozen in horror, his jaw clenched, his eyes fixed in a manic stare.

Pylos placed a hand on Meggan's shoulder but she was oblivious to all around her. The Helyan rose and turned to Remiel. They were both thinking of Caliban. 'How could he do such a thing?' Pylos said incredulously.

*'Lord Caliban, your brother and the others will not go with Drabella. They will kill her and Defecious without hesitation.'*

*'Yes, Lucetious. I believe you are correct.'* Caliban leant forward on his throne of bone and stared into his lieutenant's hollow face. *'You do not see how this serves our interests?'*

*'Regretfully, I do not.'*

*'Lucetious, this action achieves two things. Firstly, Drabella and Defecious have both let me down. Drabella's bungling efforts to kill the Sapphyrran Trypp Elan at Madron's Pass cannot be tolerated. Similarly, Defecious' sacking of the city of Sulis should have been achieved with ease but instead she retreated her forces and let the Helyans kill Anaresis. This mission will be a punitive display to all other Ghul as to what happens when my expectations are not reached.'*

*Lucetious nodded but said nothing.*

*'Furthermore, the Spriggan must now be cast back among the Myrrans. This must be done before they depart from El Silat.'*

*'I begin to see,' Lucetious said with great humility. He bowed before Caliban. 'What would you ask of me? What are your orders?'*

*'Once Drabella and Defecious have been defeated, I want you to kill Meggan's child. I want to see my brother's face when he realises the child was killed for his... edification.'*

Remiel's jaw unlocked and an agonised response rumbled out. 'He did it for me.'

'What? He would kill a child to spite you?'

Remiel continued to stare at the pathetic figure coiled up in the corner of the veranda. 'He has shed all humanity.'

The Moraen continued to pound her head. Strange sounds spilled out her mouth – the final components to an incantation that had not been

heard for hundreds of years. Meggan's voice grew and her hands continued to strike her head and then suddenly a sharp snapping sound filled the air. She froze, and for a brief second, she resembled an intricately carved sculpture. All colour fled from her body which momentarily took on the quality of glass. Before Remiel, Pylos or Trypp could move, the translucent body before them shattered into countless pieces which spilled across the veranda and out onto the street.

Remiel bellowed in rage. His Morgai power blended with his voice and the walls of the houses shook as his agonised scream filled the air. 'A child, Caliban!' he roared at the sky. 'A child!' His hands radiated with cold, blue light. A crackling sound drowned out all other noises on the street and the air was filled with lightning. The tiny bodies of a cloud of dead shatterbugs fell to the earth.

Remiel sank to his knees in the middle of the street and broke down crying.

Pylos gazed over his shoulder at the tavern veranda where thousands of glass shards glittered in the sunlight. 'Why would she kill herself?'

'She lost her child Pylos,' Trypp said distantly. 'I imagine she could not live without her.'

'But she is not the first mother to outlive her offspring.'

It was difficult for the Helyan. In his culture, suicide was not an option. It was considered the end to all options. To give oneself to suicide was considered an action of cowardice. He could not understand why someone would nullify their own existence when faced with the death of others.

'Not all races are as stoic as the Helyans, Pylos,' Gerriod snapped. 'Not everyone can look death in the face with a steely gaze. You could be more compassionate.'

Pylos was surprised by Gerriod's tone but not offended by it. In a way, he was impressed that the Tuathan spoken his mind. He smiled softly in response. 'Compassion doesn't come easily to a people like us.' He didn't say it defensively; it was almost like a confession.

'Perhaps centuries of celebrating death in festivals such as the Forging has inured you to the struggles other people have with their mortality,' suggested Trypp.

Gerriod nodded. 'I imagine, in the Endless, under the tyranny of Caliban, the witch had to cling to something – perhaps hope that one day she would be reunited with her daughter. It is likely that her daughter was her strength, the thing that kept her going when everything else was lost. Once that hope was destroyed, she had nothing left to live for.'



As Gerriod spoke Pylos noticed his voice begin to shake. Something had rattled the mariner. It wasn't just the death of the Moraen. There was something else.

'What is it Gerriod?'

At first Pylos thought that Gerriod had not heard him, but the mariner was trying to get control over his fraying emotions before replying. 'The Ghul in the tavern,' he said as he waved a hand towards the building across the street. 'She said something. Something bad.'

'What Gerriod? She said what?'

'She told me that she had tortured my father before he –'

Pylos cut him off. 'Gerriod, these creatures are not to be trusted. Your father is not dead.'

'Pylos, he is held captive by the very man who murdered that woman's child. How would you know that?'

'Because,' Pylos said softly, 'I cannot believe we live in an age where a son as dutiful and courageous as you can journey the lengths of two worlds and face dangers that would send most men scurrying and not find what he seeks at the end of it. Your father is alive and I will make sure that every hour he has spent in the Endless is paid for by his tormentors.'

Gerriod fell down in a heap beside Mulupo. Although the argument Pylos put forward had holes large enough to stick a sword into them, it was exactly what he needed to hear in light of Defecious' sneering claim. Gerriod had to trust one of them – he picked Pylos' story over the Ghul's.

Trypp smiled. Pylos' sentiments shouldn't have come as a surprise to any of them. It made perfect sense that the Helyan admired Gerriod in the way he did. The Tuathan had fought on. He had persevered despite being surrounded by younger, fitter men who had been trained for such a quest as they were on. Gerriod had no Birthstone to tell him that his father was still alive and yet he had not faltered in his commitment to finishing the mission. His courage was uncommon.

Remiel returned to the group. His dirty face displayed two patches of clean skin where he had wiped away his tears. 'I am sorry,' he said disconsolately. 'I forgot myself.'

'It's understandable,' Trypp said, 'but we need your aid here. Mulupo is in a bad way.'

The Spriggan's breathing was shallow and although he was still conscious, there was nothing about him that indicated he was aware of the group that crouched around him.

Remiel placed a hand upon Mulupo's forehead.

‘Will he live?’ Trypp asked with an uncharacteristic note of nervousness in his voice.

‘He will if I have anything to do with it,’ said Remiel resolutely. ‘Heal.’ It was more an exhalation than speech but it had the desired effect. Mulupo opened his eyes.

‘Why do you gaze upon me with sepulchral faces. You look as though you have just concluded a requiescat! Be joyous for I have escaped the vituperation and objugation of my unsavoury tellurian hosts.’

Pylos laughed and observed, ‘Yes – things are back to normal. I can’t understand a word he is saying.’

Mulupo ignored this comment as he ran his tongue across his dry, cracked lips. ‘My mouth’s xeric environment is much like a desert. Does anyone have any of Nessa’s vineous delights?’

Trypp passed his water flask to Mulupo who sniffed and pulled a face. ‘My good Trypp, let me speak plainly. I desire wine, not water. How thirsty do you think I am?’

Trypp’s face broke out in a broad smile. It was good to have the Spriggan back with them. Pylos, Gerriod and Trypp laughed loudly, unable to hide the joy they felt in being reunited with their garrulous companion.

If Remiel was pleased by Mulupo’s presence, he did not show it. He was looking at the Spriggan with a strange expression on his face. He was staring, almost as if he didn’t recognise him.

Half an hour later, when they had patched up all their wounds and bruises, the party picked up their belongings and headed off through the city. Gerriod, already limping from his crossing of the Marid, carried Mulupo with Trypp hovering nearby attending to the Spriggan’s every wish – food, shade, conversation. Pylos used the opportunity to sidle up to Remiel. ‘What is wrong?’ he said cutting to the heart of the matter. ‘Back there, after healing Mulupo you –’

‘He’s different,’ Remiel whispered quickly, cutting Pylos off for fear of being overheard. ‘I don’t know what it is, Pylos, but something had changed about the Spriggan.’

‘Yes, he’s been taken to an inch of his life,’ Pylos whispered back louder than Remiel would have liked.

Remiel stopped and looked Pylos in the face. His eyes were rimmed with tears. ‘I tell you truly Pylos, I have no idea how we can win this fight.’ He quickly turned from the Helyan and headed off down the street at a pace that the rest of the group could not match.

To assist Gerriod, Pylos took Mulupo from him. The Spriggan wasted no time in engaging Pylos in conversation. The whole time Pylos searched for some indication of the changes Remiel had mentioned and finding none, concluded that the stress of the mission was finally taking its toll upon Remiel Grayson. For all the vaunted power of the Morgai, Remiel was now struggling.

They moved through the city quickly. A shatterbug flew by and Pylos reached out in a blur of motion and squashed it in his fist. He looked at the stain the bug had left on his hand and pondered. 'Trypp, explain your theory on the shatterbugs. How can a bug be... be whatever it is you think they are.'

'They appeared just before chaos spread across our world,' Trypp replied. 'They must be connected to Caliban somehow. I don't know how but they must communicate what they see to him.'

Mulupo cocked his head up excitedly. 'Of course! How did I forget such a thing?'

'Forget what?' asked Pylos

'The night Caliban appeared in Sarra, he released the arachna. In my addled state brought on by my year in stasis, I had forgotten this detail.'

Gerriod frowned. 'Arachna?'

'Shatterbugs. They are native to the Endless.'

Pylos frowned. 'How could the shatterbugs provide Caliban with information? They're just insects! And even if they could communicate with him somehow and provide him with information, surely it would take them weeks to fly back to him.'

'Perhaps that their crystalline bodies act as a conduit to him,' Trypp suggested.

'A what?' Gerriod sighed. 'Trypp, you're sounding like Mulupo.'

'The mariner compliments you,' Mulupo quipped.

'A conduit,' Trypp explained. 'Somehow they send what they see, like a reflection of sort.'

'Now you've really lost me.'

'Pylos, think of the Moraen Meggan. Although she was separated from her child, by many leagues, their bond was such that she knew when her child was slain. Perhaps the shatterbugs have a similar connection and that Caliban has found the means to exploit it.'

'That's ridiculous.'

Remiel shook his head. 'No. It's not. It makes sense. He has seen and heard almost everything we have done these past months. The shatterbugs may be the lens through which he focuses upon all we do.'

'Then why did he do so much to draw you out? If he had known where you were, why did he not go to you directly?'

'Garlot Abbey is famous for the families of churchwrens its steeples attract. They are fairly ordinary birds except for one unique aspect. They eat shatterbugs. They love them. If what Trypp is suggesting is true, that somehow the shatterbugs provided Caliban with sight, then the absence of them around Garlot kept me hidden from him.'

'And now he watches your every step.'

'No. Not anymore.' Remiel glanced up at a number of shatterbugs that were hovering aimlessly a little further down the path. He held out a hand, his fingers stretching out wide. Suddenly he clenched his fist and the shatterbugs all exploded in mid-air, as if each of them had been squeezed by an invisible hand.

'He still knows we're coming' noted Gerriod.

'Does this change anything?' Pylos said bluntly. 'Does this alter the course?' Although he presented his thoughts as questions, it was clear to everyone that Pylos would not consider deviating from their course. For him, the point of no return was always one step after the start of a mission. He would see the task through. The fact that Caliban was prepared for them only tempered the steel of his heart.

All eyes turned to Remiel. 'Not a jot,' he said, after a long pause. 'We will end this, one way or another.'

'How did we fail to notice?' Pylos thought aloud. 'Why did we not question the appearance of the shatterbugs?'

'Perhaps because they are such beautiful, benign creatures,' Trypp said softly. 'They literally brought light into our world. They gave us no reason to fear them.'

'Well put, Master Trypp,' Mulupo said with a laugh. 'Exquisitely expressed. The Sapphyrro would make excellent Spriggans!'

It was a light-hearted comment, but Mulupo looked anything but carefree. Dried skin lay across his lips like curled up autumn leaves. His once ruddy complexion had faded and his eyes were bloodshot. Though he was no longer of the verge of death, he was struggling under the Kheperan heat. Pylos was beginning to doubt whether the Spriggan could continue on in his present state.

'Let's stop for a bit,' Pylos said suddenly. 'I could use a drink.'

They stepped off the road and sat on a large flat rock under one of the bomb-blossom trees that lined the route down to El Silat's docks. It formed a rudimentary table around which they all sat. Pylos took the top off his water flask and handed it over to Mulupo.

'I think I can make it a bit more palatable,' said Remiel, who waved his hand over the flask Pylos had given to the Spriggan.

Suddenly a rich bouquet of Nessian grapes wafted out of the bottle and Mulupo's face shone. He quickly took a swig and his eyes almost popped out of his head as the taste of Nessa's best wine coated a tongue that had previously been covered in dust.

After three long gulps, Mulupo lifted his head and beamed at Remiel. 'Prelate, you have kept your best skill hidden until now. How long have you possessed the talent to transmogrify humble water into wine.'

Remiel shook his head. 'It's still water, but I have made you think that it's wine. It is the power of suggestion.'

'Well sir, it is a rare skill indeed. I wish that you had revealed it earlier.'

Gerriod looked harshly at Remiel then quickly turned away but not before Remiel had noticed his glance.

'Gerriod you wish to say something to me?'

'I do but I fear I will regret what comes out my mouth.'

'Soon we shall be sailing towards Caliban's End and the time for speech will be ended. Please speak your mind. I would have no enmity between us before the confrontation that awaits us all.'

The tension in Gerriod's body was obvious to all of them. They could feel his anger rising to the surface. 'So you can alter our minds now can you? It's not enough that you can wipe them altogether?'

'Gerriod, I do not blame you for your hostility. I should never have taken from you your memories of what happened that day on Lake Erras but I thought it was the merciful thing to do. I thought that you should live your life unencumbered by the terrible events of that day.'

'So you just used your talents to wipe it all away? Perhaps you could use them to give back to me my memory of that day.'

'I neither have the ability to change minds or erase them. Mulupo's imagination is what created the taste of wine. I merely made his mind more susceptible to what he most desired. I was not even Morgai when I sent your father and Caliban into the Worldpool. I was just a man. To make you forget, I had to use an apothecary's potion, a complex potable called *Nepenthes*.'

Gerriod was not appeased. 'So you can give us what we most desire, can you? I want my father! Can you give me that?'

He stood up and walked away. It seemed the closer they got to Caliban's End, the place where it all began, the harder it was for him to let go of what Remiel Grayson had done to him.

An uncomfortable silence settled on the group sitting around the flat boulder. Everyone looked down, rummaging through their minds for something that would change the mood.

Mulupo had another swig from the flask, burped loudly and smiled contentedly to indicate his thirst was quenched.

'I lost my temper, Remiel.' Gerriod's face was a mixture of embarrassment and contrition. 'I apologise.'

'You are the last person who should ever apologise to me.'

Out of the corner of his eyes, Gerriod saw something move behind Remiel, something small. Seconds later, a shatterbug flew over his shoulder and landed on the boulder in the centre of the group. They all looked at it as one and slammed their hands down upon it. In the centre of the boulder, their hands met. It was a unifying gesture and its symbolism was not lost on any of them, except perhaps for Gerriod whose hand at the bottom of the pile was coated in the incredibly sticky, phosphorescent goo that constituted most of the shatterbug's body.

'Let's go,' said Pylos, trying hard to stifle a laugh as he watched Gerriod trying to pull his hand from the boulder. The shatterbug goo eventually gave way and Gerriod fell backwards into Trypp.

Pylos picked up Mulupo who curled up like a child in the Helyan's muscled arms and closed his eyes in preparation for sleep. The wine not only tasted like wine, but it also seemed to have all the properties of alcohol. The Spriggan could think of nothing better than a nap.

They made their way through the rest of the city in silence and within the hour found themselves at the docks. A number of boats had been destroyed in the Ghul's assault upon the town. The flotsam and jetsam of these sunken ships bumped against the stone wall of the docks as gentle waves pushed and pulled along the lake's edge. This debris also including a number of dead bodies, bloated and pale in their watery grave.

The dock consisted of a number of stone jetties that jutted out into the lake. Gathered around the westernmost jetty were three small skiffs that seemed more or less intact.

'Look,' said Pylos, gazing at the skiffs. 'It seems the Ghul overlooked a few boats!'

Gerriod's face dropped when he realised the significance of Pylos' comment. 'You can't be serious! You're not suggesting that we head into the Worldpool in those, are you?'

'Have you got a better idea?'

'You've never seen the Worldpool Pylos. I have. If you think we can head into the maw in those, well, we may as well kill ourselves now and save ourselves the trip.'

'Gerriod' said Remiel as he casually crushed another couple of shatterbugs that had flown too near, 'you've survived the Worldpool before, Trypp fell from atop the Skyfall and lived, and Pylos, well I doubt there's anything that can kill him.'

'What about Mulupo?'

'We won't be taking him. He's done enough.'

Pylos was still carrying the Spriggan, cradling him in his arms. Despite the blazing sun and their hurried march through the city, Mulupo slept soundly. Though Remiel had repaired the trauma done to his body, he still needed to rest. There was little chance he would survive the battering the Worldpool would dish out.

'We can't leave him here,' Gerriod said softly, not wanting to wake the Spriggan.

'No. We'll put him in a boat, give him what's left of our provisions and set him on a course for Skyfall Town.'

'Oh, that's safe! As far as we know, Skyfall Town is still under attack from the Morrigu.'

'It's safer than where we're going. I'll put a protective barrier around his boat and guide it to safety. He will remain untouched.'

They made their way over to the skiffs. The boats were tiny with barely enough room for two men, but they were in sound condition. Remiel took off his outer robe and lay it inside the closest skiff. He then took Mulupo from Pylos and placed him tenderly into the boat, as if he were putting an infant to bed. Mulupo rolled on to his side, curling up into a ball, seemingly oblivious to where he was and where he was going.

'Wait a second,' said Gerriod in a hoarse whisper. 'What is that?'

Pylos shrugged. 'What is what?'

Gerriod leaned over the side of the skiff into which Remiel had just placed Mulupo. He pulled up the back of the Spriggan's waistcoat to reveal a large purple bruise. It lay in the small of Mulupo's back and looked like it would have caused him extreme discomfort. But he had not mentioned it, nor did he give any indication that he had been hurt in such a way.

‘That has to be incredibly painfully,’ Gerriod muttered, voicing the obvious. He looked up at Remiel and said, ‘I thought you healed him.’

‘I thought I had,’ replied Remiel, baffled by the existence of the bruise.

Pylos leaned closer and inspected the purple mark. ‘It looks as if his back has been punctured!’ he said incredulously.

‘Punctured?’ said Gerriod as the colour ran out of his face. A sense of dread and déjà vu settled on him simultaneously. There was something terrifying in Pylos’ observation, something that sat on the edge of his memory, teasing him from afar.

‘Gerriod?’ asked Pylos, turning around to face Gerriod. ‘What is it?’

Gerriod shook his head. Whatever it was, it had gone.

Trypp leant between Pylos and Gerriod and pulled down the Spriggan’s waistcoat to cover the bruise. ‘The Ghul are sadistic creatures. I imagine that bruise is but one of many tortures inflicted upon Mulupo.’

‘He seems okay now,’ Pylos said, trying to sound reassuring. He stood up, picked up the last of their provisions and placed them in the skiff at Mulupo’s feet. ‘He’ll be fine but we should send him on his way before more Ghul arrive.’

‘Agreed,’ said Remiel as he cast his eyes over the skiff. ‘It is time to bid another companion goodbye.’ He placed his hands upon the sides of the boat and gave a gentle push.

The boat drifted off across the water, watched by Remiel, Trypp, Gerriod and Pylos, until it was but a speck upon the rippling veil of the lake.



## Chapter Eight Amasis Research Facility

They rounded the headland and saw the outpost of Amasis moments before the setting sun slid behind the mountains to the west. At the far edge of the long sweeping beach a gleaming structure could be seen. Its shining surface took the last rays of daylight and reflected them, casting ethereal light across the entire beach. The tall, smooth building resembled the head of a giant axe that had been thrust into the sand. Its front edge which faced the sea was thin and curved. The rear of the vast building was hidden in shadow under the steep mountainside that framed the eastern edge of the beach.

Sela put a hand to her eyes to shade them from the brilliant light. 'Is that a building?' she said as she squinted at the unique structure. 'It seems to be made of glass.'

'It's not glass,' Jehenna said proudly. 'It's translucent metal developed by my mother. Harder than steel. Almost as tough as shatterstone but easier to work with. My mother had told me that they had had some success with it, but I never dreamt that they had built the entire installation out of the stuff.'

'Installation?' asked Bormanus.

'You are looking upon the Amasis Research Facility. My mother is director of the installation and its chief scientist.'

The sight of the beautiful Acoran gazing proudly up the beach at her mother's secret science facility filled Lilith with sorrow. She had seen hints of what lay ahead and the knowledge was as poignant as it was terrible.

A short pier made of Acoran iron had been built inside the rocky breakwater that extended out from the headland. A number of ships could be seen here, but they were derelict, either smashed up against the rocks or lying on their side caught on a sandbank which ran parallel to the shore.

Jehenna noticed one ship had been damaged significantly more than others in the maritime graveyard. The hull of this vessel was split and pocked with holes, as if it had been subjected to cannon-fire. The ship's deck was a field of arrow shafts made of bone. The Ghul. They had rained so many arrows down on the craft, there was hardly a square foot of timber that wasn't marked by their passing. Although the hull had been broken badly, Jehenna could still make out the lettering on the side of the vessel: *The Silhouette*.

Jehenna stopped dead when she saw it. She couldn't count the number of times she had sailed on that boat, but now it was almost unrecognisable. The Ghul had been merciless in their attack. There was no way anyone could have survived such an assault.

She sank to her knees and cried. She didn't care that her companions could see her. Didn't care that crying was a very uncharacteristic thing for her to do. Didn't care that she looked vulnerable and weak. In the sight of the destruction of her father's boat, and the likely slaughter of the rest of her family, nothing seemed to matter anymore.

A small hand touched her on the shoulder. 'Your family?' Sela asked tenderly.

'Yes,' she said and buried her head in her hands.

Jehenna had no way of knowing how long she had spent on her knees in the sand. Time seemed to have collapsed upon itself and was now a broken object she had no interest in. Simeon was dead. Her parents were dead. All she wanted to do was kneel on the beach and watch the waves lap at the shore. She would stay where she was until the tide had risen high enough to sweep her out to the sea where she would float forever, adrift and alone.

'Come on,' Sela said with a softness that she had kept hidden until now. 'We must go.'

Jehenna was vaguely aware of the Tamuan but the words she spoke did not take on any meaning. They were just sounds. It was as they were underwater. It was hard to hear underwater. The water made everything soft. Dull. Numb.

'Jehenna, it's almost nightfall,' the soft voice said. 'The Ghul will return. We must go.'

Ghul. Nightfall. She knew these words had significance but as the setting sun fell from view, she wasn't sure what they meant. She wanted to sleep. Sleep. For a very long time.

She felt hands take hold of her elbows and she was lifted onto her feet. She was walking but she wasn't sure where. Out of the corners of her eyes, she could make out the corpses of dead Acora, stripped of their flesh by wind and sand. Someone was talking to her once more, but the voice was not as soft as it was before. There was tension there. Jehenna thought the voice might shatter.

'Jehenna – you've got to pull it together. They are coming!'

Suddenly her head was pulled around and the shadows of hundreds of Ghul marching up the beach towards her pulled her back into reality.

Her vision became sharp. All sounds became clear. It was as if a blanket had been pulled off her senses, and the chill of reality slapped against her skin, waking her from her stupor.

‘I have a key!’ she shouted, and pulled out a locket that lay at the end of a golden chain she had been wearing around her neck. A delicate press along the side of the locket popped a tiny latch on the ornament, revealing a small compartment in which lay a key.

A bone arrow shaft splinted against the iron frame of the research facility’s doorway. The Ghul were within range. Another second would bring a volley of arrows that would kill them all.

‘Hurry up please!’ shouted Sela who was beside herself as she watched Jehenna turning the key in the door’s tiny keyhole.

A second passed and the volley of arrows was fired. But the shafts smashed harmlessly against the iron doors through which the company had passed. Sela winced at the sound of so many arrows hitting the doors. She groaned loudly, not knowing whether it was from relief or frustration.

*Dr Claudia Kallady.* It was her office. The golden letters on the frosted glass of the door said so. The door to the room was ajar. Jehenna turned to her companions and said, ‘Wait out here please.’ She pushed the door open just enough to slip through and disappeared into the room.

It was dark inside, but a cloud of shatterbugs outside the dirty windows at the far end of the office provided enough light for Jehenna to avoid walking into the furniture that cluttered the room. There were chairs, benches and stools scattered throughout the large room. Piles of books lay on the floor amid sheets of paper and piles of clothes. To one side of the room a cot had been set up beside a stolid oaken desk. Crumpled sheets lay heaped at one end of the cot. At the head, a pillow still bore the imprint of the head that had recently rested there. Behind the desk, an ornate chair crafted from maroon leather and Acoran ironwood faced the garden that lay on the other side of the windows.

‘Mumma?’

Although she had hardly spoken above a whisper, in the silence of the room Jehenna’s voice reverberated off the timber panels. In the chaos of her mother’s office, she felt like an intruder.

Jehenna stepped forward just as the arm chair swung around to reveal her mother.

She looked haggard. She wore the white scientists' robe Jehenna had always associated with her, but it was scuffed and ripped. Her dark skin was similarly marked by bruises and cuts. The only thing about her that wasn't unkempt or dirty was a small glass sphere that was suspended from a silver chain around her neck. The sphere shimmered in the soft light filtering in through the grimy windows.

Jehenna rushed to her mother and knelt down before the armchair. She clasped her arms around her mother's legs and threw her head into her lap just as she had done a hundred times before as a child. Claudia Kallady put a soft hand on her daughter's back and patted her gently.

'Jehenna, I'm sorry to inform you that your father is dead. I buried Jonas three weeks ago.'

Jehenna looked up into her mother's tear-soaked, brown eyes. There was a time when those eyes sparkled with curiosity and desire. Now they just looked like flat, muddy puddles. 'Mumma, Simeon is dead too. I was with him when he died.'

Claudia didn't even blink. She just stared back at her daughter and said, 'I thought something like that would happen.'

'Mumma?' Jehenna was unnerved by the reaction.

Claudia gave Jehenna a few brusque taps on the back and pulled herself out of her chair. She gazed around the room with a guilty look on her face. 'I'm sorry Jehenna. Had I known you were coming I would have tidied up.'

She proceeded to pick up books from the floor and place them in untidy piles on her desk. 'So much to do. Never enough time in the day to do it.'

It was erratic behaviour and Claudia Kallady was never erratic.

'Please stop,' said Jehenna as she grabbed her mother by her shoulders and swivelled her around so that she was facing her. 'Tell me Mumma, how did you survive? Everyone else is dead. How did you escape?'

Claudia walked to the dirty windows and rubbed a hole in the grime so she could see better. 'Do you like my garden Jehenna? I've become quite the gardener since coming to Amasis.'

Jehenna said nothing but just gazed dumbly at the sad figure of her mother looking out onto a garden that contained more weeds than flowers.

Claudia placed her head against the window and sighed. 'On the night they attacked, I was out in the garden. I had no idea what was taking place on the beach. It was not until the Ghul were climbing over the garden wall that I...' She stopped. In her mind, the terrible night replayed itself. She could see the pallid figures of Caliban's forces

streaming over the wall like a plague of rattu. She could see herself running through the garden, fumbling with the door of her office before the Ghul could take her.

‘The actual facility was locked down before they could enter. Everyone but me was outside. That was many weeks ago.’

‘Mumma, they’re back. We narrowly escaped them on our way in.’

‘Oh that’s not news to me Jehenna!’ Claudia laughed frivolously. ‘They’ve been back every night! They keep climbing over the walls, but they can’t get in.’

Jehenna looked at the windows and the door leading out into the bedraggled garden. They looked so flimsy, she was surprised that it had kept out the breeze, let alone the Ghul hordes.

‘They couldn’t get in here?’ she said, confusion colouring her voice. She twisted the handle and stepped outside into the garden.

Suddenly Claudia burst into action. She leapt towards the door, grabbed Jehenna by the arm and swung her back into the room.

Jehenna was stunned. She said nothing but stared at her mother as though she didn’t know who she was.

Claudia stepped forward and stroked her daughter’s hair tenderly. ‘I’m sorry darling. I didn’t mean to scare you. It’s just it’s dangerous for you to go out there.’

Jehenna nodded as if she understood but her eyes remained wide open in surprise. ‘Are there Ghul out there Mumma?’

‘No darling. Only plants.’ She stepped back towards the window and pointed at three purple plants that stood in the centre of the garden. The plants were as tall as a small tree but unlike a tree they were mobile, sliding like serpents on prehensile stalks. When Jehenna moved closer to the window the plants slithered forward. At the end of their stalks a thick corolla quivered and then in unison, three long lurid tongues slithered out and slapped against the glass window that Jehenna was peering through. She shrieked in shock and jumped back from the glass.

Claudia smiled sympathetically. ‘They are a little frightening, aren’t they!’ The tongues continued to lick at the window. ‘They have voracious appetites. They must have eaten over one hundred Ghul in the past week.’

She moved over to the door and before Jehenna could do anything, stepped outside into the garden. She walked straight up to the bizarre plants and gently herded them away from the window. They slithered across the garden with their tongues tucked back behind their petals.

Jehenna rushed to her mother when she came back into the room. ‘Why didn’t the plants attack you?’

‘Why? Because I’m their mother,’ Claudia replied in a teasing fashion. ‘Until recently I fed them all the gillygulls I could shoot down.’ She smirked to herself. ‘At least some good has come out of the Ghul’s discovery of Amasis – I bet the gillygulls are happy about it!’

‘Mumma, there are people outside the office who are waiting for me. They need your help. I need your help. We need passage north to Cephalonia.’

‘Of course darling. That can be arranged.’

‘Mother,’ Jehenna said, adopting a formality reserved for the most serious of occasions, ‘are you alright? You... don’t seem yourself.’ In the privacy of her mind, Jehenna scolded herself for asking such a stupid question. Her mother had lost her soulmate. Her husband of thirty-three years. How could she be anything but devastated?

‘Oh, I’ve done some incredible work lately Jehenna. You’ll be so proud!’ Claudia replied in a voice that bubbled with glee.

Jehenna frowned. Joviality never came naturally to her mother.

‘Come. I have something to show you.’

She walked out of the office and into the corridor where Lilith, Sela and Bormanus were waiting patiently. Without acknowledging Jehenna’s companions, Claudia sped off down the hallway, eager to show her daughter her latest work.

Sela and Bormanus hurried off to catch up to the scientist, but Jehenna just stood there dumbstruck.

Lilith had stayed back. She knew what was going through Jehenna’s oppressed heart. ‘Child,’ she said sagely, ‘you will find that people respond to death in vastly different ways. Your mother has been all alone for weeks. She could have been crippled by despair, but instead of allowing that to happen, she chose to cut off her emotions. It’s probably what has kept her alive.’

They made their way through the maze of shining, empty corridors until they came to a broad corridor that ended in a metal bridge. On either side of the bridge lay darkness. The sound of surging surf rolled down the hallway towards them. Claudia stopped and addressed them as if she were a tour guide. ‘We are now entering a part of the facility that is actually carved into the rock of the escarpment. It took us many years to dig this out but what we have down here is very important to us. We didn’t want to make it too easy to find.’

As they approached the bridge, Sela's nose crinkled up and a tortured expression appeared on her furry face. 'What's that smell?' she said in a pained voice.

Claudia smiled at the question but did not answer it.

They stepped out onto the bridge and the sound of crashing water drove away all thought of the stench of sulphur. They had walked out into a chasm. Steep rock walls could be seen fading into the darkness and the occasional spray of salty water suggested the sea had somehow found its way into the chasm. Jehenna leant over the tall sides of the bridge to see the white crests of waves drawing an intricate, ever-changing pattern on the shifting dark waters beneath. The base of the chasm as far as she could see was a seething mass of ocean that squirmed about in the narrow fissure like a serpent caught in a crevice.

A sudden wave exploded against the rock wall nearest Jehenna and the resulting spray drenched her.

Claudia exploded in laughter when her daughter pulled her head back from the bridge's edge. Jehenna's long, dark locks lay against her scalp like trodden grass. 'Jehenna, if you're done having a bath, perhaps we'll move on.'

Sela sniggered at Claudia's comment but the sulky glare Jehenna gave her mother was more entertainment than she could have hoped for. Claudia, spurred on by Jehenna's petulant look, added, 'Oh do come on, Jen! You're leaving a puddle on the bridge.'

The surging flood below was not enough to drown out the sound of Jehenna stomping across the metal bridge as she followed her mother to the ominous-looking iron doors that lay embedded in the wall on the far side of the bridge.

Claudia Kallady placed her palms against the doors and pushed. 'I think you're going to like this.'

The doors swung open to reveal a circular room that was as large as any indoor space they had ever seen. As one, they all walked through the doorway to find themselves standing on an elevated iron landing. Walkways extended to the left and right of the landing and ran around the circumference of the room until they met on the opposite side where another set of double doors stood behind a similar iron landing.

The room was filled with tables covered with white cloth and illuminated by lanterns of shatterbugs that were suspended from the high ceiling above. But it was not the tables that held Claudia's guests' attention. It was what lay on them.

Jehenna, Sela, Bormanus and Lilith all had the same expression of stupefaction and wonderment upon their faces. They did not understand what they were looking at, but they all knew the objects on the tables were

something special. They varied in shape and were constructed of all manner of materials, although metal and glass figured prominently. Many of the objects gleamed in the gentle light cast from the lanterns overhead.

'Just what exactly are we looking at here, Dr Kallady?' Bormanus' oily voice articulated what the others had been thinking.

'Weapons,' she replied. She said it quietly and proudly, the way a mother might present a sleeping newborn. *Weapons*. Jehenna realised that her mother's work had been her only defence against the madness that follows in the wake of absolute despair. Claudia Kallady had not only lost a husband and son. She had lost a community. She had built the Amasis Research Facility from scratch, made it a home to hundreds and in their isolation they had become a family. She had watched the Ghul tear down that community. The weapons were the only things left of that life she had known and they were the means to retribution.

'Weapons?' Jehenna said slowly, as if waking from a dream. It had been a long journey. The longest of long journeys. They had been beaten almost every step of the way. But it didn't have to stay that way.

The sudden promise of something that could help them change their status of victims, help them strike back, had a profound effect upon the young Acoran. She felt giddy. The presence of so many tools for revenge was like an epiphany. She knew what she had to do. She had to adapt. Harden her heart. Like her mother, Jehenna had to dispense of her sadness. Weapons were cold. Hard. Sharp. The very things she needed to be.

'Can we see them?' Jehenna asked. Despite the melancholia that had been eating at every cell in her body, the corners of her mouth crept upwards in a show of perverse delight.

Claudia smiled back and the similarity of mother to daughter was extraordinary. 'Why, if you're good, I may even let you keep an item or two!'

They made their way down two ladders suspended from the landing onto the floor beneath. As they clambered down the ladders, the smell of sulphur rose up again, this time stronger than before.

'It stinks even more in here!' exclaimed Sela between highly exaggerated gagging noises. The smell was at its worst around the room's periphery, so they were pleased when Jehenna's mother led them through the tables to the centre of the room.



The room was an arsenal but unlike any found in the Myr. There were variations on conventional weapons but most of the objects on the tables were completely new inventions.

Jehenna picked up a glass sphere that had a number of small copper dials in it. 'What is this?' she asked, turning the sphere over and over in her hand, trying to get some sense of its purpose.

Claudia beamed. 'That's one of mine!' she said proudly. 'It's a sunsphere. I designed it when I first heard of the Ghul's weakness to direct sunlight.'

'What does it do? How does it work?'

'The dials on the side control the phosphorescent intensity and the dial on the top controls the yield.'

'Mumma, you're talking like a Spriggan. I have no idea —'

'Perhaps it would be easier to show you.'

She picked up the sphere and set its dials with the speed and casual manner of someone who literally knew the equipment inside out. Then she lobbed the sphere high into the air. The size of the room was such that there was no risk of the object hitting the ceiling which was over fifty feet above them. When the sphere was at the zenith of its throw there was a loud click and then...

It was like walking outside on a hot summer's day. The light was pure and brilliant.

Sela closed her eyes and enjoyed the warmth of the light upon her face whilst Bormanus shielded his eyes. Jehenna and Lilith continued to stare at the light, their iris' shrinking to tiny pinpricks.

'Oh my, Mumma!' sighed Jehenna as the light faded. 'It's wonderful.'

'You could kill an entire squad of Ghul with a single sphere,' Claudia said as she picked up another sphere from the table and tossed it to her daughter. 'The longest we have been able to sustain the blast is five seconds. By that time I imagine every Ghul with fifty feet would be incinerated.'

'May I keep this?'

'Of course. We never went into production with them, but you are welcome to take the prototypes.'

There was one other sunsphere on the table. Jehenna gave it to Sela who smiled appreciatively at Claudia and followed her to the next table where a collection of leather vambraces lay.

'These just look like arm guards,' the Tamuan said as she picked up one of the vambraces and placed it on her forearm.

'You might want to be careful with that,' Claudia warned as the Tamuan watched the vambrace curl around her forearm.

‘Why? What does it do?’

‘Hold your arm in front of you and twist it.’

Sela did so and out of a small hole at the front of the vambrace shot an incredibly long black tendril. It resembled a friggs’s tongue, only a thousand times longer and much stickier. It whipped across the room and connected with the pommel of a triple-bladed weapon on a table fifty feet away and stuck to it.

As soon as the tendril was fully extended, it whipped back towards the arm guard fixed to Sela’s arm, retracting at a frightening speed. Unfortunately for the Tamuan, the tendril was still connected to the pommel of the sword which now hurtled through the air promising Sela a bloody end.

The Tamuan was frozen to the spot, all too aware of the fearsome weapon that was about to be embedded in her skull.

At the last second, a shield was raised in front of her face. Expecting the shield to do nothing to stop the oncoming weapon, Sela closed her eyes and accepted her untimely death.

*Gloop!*

It was not the sound she imagined a sword would make upon colliding with a shield. Sela’s mind reeled trying to understand what had happened. She opened her eyes to see Claudia lowering the shield she had thrust between Sela and the sword.

Jehenna, Lilith and Bormanus were gazing at the miraculous shield with their mouths wide open. They had seen the sword lunging at Sela. They had seen Claudia quickly pick up the shiny black buckler from the table beside her and hold it in front of Sela. They had watched as the dark, glassy surface swallowed the sword in its entirety.

Jehenna stepped forward and peered closely at the strange shield. She could see slight ripples on the surface of the buckler, like the skin of a pond shortly after a stone had been thrown into it. ‘I don’t believe it!’ she said as she lifted her hand to touch the shield.

‘Stop!’ cried Lilith, anxious that the Acoran would lose her hand.

‘Oh, it’s quite safe,’ reassured Claudia. ‘It takes some force to push through the buckler’s outer layer.’

Bormanus approached the shield, amazed by what he had just witnessed. ‘Outer-layer?’ he asked. ‘Just how many layers are there?’

‘We’re not sure.’

‘Not sure!’ he exclaimed. ‘You made it didn’t you?’

Claudia shook her head and laughed frivolously. ‘Actually, I had little to do with this wondrous shield. Someone else was responsible for this amazing piece.’

‘How does it work?’ asked Sela creeping around to the front of the shield, still shaken by the incident. She was fumbling with the arm guard, terrified that any slight movement would release the tendril again. ‘Where did the sword go?’

‘I really can’t tell you. It was once explained to me, but the science of it is beyond even my comprehension.’

‘Science?’ Bormanus said with great surprise. ‘You mean it’s not magick.’

Claudia smirked. ‘Young man, just because a thing can’t be explained does not make it magick. Or divine.’

Claudia spent the next hour taking the group around the room, showing off such wonders as glass-steel swords capable of cutting through iron and suits of armour that were lighter than cloth.

‘But Mumma, with all these weapons, how is it that the Ghul defeated you?’

Claudia’s face darkened. ‘They knew when to strike. Four weeks ago, Amasis was hit by a dreadful storm. A number of ships, including your father’s, were blown against the sandbar. We had to move them as they were taking on water. On the night the Ghul attacked, we had everyone out on the breakwater helping move the marooned vessels. I was in the garden, picking some pok poks for everyone to eat when Caliban’s troops appeared. Their timing was impeccable. Not a single Acoran was inside the facility. The Ghul had filled the beach before we were even aware of their arrival. We were cut off from the very weapons we had been designing to fight them. We were easy pickings for them. They just stood on the sands firing volley after volley at us. There was nowhere to hide.’

A long silence followed. No-one knew what to say. Finally, unable to endure the awkward speechlessness, Sela asked, ‘Did they get inside?’

‘No. Fortunately we have security protocols that denied them the access they were seeking. The facility went into lockdown as soon as the last Acoran stepped outside to rescue the ships stranded on the sandbar. It stopped them that night, but it is only a matter of time before they claw their way in.’

Suddenly, the double doors on the landing above burst open and a battalion of Ghul troops spilled in. They quickly spread out across the iron balcony encircling the room. As each soldier entered, he or she

raised a bone crossbow and trained it on the Myrrans below. Soldier after soldier filed in until the entire balcony was packed thick with Ghul.

A small gap appeared in the troops on the nearest landing. A heavily armed Ghul officer wearing a horned skull as a helmet marched through the gap and stepped up to the edge of the landing. He held his left hand aloft as a signal to his troops to hold their fire.

Through the eye sockets of the bone armour, Jehenna could see the officer's eyes twitching, waiting for any sign of movement from the floor beneath him. He sneered at them revealing long yellow fangs which curved back into his mouth like bent nails. Jehenna could tell that he was barely holding back his bloodlust. He wanted to drop his hand and give the signal to his battalion to fire. He wanted an excuse to riddle the bodies of the five Myrrans before him with the hundreds of bone shafts that were nocked and ready to fly.

'My name is Corporal Golagg and I claim this facility in the name of Caliban. Move and you will be fired upon.'

Anxiety cascaded through Jehenna's veins. Her fear was not so much for her own life but for her mother and her life's work. Jehenna expected to see anger on her mother's brow. Or outrage. Or fear. But Claudia Kallady's face hosted no such emotions. She was calm. She stared back at the Ghul officer with eyes so untroubled, she could have been gazing upon a friend.

'Mumma?' Jehenna whispered nervously.

'We always knew a day like this would come,' Claudia breathed back.

'Silence!' screamed Golagg, eyeing mother and daughter in such a way that they thought his next comment would be the order to shoot them. But what came next was neither a threat nor an order to execute. 'Caliban has watched the progress of this research facility with great interest. He commends you on your efforts Claudia Kallady!'

'Do you know this creature?' asked Bormanus suspiciously.

'No,' rasped Claudia, not liking the inference Bormanus seemed to be drawing. 'Do you?'

'He knows your name. He knows what you've been doing,' Bormanus hissed back.

Seeing this exchange, Golagg turned to a soldier near him and stripped him of his weapon. He aimed the crossbow at Bormanus and fired. Before anyone had realised what had happened, Bormanus was screaming, his hand split by a six inch long bone shaft. His long, shrill scream echoed off the chamber's curved wall as he collapsed to the floor.

Before Jehenna could move to assist him, Golagg barked, 'Do not move!' He had cocked another bolt and this one was aimed directly at her head.

'I've had quite enough of this!' Claudia growled. Her hand shot up and ripped the glass pendant from her necklace.

'What are you doing?' Jehenna screamed as Golagg shifted his aim so that his crossbow as pointed directly at her mother.

No answer was given. The glass orb was slammed into the steel floor of the room with a most surprising result. As the glass shattered, a cracking noise split the air. It was like being inside a lightning bolt. Jehenna felt her heart skip a beat as the sound sliced through her body.

For the briefest of moments, it looked as though the explosion of sound had no effect. And then everything changed. The walkway upon which the Ghul were standing suddenly dropped beneath their feet. At the same time, the floor underneath the walkway slid back to reveal a glowing moat of sulphurous, amber liquid. The moat was about five yards across – wide enough to swallow the walkway in its entirety and with it, the Ghul. When the metal walkway hit the moat, a sizzling sound filled the air. Caustic, black fumes rose from the moat's surface as the metal was consumed.

The Ghul had no chance of escape. Everything was happening too quickly. By the time they realised what had happened they were up to their waists in the bubbling, orange liquid. They did not scream but their frantic movements indicated they did not want to die. As she watched the Ghul's pathetic struggles, Jehenna thought of something Azazel had said.

*'Sunlight and shatterstone are probably known to you but we are vulnerable to other attacks.'*

As the Ghul lay suffering in the boiling moat, Claudia Kallady ran from burning soldier to burning soldier taunting them. 'Not so immortal now are you?' The calm, restrained shell had been cast aside leaving nothing but the raw skin of emotion. She spat at them, laughed at them and abused them. Much of what she said was incomprehensible and in their death throes, none of the Ghul was aware of their ranting executioner. Finally when all the Ghul had faded from view, swallowed up by the boiling molten rock, Claudia collapsed on the floor. 'And my little boy gone too. All is undone.'

Jehenna picked her mother up by the shoulders and held her tenderly. 'No Mumma. The fight is not yet finished, but you have given us hope.'

Suddenly the door at the other end of the room buckled as if a great spear had been rammed into it. The sound of the impact reverberated around the weapons room. A patch of dread silence was followed by another explosive noise as the entire door was belted off its hinges. It flew across the room followed by a large black shape. The Morrigu had come to Amasis.

The sight of the Morrigu catapulted Claudia into action. She pulled a small, thin device from her belt and clicked one of a series of buttons that ran along it. A heavy groaning noise sounded at their feet and for the second time that day, a section of flooring in the room fell away. Claudia took her daughter's hand and ran to the new hole in the floor. Inside it, a spiral staircase wound its way down into the darkness beyond. The sound of waves crashing against rock could be heard below.

The Morrigu swooped down upon the group, its talons raking the floor in an attempt to stop the Myrrans from escaping. Sela shoved Lilith forward down the stairs and jumped in behind her. Bormanus also slipped down in to the hole, but Jehenna jumped away from the hole and rolled under a table near the centre of the room.

'Jehenna!' screamed her mother. 'What are you doing? This is no time for heroics.'

The Morrigu swivelled around in mid-air trying to snag the lithe Acoran as she dived across the room. It screamed in frustration as Jehenna eluded its long, thin claws. The talons carved grooves in the floor as the great monster tried to turn in the cramped space. Tables went flying along with numerous objects and weapons. The sound of strange objects detonating as they were scattered about the room was all the impetus Jehenna needed to head back to the spiral staircase. Before the Morrigu could snatch her, she tumbled down the stairs and collided with her mother.

They stood up and faced one another. A look of annoyance appeared on Claudia's face. 'What were you thinking Jehenna?' she scolded.

'I wanted to grab a few things before leaving. I didn't want the opportunity to go to waste.'

'What things?' Claudia asked.

Jehenna smiled mischievously and held up the strange black buckler and the glass-steel sword Claudia had shown her earlier. Wrapped around her forearms were the amazing vambraces Sela had looked at earlier.

'You are too reckless,' Claudia commented. 'It will get you killed.'

‘Or keep me alive,’ Jehenna retorted as she looked lovingly at the small arsenal she had gathered in the few moments she had. She held up a small glass vial she had snatched from a table. ‘What is this?’

‘It’s called angelfire. It burns hotter than a Kheperan day. One of my scientists was once an apothecary. We were hoping to produce this on a large scale, but that little bottle was all we could manage before the Ghul came.’

‘Would you mind if I took it?’

‘I’m sure you will find a use for it.’

A shadow fell across the pair and Jehenna shoved her mother away from her a split-second before the Morigu’s beak slammed down into the stairwell like a giant nail. ‘I think we should go!’ Jehenna said with a wry smile. Claudia took her daughter’s hand and led her down a narrow hallway that led away from the base of the stairs. The sound of the crashing waves filled their ears. At the far end of the hallway, diffuse natural light leaked across the passageway, hinting at a nearby exit from the facility.

Jehenna and Claudia skittered around a corner to find Sela, Bormanus and Lilith standing on a platform that overlooked a wide cavern. The mouth of the natural chamber opened out onto the Sea of Mists. The ocean waters swirled around the cavern, lapping at its steep walls and creating pretty reflections upon the slate ceiling above.

Tethered to thick bollards that dotted the water below the platform were numerous water-craft made of silver metal. These bobbed up and down in the waves that pushed back and forth across the cavern.

Sela pointed down at the strange craft below her. ‘What are they?’ she asked Claudia who drew up next to her on the platform.

‘Sea chariots. That’s how we’re getting out of here.’

‘But how? There are no engines. No sails.’

Claudia reached over and struck a small bell that hung in a recess on the wall next to Sela. A thin, timorous note rang out across the cavern. Claudia turned back towards the sea chariots, eyeing the waters expectantly. Sela followed her gaze but when nothing changed after a short time she exclaimed impatiently, ‘What exactly are we waiting for?’

As if on cue, the waters around the closest chariots were disturbed as twelve nep’gii broke the surface and formed two lines of six in front of the craft. They had inserted their bodies into harnesses that had been dangling just below the surface. These harnesses were connected to a long leather strap which was in turn tethered to the front of the chariot.

Claudia laughed. ‘That’s what we were waiting for – our team of sea snorses!’

Claudia ran down the steps to the sea chariot and jumped on board, followed by Sela and Lilith. Before Bormanus could move off after them, he felt his arm being held by Jehenna. 'Not so fast, Bormanus,' she said. 'I need to tend to your wound.'

She gazed down at the bloody mess staining the sleeve of his silk shirt. Bormanus had pulled the sleeve down over his wounded hand, as if to stem the flow of blood.

He pulled away from her. 'It's okay. Really. I've looked after it.'

She pulled him back towards her. 'No Bormanus, that arrow hit hard. Let me see your hand.'

He frowned at her and stepped back. 'Jehenna, I'm okay,' he said sharply. 'We have more pressing matters. If we leave straight away we can hide ourselves in the Sea of Mists before the Morrigu finds us. We'll be safe there, but we have no time to waste.'

'Very well,' she said slightly petulantly. 'Let's go.'

Jehenna climbed into the sea chariot and placed herself beside her mother in the driver's seat, a small bench that was situated at the front of the carriage. The nep'gii in front of the tiny craft pulled at their harnesses, obviously keen to return to the open sea. Claudia took the reins firmly in her hands and when Bormanus, Sela and Lilith were seated, she said, 'Hold on!'

With a snap of the reins, the nep'gii lunged forward and hurtled out into the Sea of Mists.



## Chapter Nine The Worldpool, Lake Erras

Gerriod sat behind Trypp, one hand on the skiff's tiller, the other on the sheet attached to the tiny craft's sail. Although the city of El Silat was just a blur on the strip of shoreline they had left behind, Gerriod felt they were not going anywhere. He was accustomed to Cold-powered engines that thrust a ship through Lake Erras' many complex currents. He felt vulnerable sitting in the small boat, unable to carve out a passage to his destination. After standing at the helm of *The Crimson Dawn* for so many years, Gerriod felt emasculated by the situation in which he now found himself.

Ten yards off their port bow, the hunched shapes of Pylos and Remiel could be seen, silhouetted against the rapidly descending sun. On either side of Remiel's boat, tiny flashes of light jumped about playfully on the shifting surface of the lake. The sun was so low that the nearby skiff threw a shadow across the distance between the two boats. Gerriod felt a chill whenever the sun slid behind the other skiff's sail. He mused to himself that soon it would get much colder, out where the water turned into a morass of ice churning around Caliban's End.

For a few moments he thought of what was ahead of them, and found the prospect so terrifying, so daunting, he let his mind wander to other things. A number of disparate images floated through his mind, random moments from the extraordinary life he was now living.

He thought of the great tower of Cessair and the multitudinous races he had encountered that day in the Cloud Chamber. Pylos was there. He seemed quieter then. Gerriod had spent much of the meeting staring across the chamber where the representatives of Acoran were seated. The Acoran consul Jehenna Canna – he remembered her, beautiful and aloof. Her husband, Maeldune, was also there, confident and articulate, giving no sign of his treacherous nature. Maeldune had been talking to a fat man in purple robes. The fat man had slunk away before the Assembly had formally began, but Gerriod had noticed him. There was something familiar about him.

Suddenly Gerriod's thoughts shifted to a time before he arrived in Cessair. He was in a chamber filled with phosphorescent red light. The Endless. He was by the dark lake, hiding behind a rocky outcrop, watching a hideous monster taunt two poor wretched captives. One of them was a tall, dark man and the other... the other was the fat man in purple. The beast – Succellos his father had called it – lifted its sting high and then rammed it into the fat man's spine. A scream cut through the cavern and Gerriod was jolted out of his reveries.

The last rays of sun clung to the top of his skiff's mast. He looked to his left and saw the other skiff right where it had been before he started daydreaming. Remiel. He had to tell Remiel about Succellos. About the fat man in purple. About Mulupo.

Although his memory of his time in the Endless was confused by concussion and mixed emotions – the joy of finding his father had been soiled by the pain of leaving him – Gerriod remembered enough details for Remiel and Pylos to put the pieces together.

'This explains a lot,' sighed Remiel.

'It is catastrophic news,' said Pylos. 'The fat man in purple – it has to be Porenutious Windle, the Chamberlain's Advisor.'

'I agree,' nodded Remiel, 'which means that Caliban has been exerting his influence upon us from the very start.'

'We can't know how much impact Windle has had upon the Chamberlain. I do not believe Tiberius Llyr would be easily manipulated by one such as Windle.'

'Perhaps not, but Llyr makes his decisions based on the advice he has been given. I just wonder who originally came up with the entire plan to assassinate my brother.'

Pylos looked curiously at Remiel. He could see where he was going with his line of thinking and he did not like it. 'Wait! Are you suggesting that this entire mission was Caliban's idea from the start? How does that make sense? Who would design such an intricate plan to bring about his own death?'

'Oh I doubt Caliban plans to die. But everything that has befallen us on this tragic journey seems to indicate we are not controlling the game.'

'The game?' asked Trypp, unsettled by Remiel's description of the horrors that had been unleashed upon the Myr over the past year.

'That's what it is to him. A game. In our youth, Caliban went out of his way to make sure I was aware of his ideas on winning. "*There are many ways to achieve victory*," he once said, "*but the most satisfying of all is when you fool your opponent into thinking he is controlling the game*." At the time, I thought he was talking about our many battles of Siege, but now I can see in hindsight that his gaze was much wider than that.'

Pylos looked over at Remiel. 'You said you knew something was wrong with Mulupo. What did you mean?'

'When I healed him, I detected something out of place, like he had been pulled apart and put back together incorrectly. It's hard to explain.'

‘It seems you detected Succellos’ influence upon Mulupo,’ Trypp noted.

‘But you did not detect it in Windle,’ Pylos observed.

‘I had no contact with Windle at all. You may remember he absented himself from the Assembly’

‘What about Maeldune?’ Gerriod asked. ‘Was he also under this creature’s influence.’

‘Maeldune was not under anyone’s influence,’ remarked Pylos.

‘I agree.’

‘Can we be certain that Mulupo was under Succellos’ control?’ Pylos asked. ‘He seemed normal... for Mulupo, that is.’

‘We can’t be certain of anything. Mulupo’s fate is out of our hands now.’

‘Perhaps,’ mused Pylos. ‘Maybe if we can kill Succellos, all those she has enslaved will be released.’

Gerriod groaned. ‘Let’s just concentrate on killing Caliban for now. Once that is done, and my father freed, then we can look for other heroic things to do.’

Night came and passed by slowly. They were close now. Caliban’s End was within sight.

Massive shards of ice collided around them sending bitterly cold water spilling over the sides into the skiffs. Trypp did what he could to influence the path their skiff took but the five foot oar he held was no match for the floating white monoliths that crashed all about. His oar was a shadow of its former self within minutes of being dipped into the frozen torrent.

The sky above was sable which contrasted starkly with the frigid grey air around them. The Worldpool’s countless icebergs belted one another with a ferocity unmatched by anything else in nature. Gerriod could feel the churning mass of frozen water scraping against the skiff’s thin hull. ‘It will be a miracle if we survive this,’ he grunted to himself.

But it was no miracle that was keeping him alive. It was Remiel Grayson. He was using all his Morgai skills to keep the boats together and intact. The skiffs had lost sight of one another numerous times as white knives of ice cut through the space between them, but Remiel maintained his control over their passage towards the screaming maw named after his brother.

A flash of white.

*Gerriod was aboard The Crimson Dawn. The noise of crashing and splintering shards of ice was deafening. Suddenly, he felt the deck being pulled out beneath his feet as another iceberg smashed against the starboard hull at a frightening speed. Gerriod twisted about in mid-air reaching for something to halt his fall. But nothing was within reach and he hit the deck hard. His skull bounced off a small killick he had left lying out in the middle of the quarterdeck and after enduring a sensation akin to a thousand sharp needles being simultaneously pushed into his brain, his mind succumbed to blackness.*

Another white flash returned Gerriod to the tiny skiff.

Gerriod looked up and noticed the first of the Myr's moons had already risen. Arma stared down at him, a cold white eye that showed no concern for the traumatic situation to which he had willingly submitted himself. On his right he could feel Trypp furiously paddling, but the oar was hopelessly broken and having no impact upon the direction of the boat.

'Are you scared?' he asked the Sapphyrran who smiled and stated coolly, 'I've fallen three leagues down a waterfall. I think I can handle this.'

Gerriod laughed and muttered, 'Yeah, I'm terrified too.'

In the other skiff, Pylos and Remiel said nothing. They both stared ahead into the darkness of the maw. And then the world turned white.

*Remiel was on a boat. Its Cold engines could be heard chugging away in the background. A young boy's voice cut over the sound of the engines. The voice was strained, almost hysterical. 'You bound him up like an animal. What had he done Mr Grayson to make you hate him so?'*

*'He... he had...' Remiel's voice faded to nothingness...*

Gerriod braced for the violence to come. He wound his arm under the plank of wood that served as the skiff's seat and suggested to Trypp to do the same. They lay there, huddled on the bottom of the small skiff looking up as the first of the Myr's stars appeared in the dark sky. They whirled around an ever-spinning circle of white streaks. The blurring disk spun faster and faster, became smaller and smaller until finally there was only darkness. Cold, swirling darkness.

## Chapter Ten Cibola, Cephalonia

The sea chariot hurtled across the rambling waves. The tethered bodies of the nep'gii rhythmically appeared and disappeared as they pulled the chariot across the Sea of Mists. The speed at which they were moving astounded Jehenna. She had no idea the creatures could move so swiftly. Their graceful, effortless movements reminded her of the ballet performances that had so entranced her as a young girl back in Elidor. The nep'gii moved in perfect syncopation, alternating their dives beneath the waves so that half the team was always visible whilst the other half was powering their way under water.

'I didn't know the Sea of Mists was so wonderful,' sighed Sela. She had expected it to be a lonely, cold stretch of water where white banks of mist silently sat upon the ocean's surface, but the place was anything but white and it certainly wasn't silent. The vagabond mists surrounding them were in a constant state of flux, their colour slowly changing, moving up and down the spectrum so gently it was impossible to detect the moment of transition.

Accompanying this delicate visual display, the strains of strange yet beautiful music could be heard floating across the waves. It was music unlike any Sela had ever heard before. The music of her homeland was percussive and intricately structured, each instrument having a highly specific role. This music was free of such constraints. It was chaotic yet harmonious, a contradiction that Sela's brain ignored as she closed her eyes and let the notes float over her, like a cool breeze blowing in from the east. She did not know what made the music, nor did she care. After the horrors she had witnessed in Tamu and Amasis, the opportunity to be soothed by something so gentle and fulfilling was more than she could have hoped for.

At the front of the chariot, Claudia and Jehenna shared the reins. 'We sometimes heard the song of the sea in back in Amasis,' Claudia said dreamily. 'When the wind was northerly, this music would roll across the beach like the surf.'

Her voice faded as her mind drifted off to a recent memory. It wasn't hard for Jehenna to imagine what she was thinking of. She could picture her mother and father sitting on the beach, staring out to sea listening to the ethereal euphony. She could see Jonas holding her mother's smooth hand in his callous fingers and smiling that disarming smile that Simeon had inherited. Pangs of sorrow poked at Jehenna's insides. She missed her father and brother terribly. She considered how

alike they were. Both were playful and garrulous among family, but steadfast and disciplined around their respective crews.

‘Did you bury Simeon at sea?’ Claudia asked Jehenna.

‘Yes. It seemed appropriate.’

‘Your father would have wanted a sea burial.’

‘I know,’ Jehenna said softly.

‘The best I could do for him was a shallow grave in the garden inside the facility,’ Claudia said sadly. ‘I even carved a little headstone out of a piece of *The Silhouette*’s decking.’

Jehenna threw her arm around her mother and gave her a hug. ‘Really? What did it say?’

Claudia turned to her daughter and smiled. ‘Here lies Jonas Kallady. A man of many words, but true to every one of them.’

Jehenna gritted her teeth, trying not to give herself to tears. ‘You wrote that?’

Claudia shrugged. ‘I’m not too sure about it. I was...’

For the second time in as many minutes, her voice trailed off as she spoke. She turned from Jehenna and focused on the bobbing heads of the train of sea snorses before her.

‘It’s perfect, Mumma,’ Jehenna said.

Lilith Cortese looked at the pair from her seat at the rear of the chariot. She watched as their hands met on the reins and clasped together. It seemed that nothing could tear them apart. But Lilith knew better. Things were rapidly going to get much worse.

Suddenly the mists parted and like a theatre curtain revealing a spectacular scene, their destination was revealed. The ethereal beauty of the mists and the music were an appropriate precursor to the splendour of the collection of islands known as Cephalaria. The archipelago stretched out across a shining sea of gold. It was not the reflection of the sun off the water that gilded the water. Just as grass was green and the sky was blue, the ocean around Cephalaria was gold.

The islands themselves were equally impressive, rising steeply out of the burnished ocean. The verdant land was clad in glass poplars and pink orchids. The latter lay upon the green grass like sequins on a ball gown. Here and there thin threads of waterfalls ran down the isles’ shoulders to disappear in mists high above the ocean surface. Flocks of gillygulls and kestra floated about the archipelago’s crown like clouds in an otherwise clear sky.

‘Welcome to Cephalaria!’ said Bormanus with an uncharacteristic hint of pride. His straight white hair streamed back from his head as the

sea chariot sliced across the gleaming waters. He showed no sign of being troubled by the injury done to his hand, an injury he continued to hide under the bloodied sleeve of his shirt. With his other hand, he pointed to a large island to the north-east. 'The city of Cibola lies on that island,' he called to Jehenna and her mother. 'Head for the wide bay on its eastern side.'

Jehenna's skin was tingling. At times, Cephalonia seemed so far away she thought they would never make it. But despite the attacks of the Ghul and three of the Cabal's worst monsters, they had arrived at their destination, ready to finish the fight.

She looked down at the swag she had taken from her mother's research facility: a glass-steel sword, a pair of vambraces and a small collection of explosives. It seemed a rather pitiful arsenal when compared to what they faced, but it was backed by her indomitable will and that would be the thing that made the difference.

'How far do we have to go, Bormanus?' asked Jehenna. 'Is Cibola far?'

'We aren't going to Cibola,' he answered. 'The breach is about twenty-five leagues from the city but if we can land on the east coast we can head to it directly. It's not far. We will be there in half a day.'

It was mid-morning when they set off from the beach. The day was warm. Shatterbugs and flutterflies hovered in the air, adding to the buzzing noise made by countless insect hiding amongst the orchida. The company made their way up an old path that cut its way up the steep, lush slopes of the hills surrounding the day.

Lilith walked slowly at the back of the group, deep in her own thoughts. Her death loomed somewhere in the hills above. She had seen it so many times over recent months that the surrounding landscape took on a distinctly familiar feeling. Up above her, where the path switched back on itself Jehenna walked at the head of the procession. As she made her way up a particularly steep section, she occasionally leaned on her glaive as if it were a walking stick. It felt strange to see the glaive being used in such a way. Lilith felt her chest tighten as the golden blade shone in the brilliant Cephalonian sun.

And yet, she didn't fear Jehenna. She had never feared her. At first Lilith thought this reflected her own preparedness to die after such a long life, but as the days passed and the vision of her death became a regular occurrence in her mind, Lilith somehow believed that Jehenna was deserving of her trust, despite the mystical evidence to the contrary.

Deep in thought, Lilith failed to be fully cognizant of her surroundings. As she clambered over a fallen log that lay in her way, she snagged her foot and tumbled into a thick clump of wild pink orchids.

‘Can I give you a hand?’

It was Jehenna, standing over her leaning on her glaive. She had seen Lilith fall and had raced down to help her. She stretched out a hand to assist. Lilith took the proffered hand and then everything went awry. Her mind folded in upon itself as a barrage of images pushed their way into it.

*She was flying. Below her a massive waterfall shot out into the night air. There was no mistaking where she was – the Skyfall. Its waters fell away but rather than them being lost in the darkness below, they were consumed by a blazing forest of flames. The Myr, it seemed, was on fire.*

*Sapphyrro made their way up the cliffs surrounding the great waterfall. There were hundreds of them and they were dying. The blades of Ghul soldiers hacked at the Sapphyrro’s limbs until the gentle creatures had no choice but to let go of the rock face.*

*‘Is it really so hard to die?’*

*It was Jehenna. She was falling through the night sky, her black hair streaming behind her as her momentum built up. Her face was dispassionate, showing no sign of concern for her own well-being despite the fact that she was falling so high above the world.*

*Then the darkness faded into white. Blinding white. Jehenna was standing in the middle of a field of ice, surrounded by Ghul. She stood back to back with a tawny-headed Moraen who was casting spells with inspiring ease. Though they were surrounded, Jehenna’s eyes gleamed defiantly. She smiled...*

And for a moment Lilith thought she was smiling at her.

Lilith collapsed into Jehenna’s arms. She was weak and could do nothing but allow herself to be lifted up by the Acoran. Jehenna found a small patch of grass at the side of the trail and lay Lilith down. ‘Morgai, you had a vision didn’t you?’

Lilith nodded.

‘Can you tell me what it was about?’

Lilith lifted her head and scanned the immediate area. Their companions had moved further up the steep path and were well out of



earshot. She took a deep breath and spoke. 'Skyfall Town was under siege. Countless Sapphyrro were being killed.'

'When?' Jehenna exclaimed. 'Can you tell me when this takes place?'

Lilith gazed into Jehenna's eyes and saw deep concern. There was something significant there – perhaps an emotional tie to either the Sapphyrro or Skyfall Town. Looking into those dark, beautiful eyes, full of compassion and duty, Lilith could not refuse the Acoran the information she sought. 'Usually, it is difficult to interpret my visions in such a precise way, but this one was particularly potent and there is no mistaking the timing of it. It takes place tonight.'

Jehenna's face dropped. 'Tonight?'

Lilith did not have to peer into Jehenna's mind to know what was going through it. She was in a quandary. She had fought long and hard to get them to Cephalonia, to find a way into the Endless, and now she had been informed of the mass slaughter of the gentlest beings to grace the world.

'Even if I could get there in time,' she mused, 'I could do nothing to stop what you have seen.'

Although it was a statement, it seemed like a question, begging for a response. 'No,' said Lilith quietly. 'You will find a way. You will survive this and see tomorrow. I cannot say the same for me.'

Jehenna's face dropped. 'You've seen your future haven't you? You think you're going to die?'

'My dear, I know I'm going to die. As do you. It's only the timing that separates us.'

'But you seem resolved to your fate,' Jehenna observed.

'I am,' Lilith said casually as if discussing the weather. 'I know the manner of my death and I know who kills me.'

'Tell me,' Jehenna whispered. 'I can protect you.'

Lilith smiled appreciatively. 'Strong you are, sweet girl, but not so strong that you can subjugate fate to your will. My passing is inevitable.'

Jehenna clasped the old woman close to her. She held her so tightly that Lilith could feel the Acoran's beating heart against her own.

The sun was high overhead when they reached the top of the trail. They found themselves on the crest of a high domed hill that gave them a commanding view of the island. Shatterbugs, gillygulls and kestra flew joyfully in the sky above. A herd of long-haired barga slowly sauntered across meadows filled with tall orchids. Here and there glass poplars stood proudly, their limbs bedecked in the transparent fruit that gave them

their names. To the north, Jehenna could make out the tall, silver towers of the city of Cibola.

‘Look!’ cried Sela in a voice soaked in happiness. ‘Peg’ii!’

She pointed out to a pink clad hill about half a league to the north-west. Even though they were far away there was no mistaking what she could see – the sky snorses of Cephalonia. Like their sea-bound cousins, they had tails that coiled around in a loop under their bodies, but instead of a dorsal fin on their backs they had a pair of brilliant white, downy wings. Shaggy brown manes hung over their long, furry faces. Almost as tall as a common snorse, sky snorses were slightly larger than the nep’gii but just as beautiful to watch.

It was a large flock, numbering over two dozen. They rolled about in the sky, occasionally darting down towards the ground only to quickly swoop upwards before landing. Sela squinted her eyes, intrigued with their odd behaviour.

‘They’re teasing the Asari!’ Bormanus observed.

‘The Asari?’ Jehenna asked.

‘Asari are small, vicious yet highly intelligent creatures that dwell in the dells of Cephalonia,’ he explained. ‘They are incredibly agile and fleet of foot. Although they stand little more than two feet tall they possess surprising strength and stamina. You wouldn’t want to meet one.’

Claudia shaded her eyes and gazed at the hill below the peg’ii. She could see the small, grey-skinned Asari and they looked just as vicious as Bormanus described them. Their bald heads were dominated by long, sharp teeth fixed in a manic grin. They also had large ears that made them look slightly comical, but there was nothing funny about their behaviour. ‘The Asari... they have whips. They are trying to strike the sky snorses with them.’

‘They are flails actually,’ Bormanus corrected, ‘dipped in sticky sap. They use them to snag any peg’ii that come too close.’

‘Why would they want to do that?’ Sela said, perplexed that such beautiful winged creatures could be subjected to such cruel treatment.

‘The Asari eat peg’ii.’

‘What?’ exclaimed Sela.

‘They crave peg’ii flesh. It’s quite interesting really. The Asari will not eat anything else. When they catch one of the beasts, they keep it alive as long as possible whilst they feed on the tender meat of the animal.’

Sela blanched. ‘That’s disgusting.’

‘No, it’s quite tasty actually,’ Bormanus said casually. He flicked his white bangs back away from his face. His expression was unreadable,

but Jehenna thought she could see something behind his eyes. Something wicked.

‘You eat peg’ii?’ Sela said abhorred by what she had just heard.

Bormanus gave no indication that he understood her revulsion. ‘Why not Sela?’ he asked. ‘It is the way of the world, for the strong to eat the weak. Just because something is pretty or gentle does not grant it the right to escape the natural order of things.’

‘What are you talking about?’ said Claudia warily. Like her daughter, she was beginning to suspect there was more to the Cephalonian than met the eye.

‘I’m talking about the arrogance of Myrrans. You will fight to keep life the same when all the signs dictate it should change. You will travel from one end of the world to the other to preserve what you have, ignoring the fact that you have nothing.’

‘I don’t like the sound of these riddles, Bormanus,’ Jehenna said as she stepped in front of her mother. Her grip tightened on her golden glaive.

The lithe, white-haired figure before her gave a shrill laugh. ‘Jehenna Canna, you can’t abide anything you can’t control.’

Jehenna brought the glaive around so that Bormanus understood her clearly. It glimmered under the midday sun. She pointed its tip at his chest. ‘You were responsible for the Ghul ambush in the Acoran Way, weren’t you?’ She took a step closer so the blade was only inches away from Bormanus’ heart.

Bormanus did not look the least bit intimidated by Jehenna’s approach. ‘Look at your small mind trying to comprehend the part I have played!’ He gazed nonchalantly at the semi-circle that had gathered around him. Claudia had pulled out her weapon – a long, thin knife that hummed ominously when drawn – and stood beside her daughter. Sela had extracted two particularly long and pointed quills which she held in each hand. Lilith did not draw a weapon nor did she take an aggressive stance. The only thing she brought to the tense gathering was an air of sadness.

‘Look at you all clambering to avoid the inevitable, unable to see the futility of your own small actions,’ Bormanus scoffed. ‘All I have done is magnify your deluded sense of self-importance.’

It was then that a horrible truth dawned on Jehenna. ‘There is no breach on Cephalonia is there?’

‘Of course not!’ Bormanus groaned. ‘Sad, isn’t it? Here, at the end of your quest, you’re as far away from Caliban as you were at the start. It has all been in vain.’

Jehenna’s face was livid. ‘You betrayed your own kind!’

Bormanus waved her anger aside. 'You have no idea what *my kind* is. Your contempt is wasted upon me, Acoran. It is... invalid. Betrayal is a matter of perspective. I do not act in your interests. I act in mine. I am no traitor.'

She edged her glaive forward so that the tip of it pressed in against Bormanus' chest. 'I think Kali, Tawhawki and my brother would disagree with you.'

He glanced down at the golden blade she had pointed at his heart. He then lifted his head and held her firmly in his gaze. There was no fear in his eyes. 'You should look closer to home if you want to find traitors.'

'What do you mean?' she said slowly, struggling to control herself.

'Your husband is the greatest traitor of this age.'

She could not hold herself back any longer. With a cry of fury and despair, she thrust the glaive forward. It sliced through Bormanus' skin with ease, cutting his heart in twain. She pushed forward and the blade pierced Bormanus' back, clad in blood that dripped onto the pink orchida at his feet. He grunted but did not scream. She released the glaive with a contemptuous shove.

Bormanus fell to his knees with the weapon still embedded in his chest. He continued to stare at Jehenna; defiance burned like brilliant stars in his grey eyes. His thin, feminine hands rose from his sides and wrapped around the glaive. He pulled at the weapon, sliding it out of his torso as if he were pulling a splinter from his finger.

The incredulous look upon Jehenna's face was mirrored by Claudia and Sela. Only Lilith seemed unsurprised by what she had just seen.

'The eyes of the Acora may be sharp but you did not see this coming, did you?' Bormanus sneered at Jehenna. 'Did you think I could be killed so easily?'

Then with a speed beyond comprehension, he whipped the glaive around and slapped her across the face with the flat of the blade. She went sprawling across the grass, lucky not to have lost her head. Claudia dropped to her daughter's side, fearful that the savage blow had killed her.

Sela leapt forward with her quills held high but Bormanus was too fast. He merely stepped aside and let her fall to the ground. She landed on her face and her moment of disorientation was all Bormanus needed to pluck the spines from her hands and drive them into her wrists. Her scream was so loud it startled the peg<sup>ii</sup> she had seen on the distant hill. She was pinned to the ground by her own quills. The pain in her wrists was so strong that Sela's mind caved in on itself. All sounds, smells and sights faded – she was left all alone in darkness with nothing but pain to inform her that she was still alive.

Claudia clung to Jehenna, terrified of the monster that had been revealed in their midst. Bormanus eyed her curiously. He knew her fear was not for herself but for her proud daughter. She picked up the black buckler Jehenna had taken from Amasis and held it before her.

‘Move away from your daughter,’ Bormanus demanded. He gave a flick of the fingers and the shield went flying away across the grass.

‘No!’

‘Stand aside Dr Kallady,’ Bormanus said softly.

‘She is a threat to all we stand to accomplish.’

‘I won’t let you touch her.’

‘Perhaps you need persuasion.’ Bormanus placed the glaive upon the ground, then calmly lifted his right hand and extended it in Claudia’s direction. Her eyes widened as a most unique pain spread throughout her body.

Bormanus stepped closer. ‘I will explain to you what is happening so you can understand your own death. Perhaps you will carry that knowledge over to whatever realm exists beyond this mortal plane and thus avoid making the same mistake twice. I am raising the temperature of your blood. Cooking you from within. Soon your internal organs will fail you and your life will be little more than a pungent vapour.’

Although the pain of speech was excruciating, Claudia managed to articulate her defiance. ‘It is not a mistake to defend your children.’

Bormanus dropped his hand and thought about this, giving Claudia a momentary respite from the pain. ‘You could be right Dr Kallady. I wouldn’t really know. I don’t have any children.’

‘Stop.’ Although Lilith spoke quietly, her voice carried great weight and conviction.

Bormanus swung around to face the old woman. He put his hands to his temples and gritted his teeth. ‘Are you trying to get in here Lilith?’ he said tapping his forehead. ‘You will find that my mind is not so easily penetrated.’

Lilith said nothing. Her every thought and ounce of energy was centered upon Bormanus’ psyche. It was not a skill she liked to use, but her desperation compelled her to try. She intended to shut down his mind. She could see the landscape of his thoughts, caught fragments of his past and glimpses of his future. It was a most inhospitable domain and it sickened her to traverse it.

*In a howling gale of snow and ice in a dark city, a tall Acoran man pounded on the door of a drab, iron house. The door opened to reveal a Sessymirian woman with a birthmark across one eye and a spike where*

*her left hand should have been. The Acoran entered the house and the scene faded.*

*On a platform being lowered into a mineshaft, an old man stood guard over an old leather satchel that rested between his legs.*

*Suddenly there was an explosion of ice and rock. Hundreds of Ghul came pouring out of a gaping hole in the mine floor.*

*The man with the satchel walks down into the breach in the mine flanked by Ghul soldiers.*

*The landscape changed to a cottage made out of the remnants of wrecked ships. An old woman stood before a man whose diseased skin proclaimed his identity – Caliban. The old woman's shape changed to that of the Sessymirian woman with the birthmark and Caliban nodded as tears welled up in his eyes. The woman with the birthmark presented him with a large, leather bound book which glowed with a ghostly blue light. Caliban's expression shifted to one of glee.*

*The landscape shifted yet again. In a silver tower overlooking a golden sea, a young, white-haired man turned to face someone who had entered his room. It was the old woman again. The man was Bormanus.*

*With a look of absolute shock Bormanus fell to the floor with a knife buried in his belly. The old woman studied his face closely before assuming his shape.*

*The silver tower faded to be replaced by a taller one. Bormanus sat on a bench in the Cloud Chamber eyeing the familiar figure of Remiel Grayson. Then the blue skies above the dome of the Cloud Chamber faded to black.*

*A handsome Arnakki man sat drunkenly on the sill of a window high in a tower. A stunning-looking Kompileran sat beside him with her arm draped over his shoulders. She took the arm away and the young man toppled from the window sill.*

*The scene changed but the darkness stayed. In the fading light of a dying bobug, Bormanus smiled as he surveyed the area below him. Kali was there. A Ghul soldier stabbed his knife down on the Kolpian's broad hand as Bormanus looked on.*

*The dim glow of the bobug is replaced by the warm radiance of a binnacle light and the soft lambency of the moons. High above white sails billowed in the strong wind that blew across the ship. Bormanus stood at the stern and closed his eyes. Suddenly a thick fog enveloped the vessel and the wind died.*

‘Get out of my head Cortese!’ The thought rolled across his mind like a fierce storm tearing apart anything in its way. Lilith had to retreat to the confines of her own head.

Claudia Kallady had no way of understanding what had just transpired. She could see Bormanus and Lilith frozen still, concentrating hard with their eyes tightly shut, occasionally grimacing as though some unseen battle was being fought. Suddenly Lilith grunted and fell back amongst the orchida.

Bormanus opened his eyes and glowered at Lilith. ‘Did you see enough Lilith or would you like to see some more?’

‘I have seen enough to know what you are,’ Lilith snarled, panting heavily.

‘Oh really?’ he said. ‘And what am I?’ He stepped forward and her features metamorphosed into those of the old woman Lilith had seen in his mind. ‘It seems your gift for shape-shifting is not as unique as you thought Lilith. Whereas you squandered your skill in an act of vanity, I have used mine to achieve many things.’

‘You killed Bormanus in order to take his place at the Assembly of Nations?’

‘I wouldn’t waste any time grieving for Bormanus Cole. He was an idle youth.’

‘You knew him?’

‘I should think so,’ the old woman said coldly. ‘He was my son.’

Claudia was mortified. ‘You killed your own child?’

‘Better the mother kills the child than the child kills the mother.’

She turned to face Claudia and shifted her form as she did so into someone much taller, much younger and much more beautiful – Jehenna.

Claudia had to turn away. The sight of her daughter standing before her with a wicked grin on her face was too much for her to bear.

‘My name is Addison Cole,’ said Jehenna’s facsimile, ‘and, as you may have guessed, I am Morgai.’ She stepped closer to Claudia who instinctively clutched her unconscious daughter even tighter.

‘Stay away from her!’ barked Lilith, getting up on to her knees with a supreme effort.

‘Stay where you are!’ snapped Addison. She gave a wave of her hands and the orchida around Lilith wrapped themselves around her legs and wrists. One of the tallest plants wound itself around her face, making speech impossible. The plants felt more like steel coils. Lilith knew there was nothing she could do to break their grip.

Addison turned back towards Claudia. ‘I apologise Dr Kallady. Now I believe we were discussing the threat your daughter is to the new age Caliban will usher in.’

'I'll die before I let you touch a hair on her head,' Claudia snarled.

'I know,' said Addison relishing in the ambiguity of her reply.

Suddenly Claudia's left arm struck forward and out from under her sleeve shot a steel dart. Even with the reflexes that had seen her dispatch hundreds of shakku with ease, Addison had no time to avoid the dart. The small, metal object speared into her open eye, sending a spray of blood and vitreous humour out into the air.

Addison screamed. Her nervous system was thrown into chaos as she tried to shift shape to mend the gruesome injury. She dropped to the ground and writhed amongst the orchida as Claudia lifted her daughter's body and attempted to escape.

'Not so fast!' Addison sneered.

The orchida surrounding Claudia swooped around her legs and stopped her from taking another step.

Addison stepped forward, her teeth bared and the desire for vengeance plastered across her borrowed face. Her injuries were gone and in their place was an eye as dark and beautiful as Jehenna's.

'That actually hurt,' she growled as she tore Jehenna from Claudia's hands. She dumped the unconscious body on the ground and kicked it spitefully. She turned back to face Claudia.

Lilith struggled against her bonds but could do nothing but look on helplessly. She knew what was to come. She had seen it in her dreamscape but this didn't make it any easier to watch in the real world.

Addison Cole took Claudia's head between her hands. She eyed her piteously. 'You are about to learn that there is a price to pay for such abject defiance, Dr Kallady. What you are about to experience will make you wish that Lilith had not come to your aid before. Boiling your blood will seem like an act of love compared to what you are about to endure.'

'Let us go,' Claudia pleaded. 'We are no threat to you.'

'But you are, Dr Kallady. Even you. Especially you. I have seen the weapons you have created. Armed with your wonderful inventions, the Myrrans could actually mount a defence against the hordes of Caliban. I can't risk it. I won't allow this world to stagnate any longer. It is time for change.'

She paused to let her comments sink in, but Claudia was so terrified that she could barely associate any meaning to the words she was hearing.

'Dr Kallady, let me explain I am proposing for you,' Addison continued. 'Your flesh will become stone and your mind will be wrapped up in this prison. In this mystic cocoon you will dwell and the laws of time won't apply to you. Around your statuesque form, the world will move through its iterations but you will stay the same and each passing



second will feel like an eternity to you. Trapped inside your shell, you will have ample time to consider the folly of your ways. Until you go mad.'

'But why would you do such a thing?' Claudia spat. 'Even to your most hated enemy...'

'Empathy, Dr Kallady. I want someone to experience what I feel every day – time dragging its heels.'

'Your long life has driven you mad,'

'As yours will make you,' Addison retorted.

It only took a moment. Claudia Kallady's flesh lost its colour and her eyes lost their sheen. If not for the horrified expression upon her face, she would have looked like one of the statues found in Mine One before the Ghul despoiled it.

Suddenly the orchida around them parted as the Asari made their way to Addison's side. The Asari were small but they were many. Their lipless mouths were fixed in a maniacal grin that seemed appropriate in light of their cruel intentions. Tiny, beady eyes stuck out like buttons on either side of their heads. These cold, nasty orbs peered out from under ragged ears that hung like flaps of discarded cloth from the tops of their heads. Their bodies were small, dark and unremarkable except for the tattoo that each had carved across their bellies. Although the embossed designs were crude, there was no mistaking what they were – the unique shape of a sky horse.

Sela was just coming to when the Asari arrived. Her vision was blurred and all sounds were muffled under the blanket of grogginess that enveloped her head. Before she could do anything, countless tiny hands with fingers like nails wrapped around her limbs. Struggling was pointless – there were too many of them.

The Asari also seized the unconscious body of Jehenna and took her away. A number of them gathered around the bound body of Lilith. 'No, leave her. She's mine.'

Just as quickly as they appeared, the vicious little creatures vanished into the tall orchida atop the hill.

Addison turned to Lilith and with a small gesture of the hand removed the gag across her mouth. She remained bound by the orchida around her hands and feet, but it did not concern her. She knew what was ahead and had prepared for it. She was, however, pleased she had the opportunity to speak.

She closed her eyes and spoke: 'A little breath to say goodbye. Remember Jehenna: magick fades in time.' Like a child blowing away

the delicate white bracts of a fairylon flower, Lilith blew the words across to where Claudia Kallady stood in her prison of stone.

‘One last spell before you die, Lilith?’

‘Something like that.’

Addison looked down at the form she had assumed and smiled. She ran her hands over it and gave a satisfied groan. ‘I can’t tell you how good it feels to assume a shape like this after months of wearing a male’s body. Jehenna Canna is a gorgeous creature, is she not?’ She lifted her hand to her face and felt the scar Jehenna had acquired in the battle on board *The Fortitude*. ‘Except for this ugly mark. I can do without this blemish.’ In the blink of an eye the scar faded from her face.

‘You do not deserve to wear such a noble form.’

‘Lilith, you are far more adept in the art of foresight than me. You have witnessed this moment before, have you not? You have seen your death?’

‘Many times.’

‘Jehenna Canna kills you – is that correct?’

‘You kill me.’

‘But in this form. In your visions, you saw Jehenna kill you.’

‘Yes.’

‘I am intrigued to know one thing. You saw all this but you continued to trust her. I don’t understand how you could do that.’

‘Perhaps that is the thing that makes us different Addison. I can see into people’s hearts.’

Addison Cole laughed coldly. ‘What a romantic notion Lilith, but completely untrue. You failed to see into mine.’

‘Perhaps,’ Lilith said enigmatically.

‘What a sad race we Morgai have become! You are but a husk of your former self and as for Remiel Grayson – he does not even deserve to assume the mantle of Morgai. The witless fool was there in the Cloud Chamber and he failed to see the camarilla of enemies Caliban had gathered before him: Maeldune Canna, Lokasenna Hagen, Porenutious Windle and others.’

‘What others?’

‘Lilith, forgive me for not wanting to devote your final moments to telling you all you don’t know. I’m afraid we do not have the time.’

Lilith remained composed despite Addison’s acerbic manner. ‘You saw Remiel Grayson?’

Addison could not resist another opportunity to indulge herself. ‘Yes, he joined the forum of fools Chamberlain Llyr had gathered around him in the Cloud Chamber that day. He was pathetic – disguised as a priest from Nessa. I recognized him immediately. He sensed my

presence too, but was too unsettled by his own part in the entire sad affair to find enough focus to draw me out. It has been a hopeless venture for the Myrrans right from the start.'

'There is always hope.'

Addison sneered. 'They cannot win and for all your talents, you lack real vision. The Myrrans are totally dwarfed by the powers that are arrayed against them. Even their own kind has turned on them.'

'With your assistance. You gave Caliban the *Incanto*.'

'Yes, and now he has an army of Pryderi bloated with enough power to rival the Morgai.'

Lilith smiled at Addison. 'And yet, for all your arrogance and influence, you have not perceived your own demise? I have seen your future Addison. You would not take this route if you knew what will befall you.'

Addison looked at her scornfully. 'It is a cheap tactic you employ now Lilith. I do not believe you.'

'It matters not whether you believe,' Lilith replied with solemnity. 'The river will run its course regardless. At the height of summer, you will die on the frozen plains of Usnach, put to death by the very Pryderi you have empowered.'

'You are lying.'

'Her name is Arinna Brine. She will make you feel more pain in your dying breaths than you have ever known. Is that specific enough for you? Do you still believe I am making this up?'

'I can change it.'

'The future is not so simple and you know it. In trying to avoid your fate, you may just create the means by which it is achieved.'

'Enough!' she snarled. She reached down and picked up Jehenna's glaive. 'You're about to die Lilith. I've no doubt that the vision of your death has been with you for some time. And yet here I am designing it as we speak.' She leant upon the glaive as she considered it. 'What a delightful paradox! I could spend years just thinking about it.'

Lilith looked out across the sunlit sea before her. The islands resembled emeralds set in a golden crown. She could see a flock of peg'ii gliding across the waters with grace unmatched by any living creature. Her heart was so full she thought it would break her chest. Words floated up from her past.

*'It's such a beautiful world, Morgai. I'd hate to lose it.'*

Addison stood above her, the glaive poised above her chest. It caught the sun on its shining surface and for a moment Lilith was blinded by the light.

The Asari made one mistake. They let go. It was only for an instant as they prepared the ropes with which they would bind their prizes, but it was all Sela needed.

When Jehenna came to, she awoke to a startling sight. Sela stood surrounded by a bloody pile of dead Asari. Every small corpse had at least one quill embedded in it. Behind Jehenna hovered a flock of sky snorses, silhouetted against the blazing sun. The image of the Tamuan surrounded by the host of peg'ii was almost religious in its beauty.

Jehenna put a hand up to the side of her head and winced but quickly decided that being alive and feeling pain was preferable to the alternative. 'Where's Bormanus?'

'He's not Bormanus,' Sela said cryptically. 'In fact, he's not even a *he* now. He looks like you.'

For a moment, Jehenna thought she had lost all her senses, but then the pieces fell together and formed a most unexpected picture. 'Morgai!' Jehenna exclaimed. 'Just like Lilith. The females can change shape.'

It seemed so obvious. It explained how Bormanus had single-handedly repelled an entire pack of shakku. It also explained the fog and the dead calm on the Arion Ocean the day the Ryugin had attacked. Her instincts were right – Bormanus was not one to be trusted.

It was at the moment that Jehenna's mind swung to her mother.

'Mumma? Where is she? And where is Lilith?'

'I... I don't know,' Sela said apologetically, scanning the hills for some sign of their companions.

'We have to go back.'

Sela gestured to the peg'ii hovering behind her. Their angelic wings flapped back and forth, gently flattening the orchida around them. Their docile eyes were fixed upon Sela. 'They wait for us,' the Tamuan said.

Sela put a hand on the muzzle of the nearest sky snorse. It snorted affectionately and tilted itself forward so that she could mount it. She climbed up on the beast, sitting herself at the base of its neck just above the wings.

Jehenna looked at her curiously. 'I thought you were afraid of heights.'

'People change Jehenna,' Sela said brashly. 'Come on.'

Jehenna smiled and pretended not to notice just how tightly Sela clutched at the sky snorse's mane.

Jehenna's howls of despair rang out across the hills. There was no sign of the Morgai that had betrayed them so completely but what she had left behind was worse than anything Jehenna could have imagined.

Lilith was dead. She lay amongst the orchida with the golden glaive buried in her chest. The sight of the old woman covered in so much blood was crippling and Jehenna could not bring herself to look at her for more than a few seconds.

As shocking as Lilith's death was, Jehenna found it far more difficult to accept the fate of her mother. She stood atop the hill, her face frozen in fear, her body fixed in a state of supplication. It was clear no mercy had been given.

Jehenna gazed upon the stone figure and screamed. Those screams embodied all the heartache and frustration she had endured since setting out on the mission. She had lost everything. She had failed absolutely. She was emptied of whatever it was that had driven her to fight. She slumped down against her mother's stone form and despaired.

'Now is not the time to give up.'

The voice was familiar but it was not Sela's.

'Mumma?'

Jehenna thought she was going mad. She lifted herself off the ground and looked into her mother's frozen face.

'There is always hope.'

Jehenna jumped back a step when the stone lips moved. Everything else was still but Claudia's mouth. It was disturbing and wonderful at the same time.

'Mumma? I don't understand.'

'Listen to me Jehenna. I have not long to speak but an eternity to think. Lilith Cortese's final act was to give me breath to speak to you. I am trapped inside this prison but I still live.'

'I will find a way to release you!' Jehenna cried, her heart tearing with sorrow.

'No! You will finish your mission. You must stop this corrosive evil from overtaking the entire Myr.'

'I can't leave you Mumma. I have left too many people behind.'

'Jehenna, remember: magick fades in time.'

The lips closed and Claudia Kallady spoke no more.

It was another hour before Jehenna picked herself up from the base of the stone figure of her mother. She had cried, she had screamed and she had retreated into herself, leaving Sela to endure the difficult silence.

*'Skyfall Town was under siege. Countless Sapphyrro were being killed.'*

Jehenna knew what she had to do and with the peg'ii at their command, she had the means to do it.

She looked at Sela who was standing beside a sky snorse stroking its mane and scratching under its jaw. 'Sela we must get to Skyfall Town as swiftly as possible.'

The Tamuan nodded but did not make any movement to go. Instead she walked up to Jehenna and wiped away the tears that had stained her bruised face. 'Jehenna, perhaps when all this is finished, we should return here. *Magick fades in time*. Perhaps when all is done, your mother may come back to you.'

'Perhaps,' said Jehenna with a smile as she spied the black buckler she had taken from Amasis lying amongst the orchida. She picked up the shield and strapped it to her right arm. 'There is always hope.'

## Chapter Eleven The Skyfall

Jehenna Canna was a small child when she first saw Skyfall Town. Her mother had decided to travel the lands in search of a remote site for her proposed research facility. Jonas Kallady, ever one to spot an opportunity, suggested that the entire family should accompany their mother on her exciting quest. Claudia had agreed, thinking that the presence of her family would be an excellent way to avoid attracting attention to her secret project.

Their journeyings had brought them across the bosom of Lake Erras to Skyfall Town, the sight of which had an indelible effect upon Jehenna. Though the cities of Acoran were exceptionally fine-looking metropolises, Jehenna was mesmerized by the aeriform beauty of the Sapphyrran town. Whilst her older brother Simeon just wanted to climb the famed rock faces that towered above, all Jehenna desired was to be left alone to wander down the pretty streets of the town. The opaline marble, the intricate rope bridges and the serene nature of the Sapphyrro made her feel she was special and safe. Although her young mind couldn't articulate the feeling, being in Skyfall Town was akin to returning to the womb.

But that was twenty years ago and much had changed since then.

Astride their incredible flying steeds, and followed by a host of other peg'ii who had taken an interest in the pair, Jehenna and Sela flew over the crest of the Skyfall. The broad river they had been following simply fell away, beginning its precipitous plunge into the waters of Lake Erras three leagues below.

An overwhelming sense of space swept over the pair as rock and water was replaced by emptiness. The peg'ii cried in delight as the distant majesty of Lake Erras, shimmering in the moonlight, appeared before them. They pulled up and hovered, hanging in the air like stars high above the world.

It was some time before Sela exhaled, so absorbed was she in the sight before her. She had never seen so much at one time, and her brain laboured to take it all in.

'Look!' Jehenna gasped as she leant out over the side of her steed and pointed directly beneath them. The red glow of fire could be seen at the foot of the waterfall. Skyfall Town appeared to be burning.

They were both horrified. Sela had heard of Skyfall Town's magnificence and the thought of yet another item being added to the

Ghul's catalogue of destruction filled her with sorrow. 'Jehenna,' she said dolorously, 'they've set fire to the town!'

Jehenna squinted, peering down through the red-tinged spray of the waterfall, trying to make sense of the scene beneath her. She shook her head. 'No, I don't think so. I think, somehow, the lake is on fire.'

'The lake? But how?'

Suddenly the expression on Jehenna's face changed to one of absolute fury. 'Ghul!' she snarled, looking down at the rock face behind them.

All three moons were up and their light illuminated a sight that Jehenna would never forget. Thousands of pallid warriors were pouring out of a large cave that was just under the lip of the Skyfall. It was a breach and from it emerged more Ghul than Jehenna could have imagined. Countless subterranean vines hung out of the cave and down these impossibly long ropes slid Caliban's forces.

'They're invading Skyfall Town!' Jehenna snarled. Her voice was guttural. The picture of the cadaverous army descending upon the beauty of Skyfall Town was like a knife under her skin.

Further down the rock face she could see the figures of Sapphyrran climbers who had made their way up the cliffs to defend their town. They had no weapons to speak of, but they met the Ghul head-on with hearts as brave as any soldier's. As a group they had found their way past the overhang known as Maru Lem and now climbed where no Sapphyrro had ventured before. Desperation had driven them to accomplish the incredible. But conquering the cliff was a small feat compared to the task before them – defeating the Ghul would be nigh on impossible.

A number of Sapphyrro had jumped from the cliffs onto the Ghul's ropes and were clutching at the feet of the enemy descending upon them. It was then Jehenna realised the significance of the burning lake. She had no doubt that the Ghul could survive the frightful fall to the lake below, but they could not survive the furnace that lay on the lake's surface. The Sapphyrro had somehow found a way to ignite the waters lapping at the feet of Skyfall Town, and in doing so had given themselves a slim chance of survival. The flames atop the water rose hundreds of feet into the air above. By the time a Ghul soldier hit the water, he or she would be little more than ashes.

Jehenna could not help but smile as she watched a number of Sapphyrro ripping Ghul from the vines, sending them off to a fiery death three leagues below.

For a time, the strategy would work, but Jehenna knew that sheer weight on numbers would win out and the Ghul would take Skyfall Town. As she watched she saw a number of Ghul archers fire upon the



Sapphyrro on the cliffs. Whilst the Sapphyrro's shells provided them with some protection they could not fully retreat into their carapaces. A number of Sapphyrro had arms and legs that were pierced by many arrows, forcing them to abandon the cliffs and fall to the lake below. It was only a matter of time before they were all dead.

Something snapped inside Jehenna. It was time to fight back.

'Tell the Sapphyrro to clear the ropes. Go now!'

Without questioning why, Sela shot off to where the Sapphyrro were vainly trying to halt the progress of the Ghul upon the vines.

Content that Sela would succeed in this task, Jehenna kicked the sides of her sky snorse and leant forward. The steed responded instantly, speeding off in the direction Jehenna had pushed. They swept down towards the place where the thick vines hung against the rock face. Protected only by the incredible shield she had taken from Amasis, Jehenna swiped at the vines with the glass-steel sword and with every swing of the blade, hundreds of Ghul fell to their deaths. Arrows rained down upon her, but she managed to catch most of these in the dark surface of the shield. She hacked furiously at the vines and as more and more Ghul plummeted away from her, a disturbing feeling of satisfaction made her skin tingle.

But for every vine she cut, two more would appear in its place. By the time Sela had joined her in her efforts, she was exhausted and her mount was badly wounded.

'There are too many of them!' Sela cried.

'We've got to stop them from laying down more lines.'

'But how? We can't take them all.'

Suddenly an arrow shot out of the darkness above them and sheared clean through the neck of Sela's sky snorse. It gave a tiny yelp and died. Jehenna stuck out a hand and caught Sela just as the Tamuan's steed dropped away in a bloodied bundle of fur and feathers.

Jehenna could feel her mount's flagging energy. It had flown for twelve hours straight at a phenomenal speed, it was wounded with at least three arrows in its side and now it bore the weight of two riders. It couldn't keep racing up and down the cliff face trying to help Jehenna and Sela beat back the relentless tide of Ghul emerging from the Endless. There had to be another way...

And there was. Jehenna was furious with herself for not thinking of it earlier. 'Jehenna you fool!' she scolded herself. She pointed up at the breach. 'Sela, take us up there. Do it now!'

‘Are you insane?’ Sela called back over her spiny shoulder. ‘We’ll be cut down in seconds.’

‘Just do it Sela!’ Jehenna shouted back. ‘Please.’

‘I hope you know what you’re doing.’

Sela urged her steed upward. As soon as they were level with the breach, hundreds of Ghul trained their bows, crossbows and spears upon them. Sela closed her eyes and braced for death. She needn’t have bothered. Instead of pain, she felt the opposite. A wave of warm light washed over her. Even with her eyelids closed Sela was aware of the white light cascading out of the breach and out into the night sky. Jehenna had used the sunsphere her mother had given her.

She slowly opened her eyes to see a dazzling sight. The cave before her was like a cup of pure light. It filled her with hope. For a moment, she believed that she and Jehenna could actually survive the night. Her euphoric state did not last long.

From that ball of light shot a familiar, black shape. ‘The Morrigu!’ Jehenna exclaimed.

As soon as it exploded out of the breach, the Morrigu opened its long talons and clawed at the air. Sela and Jehenna avoided its first strike but one of the peg’ii behind them was caught in its terrible clutches. The Morrigu wheeled around in the air and cackled as it discarded the sky snorse it had just caught. With its neck broken, the poor, limp creature fell towards the burning lake like a pebble carelessly thrown down a well.

Jehenna expected the Morrigu to repeat its attack on its second pass and she raised her glass-steel sword. The Morrigu opened its talons to attack but at the last second dived underneath them, folding its wings back so it shot like an arrow towards a stretch of cliff wall below.

Jehenna realised in an instant what the creature’s intentions were and she tugged at her sky snorse’s mane to follow it. ‘Sela!’ she screamed across to her companion. ‘The Sapphyrro! The creature is going to—’

She didn’t even have time to finish her sentence. The Morrigu finished it for her. It raked the cliffs with its sharp talons wiping at least twenty Sapphyrro from the wall in one pass. A number of peg’ii swooped down to catch some of them with their prehensile tails but most of the Sapphyrro fell haplessly to their deaths.

The winged monster shrieked triumphantly, its black heart rapturous over the sight of so many helpless, little creatures tumbling

about in the air, their blue arms flailing, their long, blue fingers scratching at the sky, searching for the rock wall they would never hold again.

The remaining Sapphyrro on the cliff scrambled about, searching in vain for a way to elude the malefic beast that had tormented them for so long.

As Jehenna raced towards them, a volley of arrows was sent her way. She held up the shield and it swallowed the bone shafts voraciously.

The shield was not so large that it could protect her mount as well. A number of arrows found their way through the sky snorse's thick hide and it squealed as it experienced pain for the first time in its life.

The Morrigu stripped the cliffs of another ten Sapphyrro and quickly swept around for a third strike. Having no place to hide on the cliffs, a great many Sapphyrro jumped over to the Ghul's vines. The light of the sunsphere now diminished, the Ghul began to pour out of the breach once more, marching past the ashes of the ones Jehenna had incinerated. They threw themselves down the thick vines, covering them like sap. It seemed to Jehenna that Caliban had an inexhaustible supply of soldiers. Whether it be by the Morrigu or by the Ghul, the Sapphyrro would be soon vanquished, and another of the Myr's gentle races would disappear from the world.

Jehenna pulled her steed to a halt and held her glass-steel sword out in front of her, following the path of the swiftly moving Morrigu with its tip. Despite the arrows that were raining down upon her, Jehenna took her time in making sure her aim was true. When she felt the moment was right, she pushed her right thumb down on a small button at the point where the hilt of the sword met the cross-guard. A simple click was all it took to send the beautiful glass-steel blade shooting across the space between her and the Morrigu.

An explosive spout of blood indicated to Jehenna that she had hit her mark. The Morrigu crumpled around the blade as it cut into the tissue and tendons in the monster's throat.

Sela gave a euphoric cry when the translucent blade sliced into the Morrigu's throat. 'You did it!' she cried above the tumult of the waterfall.

Jehenna also gave a cry of triumph but as her gaze followed the falling behemoth, her look of elation suddenly changed to one of anguish.

The Morrigu was still alive. With the sword still wedged in its throat, it was in great pain but it was not dead. It had fallen far, but not far enough. Against the glow of the fire of the lake, Jehenna watched the creature unfurl its wings and glide in wide circles as it tried to extract the blade that was buried deep in its neck. It was only a matter of time before

the beast would return to the heights above and continue its campaign of terror upon the resilient but vulnerable Sapphyrro.

'Is it really so hard to die?' she cried angrily, exasperated by the Morrigu's unwillingness to submit to its own death.

To Jehenna's left, Sela shrugged her shoulders, thinking the Acoran expected a response to her question. But Jehenna was not looking at Sela. She was looking down. Her eyes were fixed on the Morrigu.

Sela had thought she had seen many wild and strange things in her travels, but nothing could have prepared her for what she witnessed next. In the most insane and unexpected acts that could be imagined three leagues above the surface of the world, Jehenna jumped from her flying steed.

As she plummeted through the night sky, Jehenna drew her dagger, an action that was almost unfathomable to Sela who watched helplessly from the relative safety of her sky snorse's back. The Tamuan could almost understand suicide in light of the odds they were facing, but Jehenna had drawn her dagger which meant that she was planning to continue the fight. Sela realised with mind-numbing incredulity that Jehenna intended to land on the Morrigu's back.

The plan made no sense. It was so incredibly reckless, Sela was astounded that Jehenna had even thought of it. The Morrigu was half a league below them. From that distance it was virtually impossible to hit a stationary target, but to hit one that was moving, it seemed beyond even Jehenna's abilities. Even if she did somehow manage to land on the creature, the impact of the mid-air collision would probably kill her.

The rush of air that buffeted Jehenna and flattened her dark hair against her body was nothing compared to the adrenalin that was coursing through her veins. As a little girl, she had always dreamed of flying, and now, high above the town that was such a special part of her childhood, she was diving through the skies with the confidence of a bird.

It was only when the black shape of the Morrigu was within a hundred feet of her that the dire reality of Jehenna's situation slapped her across the face. For a fleeting second she considered whether she had abandoned all reason. Perhaps her decision to launch herself out into the void was one of despair.

No. She was still in the fight. She was alive and that was all she needed to continue.

Jehenna plummeted past the Morrigu which was so fixated upon the blade embedded in its throat, it failed to notice the small Myrran that had fallen past its left flank. It failed to notice the Myrran's tiny left arm stretch out and twist. It failed to notice the long black tendril shoot out from one of the Myrran's arm guards.

The attack couldn't have been better orchestrated. Despite the fact that she was falling fast and the Morrigu was moving in circles, Jehenna managed to snag the part of the beast she wanted to hit – its beak.

Being the smaller of the two objects at either end of the tendril, Jehenna was pulled towards the Morrigu at great speed when the black line extending from her vambrace retracted. Strains of a recent conversation floated into her head.

*'You are too reckless. It will get you killed.'*

*'Or keep me alive.'*

With a litheness and balance that would have made a Tethran dancer jealous, Jehenna swung up onto the Morrigu's back and detached herself from the tendril. The beast was too absorbed in the blade in its throat and the tendril that had looped around its beak to be concerned with the sudden weight on its back. Moments later Jehenna made sure she had the Morrigu's full attention.

Clutching a handful of four foot long feathers to stop herself from falling, Jehenna lifted her silver dagger high into the air and started hacking.

At first she wasn't sure whether she was having any impact at all, so dense were the feathers on the Morrigu's back. After repeated stabs, thick, viscid blood oozed through the blanket of feathers. The Morrigu let out a shriek that cut Jehenna to the marrow, but she kept on stabbing. The frenzied beast twisted and bucked in mid-air but Jehenna held on tightly. She had to make sure the monster was dying or dead before she released her grip.

With grim resignation, Jehenna sheathed her dagger and reached into a small satchel she wore upon her belt. She withdrew a small glass vial with a glowing orange liquid swirling inside. 'Angelfire!' Jehenna said admiringly as she lifted the vial into the air where it shone in the light of the Myr's moons. Then with a fury and strength that was borne out of deep hatred, Jehenna slammed the little bottle down upon the Morrigu's back.

Instantaneously, a blaze of blue fire flared up. The flames were so intense that she had no choice but to let go of the Morrigu's feathers and fall, away from the fires above, towards the fires below.

She was reeling through the night air where her lissomness and balance counted for nothing. The night sky was retreating from her. The

flaming, squirming figure of the figure of the Morrigu was also getting smaller and smaller. As she fell, Jehenna extended a hand, hoping beyond deepest hope, that her intuition was right.

Suddenly she felt a small hand upon her wrist and she knew she was not going to die.

As Sela pulled Jehenna onto the sky snorse, she scowled at the Acoran who was smiling brashly back at her, pleased and relieved that her desperate gambit had paid off.

‘Do you want to tell me what you were thinking?’ Sela growled.

‘I was thinking that I had to stop that damned bird!’ Jehenna replied with a sly grin.

‘And did you consider what you were going to do once you had stopped it, or didn’t you plan that far ahead?’

‘Oh, I planned for that. I knew you’d come for me.’

Sela wasn’t sure how to take the comment. It could have been construed as Acoran arrogance, but Sela detected something else – respect. Jehenna had intended the comment as a compliment.

As the two of them flew back up the cliffs to the conflict still being fought above, Sela twisted her head around and said, ‘Well next time you have a plan like that, promise me that you’ll share it with me first.’

‘I promise,’ Jehenna said earnestly.

There was no sign of the Morrigu. Jehenna had expected it to fall past them, a flaming ball of feather and talons, but the sky around them was empty.

‘Look!’ said Sela pointing out to the west. Far, far away a glowing blue light was heading for the centre of the great lake. It was flying so close to the surface that the light was reflected in the water.

‘It’s the Morrigu,’ Jehenna groaned. ‘It’s still alive.’ She was visibly shaken by the sight of the Cabal’s most resilient monster. ‘Can that thing be killed?’

‘You stopped it,’ Sela said firmly. ‘You did what you set out to do.’

Despite its burning wings, the Morrigu was moving incredibly quickly. It had not taken it long to reach its destination – the centre of Lake Erras. From where they sat on the back of Sela’s mount, the pair watched the light of the burning Morrigu rise a little into the sky, only to plummet into the heart of the lake.

Sela was reminded of the falling stars she would watch streaking across the clear night skies above the plains of Tamu. She pondered this, how such a hideous creature could give rise to such a fond memory. Beauty, it seemed, could be found in the most unlikely places. She had no time to consider it further. The sky snorse had climbed to the breach. Before them, skeletal figures brandished weapons of all description.

Without a moment's pause, Sela reached into a bag she had strapped to the sky snorse and pulled out the sunsphere Jehenna had given her back at Amasis. She held it above her head and drew back her arm to throw it.

'Wait!' Jehenna cried sternly.

Sela's hand hovered in the air, holding the sunsphere in her small fingers as the clash of weapons filled her ears.

*Weapons?* The Sapphyrro did not carry weapons. In fact, as Jehenna and Sela gazed down on the scene before them, they realised that the Sapphyrro had not even entered the cave.

'The Ghul – they're fighting one another,' Sela said incredulously. It seemed impossible but the ocular proof was right in front of her.

Her mind raced back to another time. To the cave near Tamu where she had seen the remnants of a great battle. And then to Johannan. It was them – the Ghaddar. There was no mistaking it.

Sela's heart brightened at the thought of seeing Rama again, but she could see no sign of his distinctive copper skin and tentacle-like dreadlocks.

Jehenna shifted her weight on the sky snorse as if she intended to dismount and join the throng of fighting. Sela quickly pulled the steed away from the breach so that Jehenna could not alight.

'Jehenna, there's a time to fight and a time to stand back and let others play their part. The Ghaddar have shatterstone weapons. You do not. Better to wait.'

It was not like Jehenna had a choice. Sela had pulled the sky snorse so far away from the breach that there was nothing the Acoran could do but watch the battle from a distance.

Although there were not many Ghaddar, their shatterstone weapons more than made up for their numbers. The mob of Ghul soldiers gradually thinned and the tide of the battle for Skyfall shifted. The Ghul would not win this night.

They both saw it at the same time. A long, ornate golden staff swung down upon a line of Ghul soldiers standing at the mouth of the cave. Rama. At the Ankaran's side fought Azazel. He had been true to his word. He had protected Rama, kept him alive.

The Ghul surrounding Rama and Azazel were sent tumbling through the air, hurtling towards the burning cauldron of the lake far below.

Sela guided the sky snorse to the edge of the cave whereupon Jehenna jumped gracefully to the ledge of rock below. 'Rama!' she cried and pushed her way through the melee to embrace him. 'You're alive!'

He grinned. 'Of course I'm alive! It takes more than countless Ghul and Cabal to kill me!'

She laughed, but it was more out of relief than amusement. The Ghaddar swept the remaining Ghul over the edge of the cave's mouth. The fighting quickly ended and all that could be heard was the sound of the tropospheric wind and the tumult of the waterfall beyond.

There were only a handful of Ghaddar left. 'This is all we are now,' Azazel said sadly as she looked upon his decimated ranks. 'I'm afraid our time is coming to an end.'

Jehenna smiled at him and said, 'I hope not Azazel. Whether you dwell on top of the world or beneath it, the Myr would be a poorer place should the Ghaddar leave it.'

He returned her smile. He appreciated her sentiment. It was the right thing to say.

She walked over to the edge of the breach where Rama was standing, enjoying the first rays of sun touching his copper skin.

'It is wonderful to breathe fresh air again,' he said. 'Tell me, are we high here? I feel as if I am somewhere high.'

She had forgotten his blindness. He was so confident in his movements it was easy to forget that he could not see. She looked over the edge to see the tiny buildings of Skyfall three leagues below.

'Yes, we're quite high here,' she said casually as she gently led him back away from the edge.

Rama stood outside North Cathedral and smelt the air. 'This place has changed,' he said sadly to Jehenna and Sela. 'I have visited Skyfall Town before and the stench that now fills my head is an obscenity to my recollections of this haven. It lies on the air like a stain.'



Jehenna looked around her. Rama was right. Skyfall Town's violation was extremely difficult to accept. The town was almost unrecognisable.

The Morrigu had made the town its home. The great blue marble dome above North Cathedral was gone. In its place the Morrigu had gathered beams, sails and planks from the ships it had attacked and laced them together with the hempen ropes of the Skyfall Town's bridges. This ungainly nest sat atop the cathedral's broken roof like a bizarre hat. The Morrigu had continued to add to its morbid collection of Myrran bodies and these meat and bone ornaments were woven into the structure of the nest like jewels. The stench arising from the corpses was so pungent that Rama had to place a cloth over his face so that his highly attuned olfactory sense was not overwhelmed. He could also smell burning oil upon the lake but this smell could never be strong enough to mask the fetor of rotting flesh that cascaded from the cathedral's roof.

'Only the Sapphyrro remain,' remarked Sela. 'The town has become a morgue.'

'It is time for us to leave,' Jehenna said decisively.

'Where will we go?' asked Rama through the cloth he held over his face like a shield.

'We go to finish the mission. We're going into the Endless.'

'But what about Skyfall Town?'

'We can't do any more for the Sapphyrro. Skyfall Town is, for the time being, safe.'

Under his cloth, Rama laughed quietly to himself. 'So you're telling me that after weeks of wandering around in the underground, I'm going back into the Endless?'

'Yes. That's exactly what I'm saying. We now have a way in.' As she spoke, Jehenna caught sight of something quickly move out of the shadows behind Rama but was unable to stop what happened next.

Rama's blind eyes widened a little and an ugly gurgling noise escaped his lips. His body stiffened slightly and then pitched forward like a falling tree. It slammed into the wet flagstones and was still. He was dead. A short knife stuck out the back of his neck.

Rama's killer did not try to run – he just stood nonchalantly at the feet of the fallen Ankaran. He was not Ghul. He was not even a soldier. Brave Rama had been slain by the most unlikely of murderers.

'Mulupo?' Jehenna gasped, transfixed by the sight of the smiling Spriggan whose face was spattered with Rama's blood.

*Mulupo woke to the sound of crashing. He thrust his eyes open to see the torrent of the Skyfall crashing down from the cliffs above him. He jumped up in the boat looking for some sign of Remiel Grayson and the others, but they were nowhere to be found.*

*Behind him lay the great watery plains of Lake Erras. A number of lush, green islands could be seen clustered together like trees in a copse. Overhead, thick, voluminous, white clouds hovered in the bright afternoon light. The clouds were so still and solid they looked like they had been carved out of marble. In contrast to the stillness of the clouds, the raging waterfall to the east was so full of life and fury, Mulupo was surprised he had come so close to the Skyfall without waking up.*

*His back ached. Succellos had speared him in the very place the needleback spike had punctured his skin a year before. Even the restorative powers of Caliban's Pryderi were not enough to completely heal him.*

*As he scanned the gentle waves looking for some sign of his companions, something dawned on Mulupo with unequivocal certainty. They knew. One of them had worked out that he was not to be trusted. It must have been Succellos' mark. They had discovered the mark and set him adrift. He was lucky they had not killed him.*

*He sat back in the skiff and contemplated his situation. Caliban had asked him to return his squad and accompany them back to the Endless. He had also asked Mulupo to kill the Sapphyrran Trypp Elan. Caliban had plans for Remiel Grayson. He had plans for Pylos Castalia. He even had plans for the mariner Gerriod Blake, but he no use for the Sapphyrran.*

*Mulupo quickly accepted the fact that he had failed Caliban. There was no sense of disappointment accompanying this. It was a fact and he accepted it as such.*

*The ruins of Skyfall Town lay nearby. It had been subjected to the Morrighu's relentless beatings and now lay like a corpse at the foot of the great waterfall. Most visitors had fled the besieged town and a great many of those who had stayed were either dead or destined to be so in a matter of days – Caliban had informed him of the assault he had planned for Skyfall Town. A great army of Ghul had been sent to the breach above the town and had been given very clear orders – leave no Sapphyrran alive. Caliban had even shared with him his reasons for attacking such a peaceful, gentle folk. The slaughter of the Sapphyrro was for the same reasons the Spriggans had been killed – to appease the bloodlust of the Ghul. As long as Caliban could serve up blood and carnage, the Ghul would remain loyal to him, and he knew there were enough races in the Myr to keep them loyal for a very long time.*

*Although he was sure the Ghul wouldn't need his help, Mulupo decided to help out where he could. Perhaps in the midst of so much bloodshed, there was still some mischief he could perform that would earn Caliban's praise.*

Sela rushed at Mulupo and grabbed him by the throat. In an incredibly fluid movement, she reached behind her head, pulled out a long, thick quill out of her back and gripped it so she could ram it into the Spriggan's heart.

'Sela, no!' cried Jehenna as she rushed to stop the Tamuan from exacting revenge. She took hold of Sela's wrist. Mulupo just stared back calmly.

'Sela, he is not himself!' Jehenna yelled as the Tamuan struggled to free her wrist.

'All the more reason to stop him now!' Sela yelled back passionately.

'Stop him? Don't you mean kill him?'

'He killed Rama!' Her voice broke and she stopped resisting Jehenna. She sank down beside the dead Ankaran and sobbed.

'I'm sorry Sela,' Jehenna said tenderly, 'but I won't let you be the one who killed the last Spriggan. You do not deserve that kind of notoriety. You're much too good for that. Let us save our revenge for these vermin Ghul and their master.'

Sela tied up Mulupo whilst Jehenna spoke to the few Sapphyrro who had survived the night. The Spriggan did not protest nor did he say anything. His characteristic garrulousness was gone and he saw no reason to pretend that he was the person he was before Succellos sunk her sting into him.

'You were right to show him mercy,' Jehenna said as she walked back to her companion.

'Yes,' Sela replied. 'He is a victim in all of this. He is deserving of our pity.'

'That is why you must take him back to Cessair.'

A passing look of shock on Sela's face quickly became a scowl. 'Back to Cessair?' she sneered. 'Are you mad Jehenna? I am not going back to Cessair! I'm going to finish what we started.'

Jehenna crossed her arms and gazed hard at her companion. 'The Chamberlain must be informed. He must be told what has happened.'

Sela bared her teeth. 'I'm not going Jehenna! And you can't make me. I don't care if you're the leader of the mission. You can have me hanged for treason – I'm not leaving.'

They stared at one another, and it seemed that neither would budge. The moment stretched into eternity.

And then Jehenna's face softened. 'Sela, dear Sela. I'm not commanding you to go. I'm asking. As a friend. With the aid of the peg'ii, you can get back to Cessair in hours, not weeks. Only you can do this. Only you.' Her voice trembled a little. 'And to be honest, I don't want you to come with me into the Endless. I've lost too many good people already. I don't want to lose you.'

Sela went to speak to rebut Jehenna's points, but no words came out. Despite herself, the Tamuan understood the request, and out of respect – and perhaps friendship – agreed to it.

'Very well Jehenna. I will go to Cessair and inform the Chamberlain. Then I will return to Cephalonia and do what I can to save your mother.'

Jehenna smiled warmly. 'Thank-you Sela. That means a lot to me.'

'I will also ask the Chamberlain to send troops to Amasis. Perhaps we can salvage –'

'I have no doubt the Ghul will have ransacked Amasis by now, taking all my mother's creations with them.' A flurry of sadness and anger swirled about the proud Acoran. 'Make sure you tell the Chamberlain of the traitor he foolishly placed in our midst.'

Sela knew that Jehenna was still struggling with the betrayal of the one they had known as Bormanus. She knew that it was only a matter of time before the Acoran's suppressed rage would be released. Sela almost pitied the Ghul who now stood between Jehenna and Caliban. Almost.

'What will we do about Rama? We can't just leave him here.' Sela asked.

'No. We can't. Whilst you were binding the Spriggan, the Sapphyrro agreed to return Rama's body to his people in Ankara.'

Sela smiled wanly. It was right that he was being taken home. He had saved Skyfall Town. He was the hero. He should be buried as one.

Jehenna approached the Tamuan. This was it. The end of their journey together. 'You know, I'm amazed I didn't kill you,' she said wryly, thinking of all the arguments and confrontations that had existed between the pair since the first day of the mission.

Sela nodded. She had wanted to kill Jehenna at least once a day for the first few weeks.

Jehenna placed her hands affectionately on Sela's bristly shoulders. 'If we should live through this...' The beautiful Acoran wanted to say so much, express the things that were bubbling beneath the surface. But her feelings were confused and the seething hatred of the man who had brought all this misery down on the Myr had so muddled her emotions that she couldn't find a way to finish the sentence.

It didn't matter. Sela understood.

Jehenna mounted the sky snorse Sela had arranged to take her back up to the breach at the top of the towering cliffs above. As soon as it felt Jehenna's arms fold around its neck, the sky snorse shot up into the sky. The waters of the Skyfall tumbled past her, illuminated by the rising sun. The retreating world below was calm, bathed in the benign light of morning.

As Jehenna climbed higher and higher the shimmering streams of water pouring down the cliffs reminded her of a bridal veil. It perplexed her to have such uncharacteristically romantic thoughts, especially on the eve of her revenge for all the wrongs that had been committed against her, against the Myr.

Emotions swirled around her body like red wine in a half empty glass. But the glass was cracked. The wine had spoiled. She thought momentarily of all she had lost – a father, mother, brother and if her suspicions were correct, she had also lost a husband long ago. She could not afford to lose anything more.

When she reached the breach atop the Skyfall, she climbed down from her steed and marched towards the tunnel at the far end of the cave. Azazel watched her curiously but did not say anything to her. He knew what she purposed. She had her mission to complete and her manner declared that she did not want company. She would finish the mission alone.

The sky snorse tried to follow Jehenna into the Endless but she pushed it back towards the open skies of a far friendlier world. 'One as beautiful as you should not go where I am going. Go fly into the fields of the sky and forget about all you have seen this night.'

The sky snorse hung in the still air at the mouth of the cave and watched her turn away and stride off into the crimson darkness of the Endless.

## Chapter Twelve The Endless

**I**t was a sound that Lara hadn't heard in months. Somewhere in the crimson glow ahead a baby was crying. Lara's heart skipped a beat and the glowing light from her chest shone so brightly, it pierced the fabric of her cloak. Her hands clutched at her Birthstone and she shot forward, slithering down the rocky path which led to the source of the sound.

'Lara, wait!' Sumi exclaimed trying to muffle her shout so as not to bring any attention to the pair.

Lara paused, turning around to face Sumi, but it was clear that her every thought was bent on finding her daughter as quickly as possible.

'I know you want to get your daughter, Lara, and that's what I want too, but you need to listen to me first.' Sumi was rushing through her speech, competing against the infant cries that called out to Lara like a siren. 'You've grown powerful, but we must do this together. If you rush in there, the Ghul will cut you down. They know we're in the Endless, and Caliban will be prepared for you. We must do this together.'

Sumi spluttered into a coughing fit. Her condition had worsened significantly over the days they had spent in the labyrinth of the Endless. The frostbite had claimed all her toes, and the resulting gangrene was well on the way to consuming much of her body. It was only sheer determination and discipline that had kept her on her feet, but her breathing was laboured and her eyes hinted at the pain that had riddled her body. She had constructed makeshift crutches from some long bones she had found littering the floor of a cavern they had passed. The crutches kept her upright but she was a thin shadow of the warrior she had been out on the hills of Scoriath and on the plains of the Slith.

Lara slid up to Sumi and kissed her tenderly on the cheek. 'Sumi. You have become dearer to me than you realise. I do not expect you to do any more. You have got me here. That is enough. You need to rest'

'No!' Sumi rasped. 'I promised you that you would hold your daughter again, and that covenant is the only thing keeping me alive.'

Her determination was so fixed and clear, Lara knew she could not suggest that she should remain behind. 'Very well Sumi. What do you propose?'

'I propose caution. Often when a snorse knows it is near its journey's end, it will bolt towards home, tripping itself up on the last stretch. You need to stay rational. Calm. Objective.'

Lara nodded. 'I take your point. Do you have a plan?'

‘I suggest you let me scan the area ahead and work out a means to extract your child. In the meantime, I want you to prepare your *En Pyrrha* incantation. That will take care of the Ghul.’

‘I don’t need to prepare it any more. I can cast it at will.’

‘Ready yourself all the same.’

And then Lara realised why Sumi wanted to slow her down. It would not be just Ghul they would be facing. There would be more Pryderi. Pryderi armed with the power of the *Incanto*.

Sumi hobbled down the path, leaving Lara to clear her mind in preparation for the fight ahead.

Caliban had also made preparations. A squad of twenty-five Ghul, commanded by Major Chabriel, were posted at the entrance to the large cavern that had served as a nursery for over a year.

The Nursery was little more than a large pit where the Pryderi infants were kept. The children numbered in the hundreds and were all tethered to poles in the ground, like beasts. The poles were of all shapes and sizes having been scavenged from the wreckage of ships that had found their way into the Endless through the Worldpool above.

The babies’ shivering tails and desperate wailing highlighted the horrors they endured in the crèche. The pit smelt of the defecation and bodily fluids that were usually removed from the environments of most infants. Some of the children clawed at one another and quite a few bore bruises and teeth marks gained from aggressive exchanges with others in the pit. Their hair was matted and crawling with rock lice. Spread amongst the children, bones and scraps of meat hinted at a diet that was totally inappropriate for offspring who had been dependant upon their mother’s milk before being stolen from their homes.

Rejected soft toys, crudely crafted from animal hide stuffed with moss, could be found throughout the Nursery. The Ghul had been instructed to create familiar childhood objects for the Pryderi offspring, and had failed miserably in the attempt. Limited by their knowledge of the world above, the soft toys were shaped into the likenesses of monsters inhabiting the dark places of the world. Suspended from vines crawling across the roof of the nursery, mobiles constructed from the bones and the claws of small animals slowly turned in the cool breeze that perpetually slithered through the Endless. Completing this sad mockery, two Ghul wearing white aprons moved through the field of poles, futilely attending to the forlorn cries of the children.

‘Look at us Droola!’ sneered Chabriel. ‘We are Ghul and what has Caliban reduced us to? Nursemaids! And look at our adopted children!’

These slithering animals make me sick with their scaly skin and wriggly tails.'

Tall, white-haired Chabriel was in the process of burping a newly-abducted child. The baby had been howling since its arrival and the relentless, unappeasable squalling had frayed Chabriel's nerves beyond repair. She wanted to shake the baby into silence, but she had discovered weeks ago that such an act only made the babies go limp and that displeased Caliban greatly. She had tried talking calmly to the baby, but her hollow voice only exacerbated the problem, scaring the infant out of its undeveloped wits. The Pryderi mothers had begged Chabriel to pat the upset babes instead, but she lacked the delicacy required, and a high number of the infants had to have scratches and lacerations tended to after her attempts to mollycoddle them. The baby she was holding had been crying for three hours straight, and if it were not for Caliban's highly specific orders, Chabriel would have eaten the child when she first laid hands on her.

Droola was doing little better. She had just fed a child with the milk of a grizzum they had taken from the world above. The child seemed content with the meal but as soon as she had finished the small sackful of warm milk she had vomited it over her Ghul nanny. Droola dropped the child in disgust and it added its screams to the cacophony of wailing that filled the chamber. 'Why, I would do anything to escape this punishment,' groaned Droola, wiping the off-white fluid from her off-white skin.'

Chabriel was separating two children who were clawing viciously at one another. One of the babies, having newly discovered teeth, sank them into the forearm of the smaller child resulting in a shrill ululation that rang out across the cavern. Chabriel yanked savagely on the ropes that were firmly tied around the poor baby's neck. It did nothing to lessen the din in the vast pen of miserable captives. 'Let's take a break, Droola. I'm about to strangle one of these nestlings.'

'I was hoping you'd suggest that,' Droola said. In her anxiousness to leave the pit, she accidentally stepped on an infant's tail sending the child into a fit of yammering tears.

The two Ghul wended their way through the nursery to a small alcove in the rock walls of the cavern. Along the side of this recessed space lay a bench that had been carved from the shell of a skitterik. Next to the bench sat a large chest that Droola had stolen during one of her sorties into Morae. She licked her thin lips as she approached the chest. 'Feel like a brew?' she asked as she turned the rusted knob on a small Cold-powered stove she had acquired on one of her sorties into Scoriath.



‘I’d kill for one,’ replied Chabriel, without the slightest hint of metaphor in her voice.

Droola pulled up the lid of rotting truck. Many small, round, ugly creatures hopped on their single leg, their eyes blinking as the red light of the cavern flowed into their dark little home. The animals were indigenous to the Endless, and like so many of the realm’s odd creatures, they did not have a name because the Ghul had never considered giving them one. With surprisingly sharp reflexes, Droola shot out an arm and grabbed one of the strange animals and in a seamless motion, well-refined after months of repetition, she slammed the lid shut with one hand as the other swung the creature free of its rudimentary enclosure and dashed its small brains out on the edge of a sharp rock. The squat little animal went limp in her hand.

Meanwhile Chabriel produced two iron tankards and placed them on a rickety bone table that was next to the stove. Droola held the dead creature in both hands and gave it a brutal twist. A thick brown liquid spurted from its body and Droola artfully aimed it into one of the tankards. She pulled another creature from the trunk and repeated the whole process. This done, the two tankards were placed on the stove where they bubbled away, sending an acrid aroma into the air of the room. After a minute or two, the two drinks were clasped in the hands of the Ghul nursemaids, who leaned back on the bench, relishing the respite from their motherly duties.

‘Why are you here Major Chabriel?’ asked Droola as she slurped noisily on her beverage. ‘I thought you had Caliban’s favour.’

Chabriel frowned at Droola’s familiarity but decided to ignore it for the time being. ‘I do. Or at least, I thought I had until he posted me down here.’

A heavy pause accompanied Droola’s pondering of this statement. ‘So you’re not here as a punishment.’

Chabriel grunted ambiguously. ‘Caliban has sent me here to await the arrival of two Myrrans who recently stole into the Endless through the Nilfheim breach.’

‘But why do you *serve* in the Nursery? Surely that job is for lesser Ghul to perform.’

‘Caliban wants me to learn the lesson of humility before confronting the Myrrans. Apparently arrogance got my sister killed.’

‘Drabella’s dead?’ Droola was amazed.

‘Yes. Killed by Caliban’s brother. Burnt to a crisp.’ Chabriel looked slyly at her companion. ‘I wonder... would you wish the same thing upon me, Droola?’

*'I will tell you what happens now Droola. You will march back to the Morae breach and from there return to the Endless. I will provide you with a report to present to Caliban that fully implicates you in the failure to capture the witch Lara Brand. I intend to make you entirely responsible for this disaster. If you are lucky, you will be reassigned to the Nursery. Otherwise, I expect Caliban will have you chopped up into pieces and fed to the skitteriks.'*

'Your death would warm my shrivelled heart Major.' Whatever Chabriel would do to her couldn't be worse than what she was enduring in the Nursery.

Chabriel did not seem the least bit offended by Droola's response. If anything, she was pleased by it.

Droola took a sip of her beverage and sighed. 'Major, tell me – the Myrrans you await – who are they?'

A thin smile crept across Chabriel's face. 'One of them is known to you Droola. The witch you let escape on Grisandole. She's on her way here now.'

Droola's pallid face lit up. 'That is good news indeed. Perhaps I will be able to impress Caliban by delivering the witch's head to him,' Droola said hopefully.

'Lara Brand is a wily one. She has done well to get this far. But she will find her journey ends here. We have twenty-five of my best grenadiers, not to mention a witch as well,' Chabriel said defiantly.

'Filthy serpents,' Droola sneered. 'We don't need their help.'

'I'm not too sure of that,' Chabriel said as she drained the contents of her mug down her thin throat. 'We will need them soon enough. Caliban's brother finally approaches and he is powerful. And there is one who accompanies him, a Helyan armed with shatterstone. He has killed many Ghul.'

'They have taken their time getting here,' Droola scoffed. 'I don't understand why Caliban did not let us abduct his brother as soon as his presence was known to us.'

Chabriel leaned back on the wooden bench and pulled out a knife to sharpen her nails. As she whittled away at her fingers, she unfolded Caliban's plans to Droola, in the manner of a teacher trying to assist a dim-witted student.

'Some time ago, Caliban devised the plan to send three assassination squads into the Endless. The stupid overworlders who were carrying out the mission were oblivious to its origin. Whilst the squads

were wasting time searching all over the Myr for a way into the Endless, a search made all the more difficult thanks to the traitors Caliban had inserted into each group, our forces have continued to grow. The Kobolds have now released almost thirty Cabal. The number of witches loyal to Caliban has swelled to prodigious proportions and they have been armed with potent, dark magick.'

'He is a patient man. I would have slaughtered these Myrrans long ago.'

'Droola, you don't understand the way his mind works. The past few months have been a wonderful source of entertainment to Caliban. He has watched every move religiously, enthralled as his machinations whirled and ticked without anyone having the remotest understanding of what was really going on.'

'You are lucky indeed to have such insight into our master,' Droola said.

Chabriel shook her head and her white hair flicked across Droola's face. 'Luck has nothing to do with it Droola. Caliban smiles upon those who serve him best. Let us go back to the pit before Lara Brand arrives,' she said, rising from the bench. 'I don't want to miss out on a thing.'

At Droola's feet, a Moraen child cried out for its mother. Suddenly, a pair of sai split the air and dug deep into each of Droola's shoulders, pinning her against the post to which the child was tethered. Before Droola had a chance to free herself, a ball of fire shot out from the entrance to the Nursery and splashed into her face. The fireball took hold of Droola's skin and moments later, a light rain of ashes floated down upon the confused Pryderi baby at the base of the post.

Lara slithered out from the entrance of the Nursery and stared down the Ghul quickly filling the space between her and the Pryderi young.

'You don't want to get in my way!' Lara snarled as she thrust out her hands and sent a wave of fire crashing down upon the Ghul ranks in front of her. They did not even have time to attack. The fire consumed them as if they were dry kindling.

Lara caught movement on her left side. A line of Ghul had their backs bent, ready to launch a barrage of needleback spines at her. She had nowhere to hide. Their bodies snapped forward and simultaneously released the vicious spines.

Lara managed to create a mystical shield a split-second before the spines reached her. The spines fell to the floor but the Ghul weren't finished. They rushed at her, drawing knives as they came – but they

were no threat to her. She cast another fire spell and burnt them into nothingness.

‘Stop.’

Lara spun around to see a red-headed witch standing at the entrance to the Nursery. The Moraen was small, but beautiful. Her fingertips glowed with crepitating barbs of blue energy.

‘Callisandra Galley?’

Callisandra did not say anything more. The only response she had was a handful of pain which she dispensed without hesitation. Lightning flared out of her hands and shot through Lara’s nervous system. The blue bolts of electricity crackled across her skin. She felt her muscles twist and jump as Callisandra’s spell wrought havoc with her nervous system. Her entire body shook as the stinging energy barged through her veins. Lara collapsed to the cavern floor, gasping for air.

She lifted her head to see a Ghul woman moving through the pit where the children lay captive. She was tall and had long white hair.

‘You!’ Lara growled.

‘Foolish girl. You should just give up.’

‘Not when I’m this close,’ Lara said defiantly, rising up from the floor of the Nursery.

In a sweeping gesture, Chabriel threw her hand out to indicate all the babies surrounding her. ‘Back down, Lara Brand or the progeny of the Pryderi will be but a smear upon the ground. I will not hesitate to slaughter them all.’

Callisandra twisted her head around to face Chabriel and snarled. ‘What?’

Whether Chabriel meant her threat or not was irrelevant. She had distracted Callisandra and that was all Lara needed to wrest control of the situation. She summoned a wind that sent Callisandra crashing into the wall behind her. Her body slumped to the ground and did move.

Chabriel had disappeared but Lara knew she was near. She had hidden herself somewhere amongst the forest of poles that filled the pit.

Lara slithered down amongst the younglings. As heart-breaking as it was to see the babies mewling for her attention as they lay in the dirt tethered to wooden poles, she could not pause to show them the attention they craved. She only had one child on her mind and she was not prepared stop until she found her.

She wanted to call out to Birren, but fearful that her baby’s response would attract the attention of Chabriel, she kept her mouth closed.

A bright light emanated from Lara’s chest. Birren was so near that Lara’s radiant Birthstone cast its colour upon the posts surrounding her

and upon the ground beneath her feet. From the centre of the nursery a light shone in response and this was both a joy and a horror to Lara, for if she could see the glow of Birren's Birthstone, so too could Chabriel.

Lara slithered as fast as she could towards the centre of the pit, ignoring all the other babies that reached out for her as she neared.

'Oh, Birren, my baby!' she cried when she saw her child huddled in the dirt at the base of a thick, ironwood post. Birren looked up and broke out into a smile that seemed too large for her little face.

'Mumma!'

Lara's arms reached out and she flew towards her child, her love so intense that the entire nursery was awash in the blue light pouring out from her chest.

Before Lara could reach her daughter, Chabriel jumped forward and snatched up the child. Birren jerked awkwardly in her arms and a small cry left the little girl's lips. Chabriel withdrew the knife she had slid into the defenceless child's side. She held up its moist blade for Lara to see.

'No!' Lara screamed and the power of her voice was like a terrible storm.

'Come any closer witch and I'll finish her off.'

Chabriel clutched Birren to her chest and placed her knife against the child's throat. 'She's still alive Lara, but that will change if you raise a finger against me.'

Chabriel's knife rested against Birren's fragile neck. There was no way Lara could release a spell before Chabriel ran the blade across the child's throat.

'Please...' Lara begged but she knew the Ghul woman had no mercy to give.

'You have done well to get here Lara Brand, but your journey is wasted. You will either submit to Caliban's will or watch your offspring die on the thin edge of my knife.'

'Don't hurt her. Don't hurt her.' Lara's confidence had shattered. Her hands shook uncontrollably.

'Tell your Susanese friend to come out of the shadows and join us. I know she is here somewhere.'

Chabriel lifted her knife from Birren's throat to emphasise her point and that was her mistake. Suddenly a shining, silver object spun through the air. It was a throwing star Sumi had collected from the armoury at Toshi Station. Chabriel noticed it a second before it severed her wrist. Her hand fell to the floor along with the knife she was planning to drag across Birren's neck.

Lara did not waste a second. Her hands formed a ball of light so brilliant that it could have been plucked from the heart of the sun. For a moment, everything in the cavern was white. Everything was bathed in purity.

The blinding light in the cavern faded to reveal that Chabriel was no more. She had been burned out of existence. Nothing remained of her but the knife that lay next to Birren Brand's little body.

*'We'll get her back, Lara. On my life, we'll get her back.'*

Lara clutched at the stone in her chest, but its light had faded.

Sumi stepped out of the shadows and made her way down into the pit. She was ill-prepared for the sight that lay before her. She wanted to pick up each forlorn child and cuddle it, wanted to tell them all that it would be alright, but she knew that she had to keep walking. It would not be alright. Tears welled up in the eyes. It would never be alright.

Lara fell to the ground and cradled the still body of her Birren. Sumi hobbled over to her, but could do nothing to console her. All she could do was lead her friend out of the pit and take her somewhere safe.

As they passed the unconscious body of the Pryderi witch who had attacked Lara earlier, they stopped. Lara was staring down at her with a curious expression on her face. 'Her name was Callisandra Galley,' she said in a hoarse whisper. 'She was a friend of mine.'

'She will not stay like this long. We must make sure —'

'No. She is no longer a threat to us.'

'But —'

'You know, she didn't even have a child for Caliban to take. She must have come down here to support the others. She once gave me a chair to sit on when I travelled to Grisandole on the back of a flying lobsle.'

Sumi realised that Lara would not consider any further discussion on the matter.

'We failed,' Lara said in a tortured voice.

'You have your child back in your arms, Lara. It's time to leave.'

'Caliban still lives and my little one is dead. It is not time to leave.'

'You want to seek him out?'

'Yes.'

'We will die.'

'I know.'

Gerriod felt Trypp's hand wind around his own. The surging waters of the Worldpool had pushed them both to the bottom of the dark body of water that lay under Lake Erras.

Hoping to avoid surfacing where Erras' falling waters pounded the underground lake, Trypp pulled Gerriod through the dark water until he felt they were clear of the crashing torrent above. The Sapphyrran moved with slow powerful strokes which pushed the pair through the chilling water at tremendous speed. Gerriod occasionally kicked his legs to assist but it was unnecessary. Trypp brought them up to the surface long before either of them felt like they were running out of air.

When they emerged into the soft, crimson light of the vast chamber, a noxious smell reminded Gerriod of his first visit to the Endless. Lining the shoreline were the same ovoid shapes he had seen months ago when he had first scrambled out of the lake.

'Does it look familiar?' Trypp said, squinting as he tried to get accustomed to the putrid smell that wafted down from the strange eggs lining the path behind him.

'Yes. Too familiar. Look!'

Gerriod pointed to the far side of the black lake where a massive beast clattered about on long, thin legs.

'It's Succellos.'

'We must move quickly. Caliban will know we are here.'

Trypp made to walk down the pock-marked path that encircled the cavern, but Gerriod stayed put. 'Where's Pylos and Remiel?' he said as he scanned the dark lake for the other pair.

'The skiffs were pulled apart during our descent. They could be anywhere.'

'We should be able to see them.'

'We can't wait for them, Gerriod. We have to find Caliban.'

'Allow us to save you the trouble,' said the hollow voice of Caliban's favoured Ghul, Lieutenant Lucetious.

The pair spun around to find a squad of Ghul staring back at them. They were fully armed and had every weapon trained on Trypp and Gerriod.

'Swim for it Trypp!' cried Gerriod as he broke into a sprint at the closest Ghul. He had not gone a foot before he was cut down by a volley of arrows.

Trypp leapt forward and caught the mariner as he fell backwards with half a dozen arrows buried in his arms and legs.

'He is lucky, Sapphyrran,' said Lucetious coldly. 'Caliban wants him alive. Unfortunately for you, he made no such stipulation.'

Pylos' mind was racing as fast as his heart. He could feel the pressing weight of the rock above him pushing down on the small space he and Remiel occupied. In the cramped environs of the small tunnel they crawled down, he could hear Remiel's breathing and it was as shallow and quick as his own. The smells in the tunnels were squeezed together in a dense concoction that made the Helyan want to wrap a cloth around his face to keep them at bay.

He quickly slid a hand to his waist. The shatterstone sword was gone, torn off his belt by the raging torrent.

'My sword!' he whispered to Remiel. 'It's gone. It must be in the lake.'

He made to turn around in the tight passage but Remiel placed a hand upon his shoulder. 'Pylos we can't go back there now. There are too many Ghul.'

'But you could use your Morgai powers,' Pylos said more aggressively than he intended. 'I need that sword.'

'You will have to use your wits instead,' Remiel said softly. 'They have served you well thus far. Let's keep going.'

Pylos nodded reluctantly and continued to follow Remiel down the tunnel. His stomach tightened. All over his body, the effects of claustrophobia began to take control. His hands were clammy. A vein at the side of his temple throbbed and his mouth was dry. He tried to shake off the anxiety but his headspace was filled with the realisation that he would probably never see blue skies again.

'Pylos come on!' urged Remiel, swivelling around to face his companion..

'I... I need a moment.'

'What? We have to go.'

'No, just —'

'Pylos, what is wrong?'

'I'm struggling Remiel.' His voice was almost unrecognisable. Although Remiel had only known Pylos a short time, he had quickly become accustomed to the Helyan's assertive, confident qualities. The shaking man in the tunnel with him was a shadow of the fearless warrior with whom he had journeyed across half the Myr.

'Tell me what is wrong.'

'I'm not sure I can be relied upon in the battle ahead,' Pylos confessed. His voice had dropped to an embarrassed whisper. 'I'm finding it hard to concentrate.'

'You're Pylos Castalia! You're afraid of nothing.'



‘I told you when we were in the Thin Grey Line – I can’t bear being in enclosed spaces. Or underground. I feel as if my heart is about to burst through my chest.’

‘You’ll be okay.’

‘No. I don’t think I will,’ Pylos said wringing his fingers. ‘I thought I would be able to cope with it but now we are here, shut in and surrounded by so much rock...’

His voice faded away as the feeling of eternal immurement built inside his head.

‘Pylos, let me make this easy for you. I can’t do this without you.’ Remiel’s voice was firm and clear.

‘I can hardly breathe.’ Pylos dropped his head, ashamed but unable to consider anything beyond his immediate situation.

Remiel grabbed Pylos’ face and lifted it so they were looking directly at one another. ‘Pylos, you are going to have to get past this. Deal with it quickly. I feel for you, but we don’t have time for you to sort this out. Too much depends on us finishing the mission. That is your obligation. That is your duty.’

Mission. Obligation. Duty. Meaningless words to some, but to Pylos an oath that he would cling to when everything else was falling apart. His jaw tightened as he reached deep into his heart to find the resolve he needed to finish what they had started. ‘I will do what is asked of me,’ he said slowly. ‘I will not let you down.’

He was not speaking to Remiel; he was talking to himself.

Trypp could not tell how many hours had passed since his incarceration. He had been beaten badly and a bloody fog had enveloped his head. The Ghul had been merciless. Intrigued by his unwillingness to fight back, they had hit him with everything they could get their hands on – clubs, rocks, sharp pieces of bone.

He had been thrown into a narrow circular pit that resembled a well. But there was no water at the bottom of the deep hole – only bones, rocks and a man by the name of Samuel Melkin.

‘My father is still alive?’ Gerriod gasped.

‘Yes, he is,’ said the gnarled figure hobbling before him. ‘It was mean-spirited of Defecious to suggest otherwise. These Ghul can be quite heartless, you know.’

‘Then give him back to me!’

Caliban looked down at his prisoner and frowned. Gerriod had been chained to the stone dais by the lake, the same dais where he had seen Porenutious Windle impaled upon Succellos' sting months before. Two Ghul guards stood to attention in the arched entrance to the cavern, watching the exchange between the two Myrrans. Succellos hovered nearby, sniffing the air excitedly as she gazed down at the defiant figure of Gerriod Blake.

'It is not the first time I have smelt this one, Caliban,' Succellos hissed, her voice leering and lascivious. 'He has been here before. Left his smell all over the path. Touched one of my pretty eggs.'

'Yes,' Caliban said, studying Gerriod as if he were an exhibit. 'Yes, he has been here before. He is an old friend.'

'I am no friends of yours.'

'Oh, but I hold you with great fondness, Gerriod,' Caliban said adopting a tone that was both familiar and insincere. 'For was it not you who freed me from my captivity thirty years ago?' He grinned exposing a row of teeth so yellowed and uneven they could have been mistaken for pebbles taken from a dirty stream. He looked down at Gerriod waiting for the mariner's reaction.

He didn't have to wait long. Gerriod's face changed as confusion settled on his brow. 'What do you mean?'

'Oh dear me!' Caliban replied, his unctuous voice patronising his captive. 'I forgot. You have no memory of that day. Something my brother did to you no doubt.'

Gerriod tried to rise, but the harsh iron chain around his wrist kept him in a forced state of genuflection. 'I know what your brother did to me,' Gerriod jeered. 'What I don't know is how I helped you escape.'

'Why, you gave me the knife I needed to cut off my own hand.'

'I don't understand.'

Caliban leaned so close to his prisoner, the rank smell of his breath made Gerriod shudder. 'Let me simplify it for you Gerriod. I was chained to the deck of *The Melody* with no hope of escape, immobilised by the very chain that now keeps you here. You brought me the knife I needed to free myself.'

Gerriod's shock was quickly replaced with disgust. 'You cut off your own hand to free yourself?'

'Desperation can make a man do astounding things Gerriod.'

Gerriod's mind was aflame.

'*You gave me the knife.*'

He had provided Caliban with the means to escape and in doing so had condemned his father to a lifetime of torment. He was the one who had set in motion the terrible set of events that had led to the chaos that

now enveloped the world. He was to blame. Not Remiel Grayson. It was he who had been the catalyst.

‘I think you’ve upset him,’ Succellos said to Caliban. Her voice gurgled with joy.

‘The truth can sting, Succellos,’ Caliban said casually.

‘So can I, Caliban. Please give him to me. He is ripe for the picking.’

‘Not yet, Succellos. I want Gerriod’s mind to be kept intact long enough for me to see it fall apart. I have plans for him.’

Succellos’ legs clattered on the ground as disappointment shook her body. ‘Caliban, will you deny me my pleasure?’

Caliban turned to the great beast and patted one of its shining black legs. ‘Now that’s a little unfair Succellos. I gave you the Kobolds. I gave you the Spriggan and soon I will give you more minds and souls to feed upon than you could possibly imagine.’

‘Yes, you have.’ Succellos lowered her torso in a show of contrition.

Caliban’s face lit up as he thought of a way to appease his monster. ‘How about a wager of a sort?’

‘Yes,’ Succellos hissed, her face transformed by glee. ‘I do enjoy a little friendly competition. What is the prize?’

‘You can’t have Gerriod, but we have others coming to visit.’

‘Yes! Yes! They are here already. I can smell them all around. Some are very near.’

Caliban smiled magnanimously. ‘Should fortune favour you in what I am about to propose, one of them will be yours.’

She spun around excitedly. The thin points of her legs made pock marks in the dais and she struggled to contain herself. ‘May I choose which one? Oh, say I may, dear Caliban.’

‘You have one in mind?’

‘Yes. There is one who is sick. Her flesh is rotting. I can smell it dying on her.’

‘Excellent choice. You speak of the Susanese princess, Sumi Kimura.’

‘I want her.’

‘She will be here shortly. I have sent Chabriel to welcome her.’

Succellos scowled. ‘What if –’

‘Do not concern yourself Succellos. Chabriel is no match for the witch who accompanies the one you have chosen.’

Succellos bent down again to address Caliban. ‘So we know the prize but what is the wager?’

‘Ah yes, now we come to the fun part!’ Caliban said theatrically. He reached into the folds of his robes, drew out a knife and dropped it on the ground before Gerriod. ‘Look at it closely Gerriod. Do you recognise it? This knife once hung in the galley of *The Melody*. I think it is only fitting that I give it back to you.’

Gerriod eyed Caliban suspiciously. ‘Why? Why would you give me your knife?’

‘Gerriod, I am prepared to let you go free. All you have to do is cut off your hand with the knife.’

‘You’re insane!’

‘There’s a fair likelihood of that, but that does not alter the choice before you. If you are willing to hack your hand off with that knife – the same knife I used thirty years ago – I am willing to let you walk out of here unharmed – except for the loss of your hand. I have one or two witches who will ensure the amputation does not kill you.’

‘I didn’t come all the way to the Endless just to walk back out.’

‘Perhaps I can entice you,’ Caliban said seditiously. ‘We both know you did not come here to kill me. You came here for your father. You may have him and walk out of here if you cut off your hand.’

Gerriod snatched the knife up from the floor eagerly. He lay his left wrist upon the stone floor of the dais and raised the knife as far as his bonds would allow.

‘Wait Gerriod!’ Caliban cried shrilly. ‘Surely you didn’t think I would make it that easy for you.’

Gerriod stared up at his captor with a look of fury and horror. The knife was poised an inch above his wrist. ‘You maniac!’ he shouted. ‘You think this is easy? Mutilating myself for your pleasure.’

Caliban ignored his protestations. ‘I am simply saying you might want to hold off slicing up your flesh before I add the complication. You cut off your hand – you and yours will be free to go, but Sumi Kimura will be given to Succellos. Should you choose not to sever your wrist, Princess Kimura will be permitted to go free, but you and your father will stay as my guests.’

‘What sort of sick arrangement –’

‘It’s not sick!’ cackled Succellos. ‘It’s delicious! A capital idea Caliban! The drama of the choice fills the air with delicious scents. His anxiety is a bouquet.’

He turned conspiratorially to Gerriod. ‘She is incorrigible, isn’t she!’

Caliban’s words went unheard. Gerriod’s mind was consumed with the proposition put before him. He had been prepared to do the deed, slice of his own hand, but now things had changed. The trembling

hand that held the knife above his wrist also held the fate of two others in it. It was an unbearable choice. He knew what his father would advocate – to put down the knife – but it wasn't that easy. Every step on the road to Caliban had been hard fought and now there was a chance he could actually do the impossible and leave with his father alive.

An image of Sumi Kimura came to mind. He had seen her in the Cloud Chamber and was struck by the sense of sadness that enveloped her. Trypp told him later that she had lost her husband and sister in the space of a few months. She had suffered greatly and now he had been thrust into a situation whereby he could contribute to her suffering. Or release her.

The knife shook.

Succellos leaned in closer and inhaled deeply. She found the scent of Gerriod's anguish to be intoxicating. 'Yes,' she whispered longingly. 'Do it! Do it!'

Gerriod grit his teeth. A droplet of sweat ran down the ridge of his nose and hung from its tip, shaking ever so slightly as Gerriod committed to his decision.

'Cut your flesh!' Succellos purred. 'Cut away, little man.'

The knife fell to the dais. He would not do it.

Caliban edged in close to his captive. 'Now that is disappointing,' he sighed. 'I really thought we had more in common.'

'We have nothing in common,' Gerriod responded, his voice little more than a bestial growl.

Succellos sniffed deeply then twisted her head to one side, surprised by a scent she had picked up. 'Now that is most unexpected!'

'What is?' asked Caliban, his curiosity piqued.

Succellos lowered herself so her face was almost level with Gerriod's. 'Caliban... he's just like you.'

Caliban glanced warily at Gerriod.

'What do you mean Succellos?'

'Well, well,' she hissed enjoying the growing tension. 'You're not the only one whose flesh is rotting Caliban. I can smell his falling apart. Look at him closely. He has the disease.'

Caliban gazed at Gerriod in shock. He stumbled away from him as if he had been hit. 'You! You're a leper.'

'It seems we do have something in common, *old friend*,' Gerriod said with a hateful smirk upon his face.

Caliban abandoned all appearance of equanimity. 'Get out of my sight, filthy leper!' he screeched. He turned to the entrance to the cavern where his soldiers stood on guard, patiently waiting for orders. 'Get him

out of here!' he screamed. 'Take him far away until I decide what to do with him. Get the filthy leper out of here!'

Caliban continued to shout hysterically as Gerriod was dragged away. 'And know this Gerriod – I will kill your father! He's dead Gerriod! Dead! Do you hear me you filthy leper? He's dead!'

Samuel Melkin leaned forward, his long face lit up by the subdued crimson glow of the pit's phosphorescent walls. 'The Ghul will keep you alive as long as you can entertain them. Pain entertains them. As long as you can be hurt, you have a chance of living.'

Trypp was stunned by the presence of the man in the pit and stared at him in wonder. He had the dark skin of a Tuirrenian, but it was covered in scabs from infected wounds which were in turn covered with a layer of grime. It did not seem he had bathed in a year.

'Who are you?' Trypp asked.

'My name is Samuel Melkin. I'd extend my hand to you, but I've had all my fingers broken.' He lifted a hand that was adorned with fingers that stuck out at such awkward angles, Trypp wondered whether the man could hold anything with them.

'What are you doing here?'

Melkin's lips curled up in a shape that vaguely resembled a smile. 'To be honest, I'm not sure why I am here. At first I thought it was to keep Caliban Grayson company.' He looked up to the mouth of the pit, fifty yards above. 'I once resided at his cottage,' he said as if describing a distant holiday. 'That was a long time ago. I haven't seen Caliban for quite a while.'

'But how did you get here?'

'If you mean how did I get into the Endless, I was abducted by a Ghul commander by the name of Lucetious as my colleague and I were journeying to the country of Morae. If you mean how did I get thrown into the loathsome pit, well, let's just say, I am a stubborn man.'

'I'm sorry. I don't follow you.'

Melkin gave a grizzled laugh. 'In our little hole, you could follow me anywhere, although I doubt that I could follow you. I happen to know that the Sapphyrro are excellent climbers.'

'I could not climb out of here I'm afraid,' Trypp said, examining the walls of the pit. The hole had been carved out of the rock by the Kobolds and they had made sure that the walls were so smooth that no-one could escape – not even a Sapphyrran. 'Even if I could get out, there are at least ten guards above who would take issue with my departure.'

'I don't think they like us very much!' Melkin laughed.

‘Sir, you said you were stubborn. What did you mean by that?’

‘I refused to lose.’

‘Lose? Lose what?’

‘Siege of course. Caliban considers himself quite the player. I think that was why I was kept in the Endless – to play games with him. Initially, I deliberately lost game after game to him, thinking that if I stroked his ego, he would set me free. Quite the contrary. He saw that I was losing on purpose and he broke my thumbs as punishment. So I decided I would never lose again. And I haven’t. I won game after game against the leper until one day he tipped the board and sent me down here to rot.’

A shatterbug flew down into the hole and shed light upon Melkin’s face. It was gaunt and tinged with madness. He grinned incessantly and his eyes darted about manically, unable to stay focussed upon a single thing for more than a few seconds even though there was little to see at the bottom of the pit.

More disturbing than his erratic glances was the fact that he did not have an ear on one side of his head. Though the skin had healed it was clear that the ear had been torn off some time in the past.

Melkin’s hand snatched out and caught the shatterbug. With his other hand he reached down into a small fissure in the rock and fished out a rusted iron hat. His face beamed as he pulled the round hat into his lap. ‘It’s just a miner’s hat, left behind by one of the Kobolds when they dug this hole,’ he said jovially, ‘but to me it is so much more. It is a cauldron of secrets.’

Trypp knelt down beside him. Although Melkin seem deranged, Trypp knew that someone who could beat Caliban at a game of strategy was worth listening to.

‘When you squash them, if you listen carefully, you can hear a tiny squeal.’ He stuck his thumb into his mess of fingers and pressed down hard with the crooked digit. A faint popping noise was heard and Melkin opened his hand to reveal a mess of phosphorescent orange goo. ‘I love the popping sound they make when they die.’

Trypp was disturbed by Melkin’s actions and his face did not hide his revulsion. ‘Do you enjoy killing things?’ he said sternly.

‘I know what you’re thinking. I’ve gone mad. But I haven’t. At least not completely. Look.’

He presented the hat to Trypp. Lying across the base of it, like a bowl of soup, was the goo that had been extracted from countless shatterbugs.

‘Touch it.’

Trypp tentatively stuck one of his thick blue fingers into the pot. 'It's sticky.'

'Yes, and it never dries up,' Melkin said exuberantly. 'I don't have much now, but one day I will have enough to cover hands and feet and then...' He flicked his eyes up to indicate the escape route.

'You're going to attempt to climb out of here?'

'Oh not me. Caliban has snapped far too many of my fingers for me to even consider such a venture. No, this for you.'

'Me?'

'I always knew one day Caliban would throw someone else down here. You can imagine my pleasure to find it is someone who will actually be able to use this glue to climb up out of the pit.'

'But there isn't enough –'

'No. Not at the moment. But let us be patient, Sapphyrran. One never knows the possibilities that may come our way when we are patient.'

'By the gods!'

Pylos and Remiel walked out into a cavern that was unlike any other in the Endless. It was tall and full of warm, orange light. Thousands of shatterbugs ambled about in the air but it was not the concentration of so many glowing bugs that stunned the two men who had stumbled upon the cavern – it was what lay in the midst of them.

Suspended from a thick strand of webbing in the middle of the chamber was a creature as large as a small ship. It resembled the shatterbugs in every respect but two. The most obvious difference was its size. With the exception of the Colossi of Ganesa, it was the largest creature the two men had ever seen. The other difference was that it did not glow. It did something else entirely, something that so enthralled the pair slowly approaching the creature that they did not speak.

Cribella – for that was the creature's name – had an abdomen that resembled a massive jewel. It had countless hexagonal faces, each about six inches wide. As Pylos and Remiel came closer to the creature, they saw a myriad of colours swirling across the multi-faceted abdomen. Another few steps closer and they realised the colours were in fact moving images. Innumerable scenes could be seen pulsing through the transparent crystalline skin of Cribella's abdomen.

'How can this be?' Pylos finally gasped as he tried to overcome his stupefaction.

'It's miraculous,' Remiel sighed.



Cribella's abdomen hung a few feet from the floor of the cavern. This part of her body was at least 100 feet in diameter and so there were thousands of tiny images within view. Many more lay out of sight where the massive abdomen tapered in to meet the creature's thorax high above.

Pylos could see a squad of Helyans riding on snorseback along the outskirts of the Sand Meadow, not far from Sulis' main gates. He could see ships being loaded in the half-frozen harbour of Skirnir on Sessymir's east coast. Another face depicted a teenage couple rolling together on a field of flowerfall not far from Cessair Tower. Another showed a young Nessian picking honeygrapes in a lush vineyard.

His eyes jumped from facet to facet as all manner of scenes unfolded before him.

Remiel was similarly engrossed. Emotions welled up in him as he watched a father and son sitting by a fountain in Pelinore as gillygulls danced at their feet competing for the bits of bread that were being thrown their way.

He reached out and touched the facet he was watching. Suddenly his head was filled with the corvine sounds of gillygulls demanding more food, the bubbling laughter of the little boy throwing the bread and the dull roar of distant breakers crashing down on the sea wall lining the harbour of the city.

He took his hand off the facet and all the sounds he had just heard ceased. He staggered back, overwhelmed by the barrage of sensory information he had just received.

He and Pylos edged backwards so they could take in the creature that hung before them

'Now we understand how Caliban has seen and heard all that has transpired.'

'Trypp was right, Remiel. He suggested the shatterbugs were acting as a conduit. Now I understand what he meant.'

They craned their heads back, amazed by the sheer number of scenes that were playing out before them. It seemed every element of Myrran life was represented there. They could also see the Ghul represented in a distressing number of scenes. Pylos even found one face in which he could see himself staring at the creature's abdomen. The fantastic array covered everything.

'Everywhere a shatterbug goes...' Remiel mumbled to himself, trying to appreciate the importance of their discovery.

'This creature,' said Pylos, pointing up above Cribella's abdomen. 'Is it Cabal?'

'It would seem.'

'I thought the Cabal were evil. This strange creature shows us no animosity.'

'That is true and yet its influence has probably been more injurious to us than any other beast Caliban has extracted from the Endless.'

'What is that?'

Pylos had momentarily turned away from Cribella and out of the corner of his eyes, he noticed a large marble statue that had been placed to the side of the cavern, so that the man depicted in the sculpture was staring directly at the great beast in the centre of the cavern.

Remiel followed Pylos' gaze. 'I don't believe it!'

'Who is it?' asked Pylos seeing the recognition in Remiel's eyes. 'Do you know this person?'

Remiel nodded slowly. 'It's my father'

Pylos lifted an eyebrow but did not verbalise his surprise. He approached the statue and could see the family resemblance. The man depicted had the same sombre gaze that Pylos had observed in Remiel. A brass plaque at its base read, 'Gideon Grayson, Bringer of Peace.'

'*Gideon*? You named yourself after him.'

'All priests must take on a name. Gideon seemed... appropriate.'

'But how did the statue get down here?'

'I imagine my brother stole it from Sarras when he invaded Mine One.'

Pylos turned back to Cribella and pondered the role the creature had played in Caliban's designs. It had enabled their enemy to stay one step in front of them all along. Pylos realised immediately the potential of what they had discovered. 'We can use this beast to find where Trypp and Gerriod are. Perhaps we can find Caliban with it. Let's turn this monster to our advantage.'

His eyes scurried over countless images, quickly ascertaining each scene's relevance before moving on to the next one. It seemed futile in the face of so many representations but after a few minutes of frantic searching, his excitement was vindicated.

'Look Remiel! It's Trypp. He's in a cave or hole. There doesn't seem to be any way out and... Wait. I know this man. It's Samuel Melkin. He was one of Chamberlain Llyr's men. He disappeared about eight months ago.'

They watched as Melkin's hand covered the entire facet and then the image faded to be replaced by another.

Remiel held his breath as he stared transfixed by one particular scene. It showed a man with scabrous skin hobbling down a path bathed in crimson light. He had found Caliban.

His brother was adorned in a variation of the bone armour the Ghul wore but it sat awkwardly on his stooped frame. He was flanked by a cadre of Ghul bearing long bone spears. Behind him slithered a coven of witches, their faces cold and aloof.

Caliban held a staff in one hand. His other arm dangled at his side like a broken limb on a tree. This arm ended in a stump. Memories of the ill-fated voyage to Sanctuary cascaded into Remiel's mind.

*Despite the rising calamity around him, Remiel did nothing. His legs remained propped against the bulwark, but his arms did not pull the chain in further, nor did his large hands let it go. He just stared out over the gunnel where the Worldpool yawned like death.*

*'Remiel! What's it going to be?'*

Remiel stared more closely at the image presented in the facet before him. As Caliban walked along, his gaunt face became coloured by an orange glow.

'Hello Remiel,' he said. 'It's been too long.'

Remiel and Pylos spun around to find Caliban standing before them. On either side of him, a cadre of Ghul stood looking down the sights of their crossbows with their thin, skeletal fingers resting on the triggers. Behind them seven witches slithered across the rock, their eyes fixed on Remiel.

Caliban hobbled forward, leaning on his staff as he made his way across the cavern. His face was partially hidden beneath a polished human skull. The top and back of the skull had been sawn off, so the bone face sat on Caliban's own face like a mask.

'I see you've met Cribella,' he said conversationally, as if he were holding a dinner party for close friends. 'Of all the creatures of the Endless, she is perhaps the most interesting. She is my window on the world. Here I sit and watch your lives. Here I see all that the gods see.'

'You would liken yourself to a god Caliban? Is that why you have done all this?'

'Dear bother, do not paint me as the stereotypical villain with self-esteem issues. You know why I have done this. My motivation is as naked as the sky that you have taken away from me.'

Remiel's fists twitched and Caliban noted the movement.

'It is inevitable Remiel that we will come to blows, but before hostilities commence let us exchange pleasantries, indulge in a little bit of small talk – you know, the sort of stuff that separates us from the beasts... and the Ghul.'

'Very little separates you from the Ghul now,' Remiel snarled.

Caliban ignored the comment. With a flourish of his hand, he indicated the bones he had lashed to his crooked frame. 'Do you like my armour? Yes I admit it's not a very good fit, and perhaps it lacks the stylings of the armour of a Pelinese knight, but it does make a statement doesn't it?'

'It makes you look just like *them*,' Remiel countered, nodding towards the Ghul surrounding them.

'Oh, I'll be the first to admit that the design is derivative, but the materials are unique.'

He took off his bone faceplate and held it up to his own face like a mirror. 'I know it's not the latest fashion,' he continued, 'but it does have sentimental value. A hand-me down, Remiel –' Caliban stopped and gave his twin a sinister glance. 'From our father.'

He held the mask out to Remiel in a provocative gesture. Horrified that his brother could be so debased as to wear the bones of their father, Remiel could not speak. His mind reeled as he tried to comprehend what sort of man his brother had become.

'It's not a good fit I'm afraid,' Caliban taunted. 'He was a much bigger man.'

'That much is correct,' Remiel replied.

'Oh Remiel, very good! Here you are on the brink of your own catastrophe and you have the presence of mind to indulge in metaphor.'

Caliban stepped away from his brother and held Pylos in his gaze. Pylos stared back but said nothing.

'Now let us see who else visits us on this fine day,' Caliban mocked, maintaining the pretence of a civil occasion. 'Let me see. Battle-scarred, weather-beaten skin. Oafish, blank look. And the sartorial splendour of a piece of cloth around his waist. You would not happen to be a Helyan would you?'

Pylos continued to stare back at Caliban with contempt.

'Hmm. I should have expected you'd have nothing intelligent to say. General Pylos Antigonus Castalia. I've been expecting you.' The use of his name made Pylos' blood boil and he spat into Caliban's face.

Caliban put a hand to his face and wiped away the spit without taking his eyes off Pylos. 'How unfortunate! You realize that I must repay in kind.' He smiled broadly revealing his bleeding gums and broken, yellow teeth. He spat back at Pylos and a vile globule of saliva

and blood exploded on Pylos' cheek. This was followed by the snapping of a number of crossbow strings as they released a volley of bolts that ripped into Pylos' legs and arms. He fell to the floor of the cavern in agony.

Caliban swung around to his brother. 'Before you even consider using your Morgai powers against me Remiel, know that my Ghul have been given very specific instructions regarding the Helyan. Should you decide to use the talents you so flagrantly usurped... I'm sure you can imagine what they are prepared to do to him.'

'I won't use my powers,' Remiel growled. With a speed that gave Caliban no time to defend himself, Remiel struck out at his brother with a heavy fist. The punch lifted Caliban off his feet and sprawling back into the Ghul standing behind him.

Another flurry of crossbows sounded and Remiel dropped to the floor of the cavern beside Pylos with ten bolts buried in his legs. Caliban rushed at his fallen brother and slashed him across the face with a knife he carried within his robes. The blade tore across Remiel's face, exposing the bone under his cheek.

'How dare you attack me, after all you have done!' Caliban screamed. He beckoned to some of his soldiers to haul his brother up onto his feet. They did so without delay, pinning Remiel's arms to his sides.

Caliban moved in close. Despite the years in the darkness and the contagion that had wracked his body, the likeness between the two brothers was unmistakable.

'Let me remind you, I have the advantage. This coven of Pryderi has been well-prepared for your coming and their arcane defence is more than a match for your party tricks. For thirty long years I have waited in this hole for this moment – and you foolishly thought you would surprise me!'

Remiel just grimaced. The pain in his legs was excruciating. He could heal himself, but whilst Pylos lay at Caliban's feet in a bloody mess with the bows of the Ghul aimed at his head, his options were limited.

'Well, brother?' Caliban flouted. 'Nothing clever to say? Or has your fellowship with this brute robbed you of the skills of civilized communication?'

Remiel knew he could cut down his brother before the Ghul had a chance to fire another volley. He knew he could take out the Ghul with his powers before the Pryderi had a chance to defend them. He could end it all in a moment. But something stayed his hand. He needed to see whether a spark of humanity still lay somewhere inside his brother's

black heart. Before he destroyed Caliban, he needed to know if he could save him.

‘Why did everyone have to pay for my sin against you, Caliban? I understand your desire for revenge, but how can you explain the cruelty that has characterised your every act since that day on Lake Erras? You have abducted and killed babies. You have committed genocide. You have tortured innocent men and trampled over the lives of countless Myrrans. What can you say to absolve yourself from the grotesque acts of violence you have perpetuated upon the Myr?’

‘Listen to you!’ Caliban barked. ‘You reel my crimes off like a Magistrate, but fail to list your own. You infected me with your potions and sent me to a leper colony to rot so you could inherit our father’s power. You are the one who should be seeking absolution.’

Caliban’s eyes contained nothing but hatred. Remiel realised that he and his twin would never understand each other. Caliban was too aggrieved to concede any wrongdoing. He would not seek to understand why Remiel did what he did. The impasse had been inevitable.

‘I’m sorry,’ Remiel said. He meant it. He once loved his brother.

The apology incensed Caliban who struck out again with his knife. This time Remiel was too quick and halted his brother’s wild attack with ease, grabbing him by the wrist before the blade got close. He looked sadly into his brother’s red-rimmed eyes. Remiel continued to hold Caliban firmly. Although he did not relish the thought, it was appropriate that he kill his wayward brother face to face.

White fire spread from Remiel’s grip and ran across his twin’s body like a wind. Within a moment Caliban was ablaze in a flame so hot that all the Ghul surrounding the pair burst into flame as well.

Pylos pulled himself back from the blaze, amazed at the power Remiel commanded.

But something was wrong. Whereas the Ghul burnt up in seconds, Caliban was still standing. Though the fire engulfed him, he showed no sign of being engulfed by it. Underneath the flickering flames covering his face like a veil, Pylos saw him smile. Remiel had not harmed him at all.

Caliban’s cold laugh was all it took for Remiel to end the attack. ‘Caliban, how could you survive that?’ he gasped as the white fire dissipated around his brother’s body.

‘You always were a bit slow on the uptake Remiel. The Pryderi protect me. Despite your Morgai talents, I have power over you. Now learn, the hard way.’

The Pryderi began an incantation that swiftly grew louder. It was not long before Remiel and Pylos were screaming.

Their bodies twisted about on the floor in sheer agony. In their brains, Remiel and Pylos felt their skin being flayed from their bones. They watched haplessly as large pieces of flesh were peeled away. The pain did not relent and both men convulsed on the ground as their organs were spilled from under their rib cages and their bones started breaking like brittle autumn leaves. Pylos watched in incomprehensible horror as his heart rolled out across the stone he lay on. Finally through all this torment, they heard Caliban's benevolent words: 'That is enough.'

Even as the effects of the Pryderi spell gradually wore off, Remiel and Pylos continued to buck about on the ground. It was hard for the pair to appreciate what had just happened to them. As the haze of suffering dispersed they slowly came to terms with the fact that their bodies were still intact. Their flesh lay on their bones and their hearts still beat inside them.

The power of the coven was strong. They had learnt the *Incanto's* darkest spells. There was no way for Remiel to contend with such a force.

Caliban scowled down at his twin. 'Remiel, you sought understanding. Here it is. Understand now that you will die the most ignoble death I can muster. The worst, I'm afraid, is ahead.'

Remiel and Pylos were bound in chains and made to kneel at the base of the great statue of Gideon Grayson. On a twisted whim, Caliban had his Ghul wind one end of each length of chain around the statue's outstretched hands so that it looked like Gideon held each man on a leash.

'Is humiliation part of your revenge?' Remiel snarled.

Caliban stuck out his staff, placed it under his brother's chin and tilted his brother's head up to the ceiling of the cavern. 'Look around you Remiel. This is my domain. I know you must have a million things to say but I am your host and, if you don't mind, I'd really like to be heard.'

Pylos could not hold himself back much longer. 'You are a lunatic. If you mean to kill us, do so now, but spare us the speech!'

Caliban adopted a sorrowful look and shook his head slowly as if viewing the tantrum of a child. 'Dear me. Such rude behaviour! Remiel, you should really keep better company. This savage will get you into trouble.'

Caliban gestured to the coven and from the air around them materialized needles and threads, one for each of the captives. The threads looped themselves through the eyes of the needles which then embedded themselves in Pylos and Remiel's lips. As if wielded by invisible seamstresses, the needles wove in and out, punching through

their skin as if it were thick cloth. The searing pain of the needle was eventually replaced by the incessant hum of their nerves on fire as each thread was drawn together.

Despite the pain being thrust upon them, neither man flinched. They bore their pain proudly. They did not know whether it was real or just another Pryderi illusion but the distinction mattered little; the pain was the same, and neither man could speak.

'Thirty years ago,' Caliban began as if he were telling a bedtime story to a child, 'things were very different. The Endless was not the well-ordered civilised haven it is today. The Ghul were in chaos, lacking the knowledge of how to extend their sphere of influence and lacking the resources to do it.'

While Caliban was speaking, Lucetious entered the cavern. He walked purposefully across the large room, ignoring the Pryderi and Caliban's new captives and stood to attention at his master's side.

Caliban glanced at his lieutenant and smiled. 'What excellent timing! I was just about to talk about you dear Lucetious.'

Lucetious bowed. 'I have news for you, Lord Caliban.'

Remiel blanched at the title the Ghul officer had used.

'It can wait a little, Lucetious,' Caliban said, his voice slightly reproachful. 'Our guests have come a long way to see me. It would be discourteous to focus upon other things at the minute.'

Lucetious lowered his head. 'Of course, my lord.'

Caliban turned back to his audience pleased they had witnessed Lucetious' subservient manner. 'As you know, I did not come to the Endless alone. But unlike Gamelyn Blake, I knew of the Ghul, I had studied their ways and had known enough of their language to communicate with them.'

He stepped closer to Remiel with a smug look on his rugose face. 'Think back to our youth Remiel. You squandered your days being ordinary whilst I devoted myself to exploring the shadows. I discovered ancient texts that revealed to me things you cannot find in the happy light of day. Long before I entered the Endless, I knew of the Cabal, I knew of the breaches and I knew of the *Incanto*, the grimoire that has made these witches more than a match for the Morgai powers you denied me.

'And so I was more than prepared for my chance meeting with the Ghul. I was fortunate enough to be met by Lucetious. Although the Ghul had no leader, it was clear to me that Lucetious did have some influence over his peers. Unfortunately, the dear fellow was rather intent on killing me at first, but after some negotiation, he soon realized that it could be advantageous to make a friend of me. With a common hatred for the world above we cultivated a mutually beneficial relationship. A covenant



was entered into – we would find a way to administer justice upon the cruel and peaceful world above us.’

Caliban paused and sighed. He felt happier than he had in years. ‘Questions? Comments?’ he said with a self-satisfied grin. He nodded to the Pryderi; a moment later Remiel and Pylos felt the thread that had kept their mouths shut slither across their lips and disappear.

Pylos was first to speak. ‘You are no better than these savages,’ he fledered casting a derisive glance at Lucetious.

Caliban turned on him like marrok upon its prey. ‘You are in no place to condemn the Ghul as savages, Pylos. Your own people are little more than a horde of barbarians.’

‘It sickens me that you could so easily abandon your own people.’

‘Do not speak to me of abandonment Helyan! I know it much better than you. Isn’t that right, brother?’

Remiel nodded. ‘I did you great wrong Caliban. I do not deny that.’

‘I think it wonderfully apt that you have become Morgai, Remiel. It is almost poetic.’

Confusion descended upon Remiel’s brow. ‘Apt?’

‘The Morgai are the greatest traitors of all. The Morgai heritage of deception and lies is unparalleled.’

‘I don’t understand.’

*‘I don’t understand,’* Caliban mocked. ‘I will have those three words inscribed on your tombstone Remiel. They define you.’

‘Who have the Morgai deceived? Explain yourself.’

‘It is time to cast light upon a piece of history that has been well hidden for thousands of years,’ Caliban cackled. ‘Surely an event as world-changing as the ancient battle between the Myrrans and the Ghul should have been etched into the consciousness of all races. It took the combined efforts of thousands of Myrrans to drive their enemy back into the Endless. How is it that almost nothing is known about the most significant turning point in Myrran history? How could we not remember?’

‘It was thousands of years ago.’

‘Quiet, Pylos!’ Caliban snapped. ‘Every thought that escapes from the roomy cell of your brain has the mark of ignorance stamped upon it.’

Caliban turned to his brother. ‘Let me tell you a little about the Morgai, so you may better appreciate the legacy you have inherited. Long ago, shortly after the breaches were sealed, the Morgai betrayed us all. They feared that knowledge of the power that lay trapped in the Endless could possibly tempt an evil soul to free the Ghul from their rocky prison. The Morgai decided that it would be in the Myr’s best interest to forget

about the Ghul and the Cabal. In their arrogant wisdom they agreed to rid the Myr of the memory of those dark times. Apothecaries were enlisted to create a drug to achieve this goal. With the help of the weather witches of Morae, the Morgai ushered in three years of drought. The drug was then added to water supplies that were distributed throughout the Myr and within a year all memory of the Ghul had been erased. The Morgai also collected all texts that referenced this period and had them replaced with a history that contained no mention of the Ghul or the Cabal or the Endless.'

'That's impossible,' Remiel gasped. 'What about the apothecaries and the Pryderi who assisted the Morgai. How could this have been kept quiet?'

'Sadly, Remiel, your Morgai lineage is not as noble as you would believe. The Morgai killed all the apothecaries and Pryderi who took part in the deception. For the greater good, you understand.'

'I don't believe it. How could they do something so heinous for *the greater good*?'

'How deliciously ironic that you would ask such a thing,' Caliban mused. 'The Morgai sought to hide the great power that dwelt in the Endless. But they couldn't hide it forever. They missed some texts: scrolls that lay in the vaults under Caquix City, a tome of chronicles in distant Cephalonia and curiously, a carving on one of the statues lining Mine One. But by the time these things came to light, they were regarded as little more than myths and legend.'

'But I knew it was real, as did Maeldune Canna and certain others I gathered around me. I knew of the aerolith that crashed into the Myr millennia ago and brought with it a delightful cornucopia of life and this knowledge gave me what I required to survive my first few years down here in the Endless.'

'And so you joined with the Ghul to exact your revenge upon me.'

'I joined with them to survive Remiel. I joined with them because they are kindred spirits. But as the years went by, and my hatred of you grew I knew the Ghul would not be enough. I needed others who would not shirk from the light of day. No offence, of course Lucetious.'

'None taken, my lord. Please... continue.'

'Now the Cabal were always going to be more difficult than the Ghul. Though some are as clever as only the cruel can be, others have minds that require cultivation. Now as fortune would have it, the very first of the Cabal we unearthed was the most important and the most intelligent – Succellos. I could reason with her. I could give her what she needed.'

‘And in payment for her services you gave her thousands of Kobolds to feed upon.’

‘Yes. Succellos fed like she had never fed before, and as a result I had a compliant workforce that was perfect for my needs. Over the past year, the Kobolds have helped me disinter more Cabal than we could have imagined.’

Remiel could not help but be in awe of the intricacy of his brother’s designs, but he was puzzled by one aspect. ‘You gained the allegiance of the Ghul by promising them access to the world above. How could you make such promise? You could not have known the Kobolds would break through to the Endless when they did.’

If Caliban had two hands he would have clapped. ‘Oh very good, Remiel. You are right, of course. At that stage, I had no certain way of delivering on this promise. But I had suspicions. Whilst you were out strolling the promenade and engaging the local strumpets in idle banter, I spent my time pouring over books and scripts brought to me from all corners of the world. I learnt how to hear the rhythms and cadences of the world. I learnt to take note of its whisperings and its quiet monologues. I discovered ways to sense changes and alterations in the ways of things.

‘Long before I entered the Endless, I knew the Kobolds’ stores of shatterstone were dwindling. I heard stories of how deeply they dug their mines and I knew it was only a matter of time before greed compelled them to carve their way through the floor of Mine One, especially once the headstrong Corbo Industries began to grow into an industrial giant. When I found myself trapped down here, one of my first labours was to prepare for the Kobolds’ inevitable mistake. For decades, teams of Ghul struck away at the stone beneath Mine One, in preparation for the Kobold excavations above. We had to wait thirty years, but our chance came and like all good strategists we were ready to seize the opportunity when it appeared.’

Caliban looked at Remiel hoping to bask in the glory of his reluctant awe, but his brother was gazing past him at the images colouring the body of Cribella in the middle of the room.

Caliban whimsically tilted his head to one side. ‘I’m not boring you, am I?’

Remiel refocussed upon Caliban and shook his head apologetically. It was a strange reaction, but Caliban decided not to pursue it in the interests of completing his story.

‘I was astounded how willing the Cabal were to assist me. At first I thought it was just to obtain their freedom, but there was more to it. Revenge. The Cabal don’t forget a thing. They remembered how the

Morgai imprisoned them in stone, so they were certainly prepared to help me hunt you down. Once we had opened all the breaches, the world was handed on a platter to these titans of the deep. It has been a remarkable game. Every manoeuvre has worked to bring about this end. And now I have captured the piece I most desired.'

Remiel rose up on his haunches and his face flashed with anger. 'Manoeuvres. Pieces. This is life, Caliban, not a game.'

A look of disappointment crossed Caliban's face. 'After all I've explained, surely you have something more profound to say?'

A grim smile spread across Remiel's lips. 'How about this? Never underestimate your opponent.'

Before Caliban could respond to this cryptic comment seven iron stars sliced into the necks of each member of the coven behind him. The witches all fell dead in the space of a second.

Remiel rose to his feet. Despite being bound in chains, he unleashed a volley of white fire that pounded into his brother, searing his chest and sending him flying onto his back.

Sumi Kimura was on Caliban the moment he hit the ground and with a speed that had defied belief, she twisted herself behind him and held his head locked in her arm with her last remaining throwing star resting on his jugular.

Lucetious raised his crossbow and took aim at Remiel. Before he could fire, Sumi's left hand flickered and half a second later, the crossbow string was snapped by the star she had held to Caliban's neck. She quickly pulled out her sai and placed it under Caliban's chin. 'Free them,' she told Lucetious, 'or the leper dies.'

Lucetious looked to Caliban who nodded, but there was nothing that suggested defeat in his countenance. Remiel and Pylos were quickly released from their bonds. Pylos wasted no time in thrusting the Ghul lieutenant to the ground. He jammed his foot down upon Lucetious' neck, ready to snap it if required. Pylos had no shatterstone sword to kill Lucetious, but a broken neck would certainly slow the Ghul lieutenant down.

Remiel barely recognised Sumi. It was not just that one half of her face was burnt. She looked incredibly weak, so weak that he was astounded she had managed to throw her stars with such unerring accuracy. She was trembling, either from rage or fatigue.

Remiel stepped forward. 'Thank-you. It's Sumi Kimura isn't it?'

She nodded but was hardly listening to him. Her eyes were focused upon Caliban. 'One of the creatures you let loose on the world

killed my husband. Another killed my sister, and this hour one of your Ghul slaughtered a small child.'

Sumi's voice shook and the sai under Caliban's chin wavered as Lara Brand entered the cavern, cradling the still form of her little one close to her chest.

Sumi jabbed the sai deeper into the loose folds of skin under Caliban's chin. 'You are responsible for this!'

Caliban grunted but said nothing as he was made to watch the forlorn figure of Lara Brand slowly making her way across the cavern.

But then Sumi saw something that filled her despairing heart with joy. The Birthstone on Lara's chest glowed, ever so faintly but the light was still there. Sumi screamed with delight. 'Lara, your child lives!'

Lara was still in shock and Sumi's words did not register. 'Huh?'  
'Your baby... look!'

Lara looked down to her breast and there, bathed in the soft blue light of her Birthstone, her baby breathed faintly. Her life was hanging by a thread but that was enough.

She quickly lay Birren on the ground and spoke a healing incantation that took the baby out of pain and into a deep slumber. Colour returned to Birren's tiny lips and a little smile appeared on her face as the first happy dream in months crept into her subconscious. Her Birthstone radiated a warm blue light and Lara's burned so brightly, it put to shame the light that fell from the shatterbugs overhead.

It was all the distraction Caliban needed to escape Sumi's weakening hold on him. He rolled under her arm and twisted behind her. His knife came up instantly and slid into the soft flesh under her ribs. For the first time in her life, Sumi Kimura was caught with her guard down, and her life was forfeit for the mistake. Her breath gurgled as she died.

Remiel fell upon him. One hand held Caliban's throat in a vicelike grip, the other hovered only inches away from his mottled face of his twin, pulsing with Morgai energy. Just as swiftly, Caliban had brought up his bloodied knife and held it to his brother's neck, its tip drawing blood but going no further. It was a stalemate. But Remiel didn't care. He didn't come to win the game. He came to end it.

Out of the corner of his eye Remiel saw the arrival of more Pryderi. They were chanting as they entered the cavern and he knew at once that Caliban had once again been shrouded in their protective spell.

‘They may negate my powers,’ he hissed at his brother, ‘but I can still break your neck.’

‘Well played, Remiel! It seems we are at an impasse!’ Caliban said proudly. ‘Your mind is naked to me. You understand the precarious balance here. If you kill me, you will die a moment later and the Pryderi will then overcome the Helyan and the witch. Her child will be taken back to the Nursery. The Ghul and the Cabal will continue to ravage the Myr and my will shall be done. I will triumph. You won’t end it here.’

Lara rose up, clutching Birren tightly to her chest. She looked about at the Pryderi with horror. ‘You can stop this!’ she screamed in frustration. ‘Look how powerful you’ve become. Kill this monster who has imprisoned your babies and you can leave the Endless with your children in your arms!’

She recognised most of them, but they stared back at her as if she were a stranger.

‘You waste your breathe, Little One. They will only listen to me.’

Lara spun around to see Arinna standing in the entrance to the cavern. In her hands she held a large leather book and from its pages, ghostly blue light cascaded to the cavern floor.

‘How can this be?’ Lara said, trying to comprehend the meaning behind Arinna’s words.

Arinna glanced down at the book she was holding. ‘You have no idea of the power of the *Incanto*, Lara. It makes a mediocre witch competent and it makes a good witch great.’

Lara’s face reflected the heart-ache that she felt inside. ‘But Arinna – you *were* a great witch! You don’t need a book to achieve greatness.’

‘I have been elevated to a mystical plane beyond your comprehension. Whereas once I could hear the thoughts of other witches, now I can control them. When Succellos tried to manipulate the Pryderi they lost their magick, but under my influence, they have become so much more than what they were.’

Lara was dumbfounded by what she was hearing. ‘To what end? Do you do all this for *him*?’ she screamed as she pointed to Caliban who looked upon the exchange with grim satisfaction. ‘What about Pippa? Have you forgotten how she was stolen from you?’

‘And now I have her back,’ Arinna flouted. ‘My ascension is –’

‘Arinna, listen to yourself! This book... it has corrupted your heart.’

‘No. It has given me strength.’

‘Strength? So you can rob others of their free will?’ Lara shouted, her voice seething with contempt. ‘Why not just control us all? Why do you bother explaining yourself to me? You could just force your –’

‘I wanted you to understand, Little One. That was my hope.’

‘There is no hope down here Arinna. Only malice and vengeance. There is no hope.’

‘Enough!’ Arinna shouted. ‘I can hear what you’re thinking Lara. I don’t need to watch the words stumble out your mouth as well.’

She slithered into the cavern, glancing down at Sumi’s body as she neared Lara. ‘A pity,’ she mused. ‘This one fought with a brave heart.’

Suddenly a shaft of bone flew out of the shadows beyond the entrance to the cavern... aimed at Arinna’s heart. The shot was true and it would have killed the witch had it not stopped an inch before it reached her chest. The arrow hovered in the air for a second before it faded into a puff of smoke.

‘Perhaps you’d like to join us, Jehenna Canna!’ Arinna said to the darkness beyond the cavern. A simple flourish of her arm was all it took to drag Jehenna into the light. Seething with contempt for the woman who had just tried to kill her, Arinna used her magick to drag Jehenna across the cavern floor by her hair. Jehenna clutched at the roots of her black tresses to stop them from being ripped out of her scalp. It was a humiliating way to treat an enemy and it made Arinna smile. But it didn’t end there.

Jehenna was hauled through the pool of blood that surrounded Sumi and slammed against the cavern floor where she was held down by fingers of rock that sprouted from the cavern floor.

Arinna then turned to Pylos and Remiel. A simple gesture sent them flying across the cavern into the statue of Gideon Grayson. Thick hands of marble then clasped around their necks as dark magick animated the statue. It held them so tightly both men were kept a hair’s breadth away from passing out. For all Remiel’s Morgai power, he could do nothing to break his father’s hold upon him. In the space of a few seconds, Arinna had broken the stalemate and handed Caliban a comprehensive victory

Remiel was looking at Sumi lying dead in puddle of blood, her unblinking eyes staring back at him. Beside her lay Jehenna Canna, struggling futilely against her bonds of stone. Nearby, Lara Brand, aware

that her every thought was being monitored by Arinna, sat with her coils wrapped protectively around her daughter.

Caliban stood in front of Remiel. He leaned on his staff, waiting for his brother to meet his gaze. When Remiel finally laid his eyes on his brother, they were lined with tears. 'Caliban!' he exclaimed. 'You have lost your humanity.'

Caliban did not respond immediately. He stepped closer to his twin and nodded, digesting his words. 'You made me what I am today. You stripped me of my humanity when you poisoned me with this disease. Am I really the villain, Remiel?'

'Thousands have died because of you. Thousands more will die because of you. Perhaps millions.'

'Not because of me. Because of you.'

'I had to do something. I couldn't ignore what I had been told.'

'Ah yes! The wonderfully provocative foretellings of the late Lilith Cortese.'

'Late?'

'Another victim of circumstance I'm afraid, Remiel. It was interesting to discover her part in this tragic story. Although I do not believe that the lure of the Morgai inheritance did not influence your decision to pack me off to Sanctuary, it was curious to learn of the role this woman played. Whether you were motivated by fear or ambition is incidental. Your actions were responsible for all that has transpired.'

'I had to do something,' Remiel repeated, but his sense of conviction had left him. His voice sounded as broken as his spirit.

In contrast, Caliban's bloodshot eyes sparkled as he dwelt upon Remiel's defence. 'Tell me brother, was the future described to you by the seer any worse than the one you have brought about? Or... perhaps...'

It came as an epiphany. The realisation sent Caliban into a rapturous state. 'Yes. It's so clear!' he gasped. 'In trying to escape fate, you have sealed it.' His laugh was cruel and long. 'I understand it now!'

He clasped his brother's face and held it close. 'Remiel, the future you saw was *exactly* like this wasn't it? You assumed what you saw transpired because of what I might become if I took the Morgai gift, but this never would have happened if you had left things as they were! By interceding, you created the very future you were trying to avoid. Your vision had nothing to do with the inheritance. By damning me to Sanctuary and driving me down into the Endless, you led me to more power than I could ever have as Morgai.'



Caliban spun around as exuberance fuelled his body. 'Oh the beauty of it all!' he exalted. 'This is more satisfying than revenge could ever be.'

Remiel hung his head as low as his unique bonds would allow him. 'Yes, it's true... it's all my fault.'

It was some time before Caliban calmed down. The Pryderi watched him cavorting about the cavern with blank expressions on their faces. They watched him constantly, ready to support him should their magick be required, but gave no indication they understood his feelings of jubilation.

Arinna stood to one side of the cavern and smiled upon the scene. She could feel Caliban's euphoria and shared in all his thoughts of triumph. She could also feel the flood of regret that broke the banks of Remiel's mind. His emotions were just as intense as Caliban's but at the other end of the spectrum. Where one basked in the glory of his victory, the other was mired in the depths of despair. It was remarkable that twins could be so different.

Caliban returned to Remiel's side. 'So now the truth is revealed,' he gloated. 'In condemning me, you condemned them all. You brought about the very chaos you had hoped to avoid.'

Remiel slowly lifted his head and faced his brother. 'Can you see what a monster you have become?'

'I am surrounded by monsters here,' Caliban retorted. 'Succellos. The Morrighu. Cribella... In their presence, I am an angel.'

'What will you do now?' Remiel asked, tired of the discussion. 'Kill us?'

Caliban's eyes narrowed. 'Kill you? No. That would be too expedient. I cannot end this conflict so quickly. My enjoyment of my victory must be commensurate with my suffering. I require a much grander conclusion to this struggle.'

'What do you mean?'

'I propose a battle. A great battle between our worlds. Winner takes all. And I intend to give you a sporting chance.'

'A chance?' Remiel scoffed. 'You would wager the lives of countless Myrrans in a battle just to get back at me?'

'Let us not forget that you made the first move Remiel.' Under a brow of rotting skin, his eyes flared. 'You made the first move, 'he repeated, punctuating every word with bitterness and pain.

'There has to be another way to end this.'

'You are in no position to make demands Remiel. There is no other way. I have been waiting for this for thirty years. This is my denouement. You will not rob me of that.'

He puffed up his chest and raised his voice as if he were a dignitary speaking to a great crowd of citizens. 'Here are the conditions. If my armies are defeated, the breaches will be sealed and we will bother the Myr no more. But if I win, the Myr shall be ours and all peoples will pay homage to me!'

'I have no authority to agree to this madness!' Remiel spat.

Caliban ignored the comment. 'As my invited guest, I shall let you choose the venue and the day, Remiel but I warn you, do not try to be too clever.'

'I can't do this,' Remiel cried.

'Choose your battleground!' Caliban demanded. He clicked his fingers and Lucetious handed him a map made on a leather parchment. The availability of the map suggested that Caliban had been planning for this moment for a long time. Remiel knew a decision had to be made.

Caliban threw the map onto the ground at his brother's feet. 'There are twenty-one breaches across the surface of the Myr – choose one!'

Remiel's eyes raced across the map as his brains considered the ramifications of each location. He had to find a place that would either give the Myrrans an edge, or put the forces of the Endless at a disadvantage. But life in the cloistered environs of Garlot Abbey had prepared him poorly for such a choice. He had visited very few of the places on the map. Lucien. Sulis. Tindalo. Nilfheim. Mag Mel. Usnach.

'Decide Remiel!' Caliban demanded. 'You don't have forever.'

Copacati. Johannan. Amasis. Cephalonia. Sarras. He knew so little about them.

'I'm waiting Remiel!'

Dagonet. Ganesa. Findias. Corra. As in a game of Siege, he had to consider every permutation of the selections available.

'Now!' Caliban screamed.

'Usnach. We will fight on Usnach.'

Once Remiel's decision was made, Caliban's demeanour shifted once more. A relaxed look graced his coarse face and his voice took on an air of nonchalance. 'Usnach? Are you sure Remiel? A rather inhospitable place to drop your pieces. You wouldn't prefer Sulis or Lucien? Or Sarras perhaps?'

'Usnach.'

'Very well. And the day?'

'We will need time to prepare our forces. Midsummer's Day.'

‘What?’ Caliban exclaimed. ‘I was hoping for something a little sooner.’

‘These are your terms Caliban. If you want to change them then –’

‘No. That would be most unsporting of me. I admit, I shall be beside myself by them. It’s all about anticipation, and there is none who is looking forward to this more than I.’

‘Caliban, I ask for one thing more,’ Remiel said as he looked across at his companions. ‘I want you to let these people go. I ask that Pylos Castalia, Jehenna Canna, Lara Brand and her daughter be permitted to return home.’

Caliban twisted around to follow Remiel’s gaze. ‘Two of your greatest warriors and a witch who has grown into a most formidable force! That hardly works in my favours does it, Remiel?’

‘You have killed most of the Myr’s finest warriors. The odds are already stacked against us.’

Caliban pondered his request and in an overly hospitable tone said, ‘Very well. I agree to your humble request.’

‘There are others...’ Remiel said tentatively. He was in a difficult position. He did not know how many other members of the three assassination squads that had set out from Cessair had actually made it to the Endless and he did not want to betray those individuals, but he also knew that Caliban had at least taken Trypp prisoner and probably Gerriod.

‘Let me put your mind at rest Remiel,’ Caliban stated taking on a significantly colder tone. ‘The fellowship that was formed to assassinate me has proven to be an abject failure. With the exception of Trypp Elan and Gerriod Blake, all surviving members of this desperate plot are in this cavern right now.’

‘It is of Gerriod Blake and Trypp –’

‘They will stay where they are!’ Caliban said unequivocally. He turned to Lara and Jehenna. ‘My lieutenant will provide you with a vessel that will carry you to the nearest breach. You may take the body of Sumi Kimura with you.’

Lara wanted to respond in a hundred ways, but every one of them would have got her baby killed. Instead, she nodded and asked, ‘What about the priest? Will he return with us to Cessair?’

‘No. From this time forth, I am my brother’s keeper. Here he shall stay at my side and watch the battle unfold. Cribella will show us everything. Remiel will watch every single one of you fall before I will grant him the opportunity to die an unlamented death’

Lara picked up her child and boarded the Ghul vessel waiting for her. She sat at the stern with her fragile baby cradled in her arms. Pylos was unceremoniously dumped on the floor before her. He had been beaten badly. Before Arinna had released him from the statue, Lucetious had taken advantage of Pylos' vulnerability and had taken to him savagely with a club of bone. His light breathing was the only indication that life still flowed through his veins.

Jehenna sat down in the boat and placed Pylos' head upon her lap. The slight movement disturbed the Helyan and his eyes slowly opened to see the Acoran staring back at him.

'I like your scar,' he mumbled before closing his eyes and fading back into darkness.

## Chapter Thirteen The Empty Isle

The sun began its slow descent towards the unforgiving sea. In the distance, in the deeper water surrounding the island, huge icebergs were dragged along by massive arctic currents. From time to time, the submerged mountains of ice would collide, sending plumes of frozen debris into the deep blue sky.

Usnach – the Empty Isle – was anything but empty. The last battalion of troops had disembarked from their transports hours earlier and now the Myrran soldiers had nothing to do but wait. Usnach was a wasteland of ice and had no remarkable features other than its distinct lack of remarkable features. The island was relatively flat, rising to no more than 150 feet at its highest point. It was a vaguely oval landmass, no more than five leagues long and three leagues wide.

Other than the Myrran troops, there was no sign of life on the island, which contrasted starkly with surrounding seas; fifty yards off the southern shore, a massive pod of leviatha had breached the water, feeding on the enormous shoals of krilla they had herded near the surface. High above, flocks of arctic vultira wheeled around in the sky, as if possessing a prescient knowledge of the slaughter that was about to take place on the island.

The Myrran troops had come ashore at the shattered remains of a Tuirrenian fort, the remnants of a war waged long ago. The fog that had shrouded the island had long since dissipated and a bitterly cold wind raced across the frozen tundra.

It was an impressive sight. At least ten thousand trained soldiers had been assembled across the frozen tundra, and these warriors had been joined by hundreds of Myrrans who had never held a weapon before – Sapphyrro, Nessans, even a large bury of Mabbits. The armies had been spread out across the eastern coast of Usnach, from the northern cliffs to the southern bay.

Pylos Castalia had been appointed General of the Myrran army. It was a position he accepted reluctantly. Whilst the opportunity to stop Caliban was one he relished, he did not like the thought of leading so many untrained soldiers to war. From a small hill in the centre of the staging area he sat astride his snorse Lampetia and watched the volunteers collect their weapons from the master-at arms. He watched them handle the newly-forged swords and was not filled with confidence.

'Every person helps,' said Pedaeus Rhodes who was mounted on a large snorse mare wearing battle armour. Pedaeus had pulled himself out of political service to fight this last fight.

'Helps who?' Pylos said sombrely. 'They'll be dead ere long.'

Pedaeus laughed at his friend's grim outlook. 'Well, you're in cheery spirits!'

Pylos ignored Pedaeus' sarcasm. He turned to the west and surveyed the island. 'This is a site well chosen,' he said as his eyes roamed over the white wasteland. 'Remiel knew what he was doing.'

'What do you mean?' exclaimed Sela who had been given command of the remaining males of Nuadu and the Tamuans' centuries-old enemy, the Sedomo. 'I could not imagine a more inhospitable place for a final confrontation. My soldiers are already feeling the strain of just being here. Breathing in this freezing air is like inhaling shards of glass. And it's bad enough waiting for the Ghul, but many of the Sedomo are nervous about waiting for the dead to appear.'

'The dead won't harm them,' Pylos reassured her. 'They may well inspire them. The soldiers need to be reminded of Caliban's atrocities. Twilight is almost upon us and Caliban's victims will soon arrive.'

'You believe in all that nonsense Pylos?'

'I have seen it before, Pedaeus. Why do you doubt such a thing? When you think of all the wonders of the world, all the things that defy our explanation, is it so unbelievable that the powerful spirits that burn within us would seek out a new home when this shell is cracked and broken? In the brief pause before night, you will see the ghosts of the dead.'

Pedaeus looked quizzically at his friend. 'Pylos, do you think that's why Remiel Grayson chose this venue? To remind us of what we are fighting for?'

Pylos nodded. 'That's partly it, but there's more. We are far north and it is the height of summer. When the sun sets, she will not stay asleep for long. Sunrise will follow sunset within hours.'

'So?' Pedaeus did not see what Pylos was implying.

'The Ghul will attack as soon as the sun goes down and their attack will be predictable as they must defeat our forces within a couple of hours. If we can prolong the battle, the Ghul will burn under this arctic sun. Caliban has made a fatal error in allowing Remiel to choose the day. Had he chosen midwinter, when this island would be kept in darkness, we would not have stood a chance. And yet...'

Pedaeus' brow furrowed as Pylos' hinted at a nagging doubt. 'And yet what?'

Pylos shook his head as he thought over the details. He had ruminated upon the place and time of the battle for many days, wondering how a man so calculating and methodical as Caliban could fail to see the advantage he had handed the Myrran forces. 'I find it difficult to accept that a mind as sharp as Caliban's could overlook such an obvious detail.'

'Why... you said he was as mad as a Tethran beggar,' responded Pedaeus. He's probably so obsessed with wiping us all from the world that an obscure detail such as daylight hours in the arctic seas was not considered.'

Pylos exhaled a long breath. Tiny frozen droplets sparkled in the golden light that was spreading across the island, illuminating the Myrrans dramatically as they faced westward looking out across the frozen breach.

'No. I doubt Caliban has overlooked anything. He's systematic and thorough – it is in the minutia of the moment that his strategies lie.'

Pedaeus shrugged. 'I didn't understand anything you just said! Who uses a word like *minutia* anyway?'

Pylos beamed, proud of the impression his choice of language had made. 'I heard Mulupo once use it. He was the Spriggan who had accompanied us on the trek to Caliban's End.'

'I remember him from the Assembly in the Cloud Chamber a year ago,' Pedaeus laughed. 'He was drunk that day wasn't he?'

Pylos sighed. 'That assembly seems a lifetime ago. So much has happened since. So many people have died.'

'The world has changed, Pylos. The people are scared. They no longer have faith in our ability to protect them. Chaos has come. Crime flourishes across the lands and the Magistrates can't keep control. Before I left Terminus I heard that the Hulks had disappeared from Murdertown. The world's criminals have been set loose. Even in the unlikely event we win this battle, we will return to a world that will never be the same.'

'Then it's up to us to put it right, Pedaeus.'

The sun was beginning to fatten as it gorged itself on the water of the Oshalla Ocean to the west. Soon the dead would appear. Pylos, who had been to Usnach once before and had witnessed the twilight ceremony, was quite at ease with the event about to take place. His mind was on what awaited them once twilight had passed. 'Tell the captains to light the bonfires. The Ghul will be upon us within the hour.'

Pedaeus Rhodes saluted his general, and spurred his snorse down the hill, quickly vanishing in the throng of soldiers surrounding the frozen knoll.

Pylos gazed over to his left where Jehenna Canna was addressing her captains. Dressed in full Acoran armour, she sat astride a large, black snorse also bedecked in silver and bronze armour. Jehenna was pointing out various strategic aspects to the topography of the island. She presented a range of stratagems for every conceivable contingency. Her captains were focused on her every word she had to say and it was clear she had their unequivocal respect.

When she was done, Jehenna dismissed her officers and climbed down from her snorse. She took off her elegantly crafted helm and handed it to her squire. Her raven tresses stretched out on the wind and Pylos thought that he had never seen anything more beautiful. She was fifty yards away and he felt safe that he could observe her without being caught.

He was wrong – he had not gazed for more than ten seconds when she looked up, stared directly into his eyes and smiled.

‘Captain Gudrun – a word with you,’ Pylos said to the squat Sessymirian who had been given command of his country’s troops. ‘What is in the crates you bring?’

‘Potions, General. It is a preventative measure. Some months ago, the Ghul attacked a factory in Skirnir. A number of items were stolen.’

‘Items?’

The gruff captain looked somewhat abashed. ‘Yes sir.’

‘What were the items Captain?’

‘The vials contain an agent that will cause blindness in those exposed to it. It is my guess that the traitor Lokasenna Hagen informed the Ghul where the vials were stored.’

Pylos looked annoyed. ‘So the Sessymirians have been acquiring illegal potions to use upon their enemies,’ he grunted.

Gudrun’s shied away from Pylos’ show of contempt. He bowed differentially. ‘It is my hope that what I share with you now will go a small way to redress the mistakes of the past. These drums are full of a potable that will nullify the effects of the blinding agent.’

Pylos scrutinized the man. It seemed he was being sincere. ‘Distribute the contents amongst all our forces. I hope you have enough.’

‘Yes, sir. We have brought enough for the entire army. Our alchemists have been working non-stop since we discovered the theft.’

‘How will the Ghul deploy the blinding agent? Do they know what to do with it?’



Gudrun nodded. 'Lokasenna would know. The poison can be mixed with water and administered in vast quantities. There was a time when we thought to use it to poison our enemies but the agent is so foul smelling, it was considered a little heavy-handed for our needs.'

'So you'll recognise it, if it is used against us?'

For the first time since their conversation started, Gudrun smiled. 'Yes sir. Without question.'

Pylos thought about this and then returned the smile. 'Perhaps we can use this to our benefit.'

The departing sun painted the Myrran troops in golden hues. They looked heroic in the fading light of day. It was with a heavy heart that Pylos realised that it would probably be the last sunset they ever saw.

He sat down on the frozen ground and placed his head in his hands, just as the Chamberlain had when Pylos told him the news.

*He had hoped the Helyan's return would be a triumph of the most simple kind – Caliban Grayson has been disposed of and the Ghul had retreated to the darkest corners of the Endless, unwilling to venture forth without the leadership Caliban had provided.*

*'And you actually agreed to Caliban's proposal?' the Chamberlain said, unwilling to lift his head from his hands.*

*Pylos stared back at the Chamberlain, his face devoid of emotion, but his heart in turmoil. The mission had failed and the Chamberlain's disappointment was excruciatingly obvious. No-one had returned a hero. Pylos did not even feel he had returned as a soldier. He was nothing more than an emissary, bearing news that the Myr would soon be at war.*

*Llyr's emotions tumbled out of his heart and successively revealed themselves to Pylos. He was angry that he – the Chamberlain – was being told that he would be sending the nations of the Myr to war. He was embarrassed that he had been manipulated into delivering Remiel Grayson to Caliban and he was upset over the losses the ill-fated mission had sustained.*

*'It would have been better to go to war when this all started,' Pylos stated. 'Sending out the assassination squads was a mistake. We have given Caliban time to prepare. The Pryderi have joined him in great numbers. He has found more Cabal to fight for him. And in the months since the Assembly of Nations he has opened more and more breaches and used them to whittle away Myrran forces. Had we committed to war months ago, we might have beaten him.'*

*'Are you saying we can't beat him now, General?'*

*'I do not know, Your Grace. I do not believe the odds are in our favour.'*

*'But he has what he sought. He has his brother. He has no quarrel with us. Why does he desire war?'*

*'That I can answer. Engaging us in war will achieve two things. Firstly, it will satiate the bloodlust of his troops. The bloodshed of battle is reward for their loyal service.'*

*'And the misery that will follow is his revenge upon his brother.'*

*'Yes, Your Grace. Remiel Grayson will be kept alive to witness the tragedy.'*

*'Penance. Caliban requires his twin to serve penance. I understand now. The annihilation of the Myr is not Caliban's goal. It is just a means to an end.'*

*'We have no option but to go to war.'* Pylos spoke plainly. There was little inflection in his voice. His tone was measured. He had accepted the catastrophe to come. All he could do now was fight. He knew how to do that. *'Caliban has guaranteed us a cessation of Ghul and Cabal attacks. His forces will retreat to the Endless and leave the people of the Myr alone. But on the summer solstice, we must face him on the icy plains of Usnach.'*

*'The Empty Isle? Why there?'*

*'The venue was not chosen by Caliban. He let his brother decide where this conflict would be ended.'*

*'And he chose Usnach?'*

*'I have dwelt upon Remiel's choice since leaving the Endless. At first I thought his decision was made out of a perverse form of nostalgia. One of the few things that connected the Grayson twins was their love of Siege. The game was invented over two hundred years ago after a terrible battle fought upon Usnach.'*

*'Yes, General, I know my history, but this seems a rather tenuous reason to fight there again.'*

*'I agree, Your Grace. Although I could not say I really knew Remiel Grayson, I knew him well enough to dismiss this hypothesis.'*

*'It would seem the river of Remiel Grayson's mind runs deep. Perhaps he chose Usnach because of its spiritual significance. What think you on this?'*

*'Your Grace, like many of my people, I once considered the idea of departed souls waiting to leave for a world beyond death to be the stuff of invention – a crutch for those who cannot face up to the emptiness of dying.'*

*'That's a rather bleak outlook, General.'*

*'Perhaps, Your Grace. A soldier cannot be distracted by thoughts of life beyond the pyre. It is why most Helyans are such formidable combatants. They fight thinking they have everything to lose.'*

*'But you have a different view now?'*

*'I have been to Usnach. Many years ago, my father was murdered by robbers on the road to Terminus. I did not take his death well. As a young man, it consumed me. So obsessed was I by his untimely end that I chartered a boat out to the Empty Isle in the hope that I would see him again. It cost me a small fortune but I had to see him one last time.'*

*'And did you, Pylos? See him?'*

*The Helyan's eyes dropped to the floor as the memories flooded back to him. Memories of the lonely wilderness of the sea, memories of ice and isolation, memories of an abandoned outpost on a wide flat island. 'Yes, Your Grace. I did. He was waiting for me.'*

*The Chamberlain smiled sympathetically. After a long silence, he leant forward and clasped his arms together. 'So, the question is not what Usnach is, but rather why Remiel Grayson chose it as the site for this final confrontation.'*

*'I believe he was being practical, and a little bit devious. He chose as remote a place as could be found in the Myr. In that regard, he was thinking of the innocents who have already paid more than they should. Whilst the battle is being fought, we do not need to worry about civilian casualties. Our forces can focus on one thing alone – the enemy.'*

*'I assume that was the practical reason. What is the devious one?'*

*'Your Grace, as you know, the date for the battle is the summer solstice. The island of Usnach is so far north that, like Sessymir and Arnaksak, it enjoys much longer days in the summer. The sun will only set for a few hours at that time of year. This will give us a distinct advantage over the Ghul. When the arctic sun shines down on them, our troops will applaud as they are incinerated before our eyes.'*

*The Chamberlain stood and wandered over to the table upon which stood the seven-tier Siege board that had been the venue for so many of his battles with Samuel Melkin and – to a lesser extent – Porenutious Windle. Llyr picked up one of the silver pieces and toyed with it as he considered Pylos' comments. 'General, do you really believe it will be that easy?'*

*'To be honest... no.'*

*'As you make your battle plans, I urge you to not to assume too much about our enemy.'*

*Pylos nodded humbly. 'I understand, Your Grace. We will make no assumptions. We are on our knees now. Caliban has given us the opportunity to stand up again, and I do not intend to waste that.'*

*The Chamberlain looked at the shiny piece in his hand. It was the king. The last time he held the piece was the week before the Assembly, that fateful meeting when he had put into motion the ruinous plan to assassinate Caliban. 'General, can we turn our attention to other matters now? Porenutious Windle perhaps?'*

*Pylos nodded. His eye twitched ever so slightly at the mention of Windle's name. If he was right, Windle had not only twisted Llyr into making the decision to send the squads to kill Caliban, but he had also arranged for Bannick Landen's death and colluded with the Myrran traitors Maeldune Canna, Lokasenna Hagen and Addison Cole.*

*'You say my advisor is Caliban's puppet?'*

*'We have suspicions, Your Grace. The mariner Gerriod Blake claimed he saw a fat man in purple subjected to Succellos' sting.'*

*'And you believe this to be Porenutious? Based on that exhaustive description.'*

*'It would make sense. Am I right in thinking that it was Porenutious Windle who first recommended to you to avoid all-out war against Caliban?'*

*Reluctantly, the Chamberlain gave ground. 'Yes – it was Porenutious who first suggested to me the idea of sending the assassination squads. In Samuel Melkin's absence, I ran this idea past Maeldune Canna who –'*

*'Proved to be the greatest traitor of all.'*

*'But why did the mariner not mention this at the Assembly?'*

*'He tried to, Your Grace. But before he could explain himself, Maeldune Canna took control of the Assembly and led us away from what Gerriod was saying.'*

*Llyr's mind raced back to that sunny day when they had all met in the Cloud Chamber. He remembered Gerriod speaking. Remembered Maeldune about to strike the Mabbit Tagtug, remembered the rant that followed. It stuck out because it seemed so out of character. Maeldune was characteristically subtle and subdued but his interruption of Gerriod's tale was quite the opposite. Maeldune had effectively taken the focus from the story.*

*'So you believe that Windle has been under Caliban's influence since the time that he and Samuel Melkin were attacked by the Ghul in Scoriath.'*

*'It seems logical to conclude this, Your Grace.'*

*'Windle said he escaped the Ghul that night. Even as he said it, it seemed preposterous but I accepted him without question.'*

*'It is a mistake we all made I'm afraid. I have sent some of the Cessair Guard to retrieve him from his quarters, Your Grace.'*

*The Chamberlain sighed. 'So many lives ruined.' He unfurled a scroll that Pylos had given him when he first arrived in the Chamberlain's apartment.*

*Bannick Landen – assassinated in Cessair  
 Gerriod Blake – missing in action  
 Gunther Ross – executed in Brigantia  
 Mulupo – imprisoned in Cessair  
 Rama Ta – killed in Skyfall Town  
 Remiel Grayson – imprisoned in the Endless  
 Sefar Hadith – killed in Khepera  
 Sir Edgar Worseley – killed in Scoriath  
 Sumi Kimura – killed in the Endless  
 Tagtug – killed in the Oshalla Ocean  
 Tawhawki Fall – missing in action  
 Trypp Elan – missing in action  
 Will Stoops – killed in Scoriath*

*'This is a heart-breaking list,' he groaned. 'We have lost some of the noblest men and women I have ever met.' The end of the scroll had curled up in his hands. He pushed it down so that he could see the names at the bottom of the page. 'And then we have our traitors...'*

*Addison Cole – missing in action  
 Lokasenna Hagen – missing in action  
 Maeldune Canna – killed in Khepera*

*A heavy knock at the door sounded and the Chamberlain admitted his guest. It was Kip Stoops, the tall, tattooed son of Will Stoops and recently appointed captain of the Cessair Guard.*

*'What is it Kip?' the Chamberlain asked, wary of the downcast expression on the young man's face.*

*'It's Porenutious Windle, Your Grace,' he answered uncomfortably. 'He's –'*

*'Gone?' the Chamberlain interjected expecting to hear the news of his advisor's treachery. It was inevitable. Why would he stay around? He had achieved his mission.*

*'He's dead, Your Grace. We found him hanging in his room.'*

*And so it was with a heavy heart that Chamberlain Tiberius Llyr committed to war all the nations under his authority. The proclamation*

went out and messengers were sent to every village and city across the lands. Ever sensitive to the political climate, Llyr prepared himself for a backlash against what he believed would be the most unpopular decision of his life in office. He was staggered to witness the opposite reaction. Civilians lined up outside army barracks and recruiting stations in every major settlement. Men, women and children of all descriptions put their names down to join the fight to stop the tyranny that had devastated their lives over recent months.

Weapons were forged and soldiers were trained. By the time summer came around, there was not a person in the Myr whose mind was not fixed on the small frozen island that lay somewhere in the White Sea at the top of the world.

Kip Stoops rode up to Pylos and dismounted. His dreadlocks swept over his head as he bowed, carving tiny grooves in the snow. 'General, all the Tuirrenian longbow teams are ready.'

'Well done Kip. When the breach is revealed, your people will be the first to engage the enemy. They must take out as many Ghul as possible before they make it out of the breach.'

'They will not miss General.'

'Before you return to your people, I'd like you to take a message to all the captains.'

'Yes sir,' he responded without pause. 'The message?'

'Tell them that their soldiers may stand at ease for now. The time has come to light the bonfires. We must ensure that our troops keep warm.'

'Does that include you sir?' Kip responded. Pylos was momentarily reminded of Kip's father. It was the sort of friendly jibe he would make.

'I cannot fight in armour or furs. It is not the Helyan way. And the cold – it keeps me alert.'

'As you wish sir.'

The fires were lit providing a colourful contrast to the gentle blue light that fell over the island as twilight approached. Pylos looked out across the thousands of Myrrans who had gathered to fight the great battle. The Acora and Helyans stood quietly in highly regimented ranks, their weapons at the ready even though there was no sign of the breach through which Caliban's army would pour.

They stood behind innumerable Sessymirians who sat on the frozen ground drinking, wrestling and comparing the size of their swords. At best, they could be described as a rabble, but they would fight hard. Their captain moved amongst them slapping them on the back, rousing their spirits even higher so that they thought they were almost invulnerable.

Standing calmly in front of the Sessymirians were the Sapphyrro. It was strange to see such a passive race involved in what would inevitably be a bloody conflict, but they had suffered much and had resolved to put an end to the reign of terror that had reduced much of Skyfall Town to rubble. The Sapphyrro were armed with nothing more than slingshots and Pylos had great concerns for their safety at the head of the assault, but they had insisted they be placed on the front line where their carapaces would protect them better than any metal armour.

Behind these four groups were arrayed the longbowmen of Tuirren led by Kip Stoops.

They were flanked on the left side by the gleaming knights of Pelinore. King Pius had emptied his city of every knight he had. Their long red capes streamed out in the cold wind like proud flags and Pylos could not help but feel inspired by their presence.

On the Tuirrenians' right side were hundreds of Susanese and Kompiran warriors, armed to the teeth with sai, throwing stars and bolas. Many of them stood there with the heart-wrenching funeral of the Emperor's daughter, Princess Sumi Kimura fixed in their minds. They remembered the day Lara Brand had appeared in the Imperial Palace in Kumoku with the still body of the nation's favourite daughter in her arms. It was the day when every able-bodied person in Susano and Kompira enlisted in the Imperial Army so that they could avenge the heinous crime that had been committed against them.

Behind the bowmen stood the Arnakki and the Kheperans brandishing all manner of weapons. Pylos had put these two forces under the formidable leadership of Hafaza Habid, the Ambassador of Khepera. Well-suited to combat in such freezing temperatures, the Arnakki seemed oblivious to the rapidly-dropping temperature. The Kheperans on the other hand were struggling so much with the cold, one of them had stood so close to the bonfires that were being lit, his robes had caught fire.

Pylos placed the Ankarans, the Sedomo, the Tamuans and a surprisingly large contingent of Mabbits behind the Arnakki and Kheperan troops. This eclectic mix of races had been difficult to position. The Tamuans and Mabbits were not well practised in the art of war and whilst the Sedomo were extremely combative, they were accustomed to sun-drenched, grassy plains. Pylos was more than a little apprehensive about how they would cope once the battle began.

At the very back of the assembled troops were the metal-clad Tethrans. Thousands of them. They were only outnumbered by the Helyans. The massacre at the Scarlet Rock Theatre was a wound that would not heal. Rage fuelled their armour-plated bodies. Originally, Pylos had thought of putting these troops on the front line, but their physical presence did much to instil the inexperienced Ankarans, Tamuans and Mabbits with confidence.

At the very rear of the Myrran troops, in the ruins of the fort, Tuathan blacksmiths had set up forges to repair the weapons that would inevitably break in the course of the battle. These forges glowed a brilliant red, lighting up the grizzled faces of the brave smiths who were doing what they could to assist the soldiers. If the battle was lost, these civilians would meet the same gruesome fate as anyone else upon the field.

The snow-covered ruins were also occupied by Nessans well-practised in the art of healing. Some of these were surgeons, others were herbalists and mystics. They were joined by apothecaries who had left the town of Shysie in Mag Mel to avenge those who had fallen when the Ghul invaded the neighbouring village of Marshmead.

Behind the ruins, a number of young Tamuans tended to the small flock of peg'ii that had been tethered there. The peg'ii hovered above the snow contentedly, happy to dine on the dried friggs the Tamuans had brought to feed their prized mounts.

There were three other groups on the battlefield but they did not represent specific nations. The Cessair Guard, the Magistrates and the Almoners of Nemetona moved about the assembled troops, ready to provide their skills where they were most needed.

There were notable absences. The great army did not contain any representatives from Cephalonia, Kolpia and Caquix. Emissaries sent to Cephalonia simply did not return. Emissaries did return from Hurucan Hill deep in the heart of Kolpia – they found no trace of the Kolpians but plenty of evidence that the Ghul had been there. The Caquikki had promised to send troops but none had come.

Pylos knew that the Pryderi would appear in due time, but sadly on the opposing side. He knew first-hand how powerful they had become. He had dwelt on them greatly since setting off for Usnach. For all his military experience, he had no idea as to how he would combat the witches when they entered the fray.

He turned to face the eastern side of the island where he could see Lara Brand silhouetted against the white ocean behind her. She had



removed herself from the troops, a lonely figure perched on a broken tower amongst the old Tuirrenian ruins. She had lost her people to Caliban and she was the only member of her squad to survive the mission into the Endless. The only sign she had anything at all was the bright light that burned in the middle of her chest like blue star.

‘You’re shivering! You’re not scared are you?’ The voice was familiar but strangely hollow.

Pylos wheeled around to see...

‘Bannick!’ He reached out to embrace his friend but his hands drifted through the man standing before him. Bannick’s body swirled away like fine, coloured dust only to return to the shape it had originally taken.

Pylos grinned. ‘So you decided to turn up.’

‘Just in spirit,’ Bannick replied with a similar grin.

Lara looked desperately among the spirits who had gathered in the fading light. Groups of them stood talking to living friends and relatives as if at a dinner party. Others, keenly aware of the passing time, ran through the ranks of soldiers looking for loved ones to farewell.

Lara knew he would be there. He would wait for her. She slithered down from the ruins and made her way out across the icy plain. Her heart raced and just when her hope of seeing him began to fade, he appeared, glowing brighter than any of the other spirits who had come to say their last goodbyes.

Sir Edgar bowed before her in a sweeping gesture of civility. ‘My lady, is your baby safe?’

Tears filled her eyes. ‘She is. I couldn’t have saved her without you. You sacrificed yourself to save us. To save her.’

‘It is comforting to know that it was not in vain.’

‘Thank-you.’ She wanted to kiss him. Wanted to take his hand and hold it to her cheek as he had done on their journey across Scoriath. But he was dead and soon he would be gone.

‘Miss Brand, I am pleased to see you still alive.’

‘I had help. Sumi Kimura. Tagtug the Mabbit. Even your brother helped me in his own way.’

‘My brother?’

She reached into her blouse and pulled out a leaf. It had remained a vibrant green even though months had passed since it had fallen from the boughs of Edgar’s brother’s boughs.

'There were times when I would lose heart. Feel like giving up. This small leaf was a reminder of the only thing I had to do to get my little girl back.'

'What was that?' Edgar asked gently.

'I had to endure.'

Under his magnificent plumed helm Edgar smiled. 'My lady, please come with me. There are others who wish to say goodbye to you.'

'Others?' she said hopefully.

'Three others in fact.'

He led her through the crowds to a place where three remarkably different individuals were waiting for her. There was Tagtug, Sumi and...

'Mumma?'

'How long will you stay?' Kip asked his father.

'We stay only to say goodbye. We all feel something tugging in the pit of our stomachs. There is somewhere else we need to be. When night comes we will fade away.'

Kip looked down at his father's belly. 'It doesn't look like your stomach is fading away!' he laughed.

'I didn't come here to be insulted,' laughed Will Stoops. 'I haven't eaten in months!' He looked down at the arrows his son was preparing for the battle ahead. 'Kip, how many times do I have to say it – keep your arrows wrapped up in cloth. The evening air will moisten the quills if you leave the arrows uncovered. I want every –'

'Dad, I was told you died a hero.'

'Is that what you've heard?'

'That's what I've heard.'

'I see you have been given command of the longbowmen.'

Stoops turned to scan the troops before him. They were all standing reverently, watching the reunion between the most famous Tuirrenian and his well-respected son. All had taken their caps from their heads as a sign of respect for the departed bowman. 'Oh for goodness sake,' he shouted in response to the show of reverence, 'put your hats back on your heads. It's not a funeral.'

They smiled awkwardly and did as he instructed. Kip laughed. 'They are good soldiers. They will serve their country well.'

'As will you, my boy. Stay alive.'

A ghostly tear ran down the side of Will Stoops' chubby face and dropped into space. Kip struck out a hand, and caught the tear which

exploded on his hand in a tiny puff of dust. When he looked up, his father was gone.

Jehenna watched her brother and father disappear into the crowds surrounding her. She was smiling. In a strange way, she was glad they were accompanying one another into the great beyond. They were far too gregarious to make the trip alone.

A cold voice sounded behind her. 'Jehenna – I...'

She turned to see the lean, arrogant face of her husband staring back at her.

'I have nothing to say to you.'

She walked straight through him.

'Jehenna, please.'

She drew her sword. 'I know I can't kill you now, dear husband, but it will give me some joy to pass my sword through your gullet.'

'I wanted to apologise... for everything.'

'You betrayed your nation, your world and me for ambition.'

Maeldune's eyes darted about as he tried to excuse himself. 'Jehenna, it was Succellos. I was under –'

'Don't!' she barked and her command was heeded instantly. 'You pathetic man. You would even lie from the other side.'

'I face the void Jehenna. I need more to take with me than your scorn.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'That's all I have for you now.'

Then her demeanour changed. Her eyes brightened and a smile broke upon her face. 'Besides, there are other men in the world.' She turned to her left and Maeldune followed her gaze. He found he was looking at Pylos Castalia engaged in conversation with Bannick Landen and Sefar Hadith. 'You can't mean that barbarian? He killed me Jehenna!'

'And saved someone else the trouble.'

'No Jehenna. I forbid it.'

She shrugged. 'You're dead. What can you do?'

Sumi reached out to the spectral figure besides her and drew him close. She rested her head on his strong arms and giggled. 'Lara Brand, this is my husband.' Her freckled face glowed as Trojanu Sato placed an arm around her shoulders.

Maeldune spat at the old man who had sidled up beside him. The man had wrapped a withered hand around Maeldune's arm and was shuffling him away across the snow. 'Who are you?' Maeldune sneered. 'Get away from me.'

'You don't remember me, Minister?' the old man asked. 'My name is Jolon Bligh. You killed me in Murdertown.' On either side of Jolon Bligh, dark robed men appeared carrying chains. These slithered through the air and wound themselves around Maeldune's wrists and neck. Maeldune could do nothing to remove them.

'Where will you take me?' he asked, his voice tremulous with fear.

'There is a special place reserved for you, Minister. A place where the truth is laid out for all to see, and justice is administered without fear or favour.'

Maeldune's screams faded with the light and then the living were all alone.

Pylos and Jehenna took to their mounts and rode across the icy plains to give last minute instructions to the troops on the front line. The clear arctic skies above had darkened to reveal brilliant stars that many of the Myrrans had never seen before.

'They'll be here soon,' Pylos said sombrely. 'They'll want to use every moment they have.'

Jehenna's mind was still on the departed. 'We lost too many good people. Bannick, Rama, Kali, Tawhawki...' Her voice trailed off.

'What is it?' Pylos asked.

'I had expected to see Tawhawki's spirit here today but he did not come.'

'I thought Gunther Ross would be here,' Pylos said. 'Swigging on some ghostly wine, making tasteless remarks about some poor woman who floated by.'

'We could use both of them today. I thought the Caquikki would show. This is their fight too.'

'We can win this battle without them,' Pylos said trying to sound confident.

Jehenna pulled her snorse to a halt. She turned to the Helyan and said, 'You really think we can win this battle?'

Pylos thought carefully before answering. 'I want to tell you our victory is at hand. I want to tell you that all these people will survive. But the simple fact is that is that the best we can hope for is a valiant end.'

She stared at him without saying anything. He looked away, uncomfortable in her gaze but she continued to stare. After years of marriage to a man who personified deceit, Pylos' honest answer had taken her by surprise. It was a good answer. A roomful of poets could not have written a better answer.

Pedaeus Rhodes came up the slope with a hunk of meat. 'Here Pylos, eat.'

'Not before a battle, Pedaeus.'

'Why not – we have time. And it's roast barga. You know you love roast barga.'

'Pedaeus, I would not be able to keep it down.'

'You're not scared are you, Pylos?'

'I am exactly as I am before every fight Pedaeus – terrified.'

'I don't believe it.'

'It's not something I share with a lot of people.'

'But, you always seem so –'

'Self-assured. A man in my position must present such an appearance, but deep down, I am more nervous than most. So much for the great hero Pylos Castalia.'

'No. If anything, it makes you a greater hero. You experience fear, but conquer it. You are the oriflamme of the Myr. All nations will follow where you lead.'

'They would have followed Bannick,' he said sadly.

'Did you see him? Just now? Was he waiting for you?'

Pylos' mouth curled up in a curious grin. 'Yes Pedaeus. I did see him.'

Pedaeus tore a strip of steaming barga from the bone he was holding. The smell of the cooked meat hung deliciously in the air, and despite his nerves, Pylos felt himself growing hungry.

'What did he say?' Pedaeus asked as he chewed avariciously upon the meat.

*'She's available now,' Bannick said casting a suggestive glance at Jehenna Canna.*

*'Here we are about to go into the greatest battle of all time and you're thinking about that!'*

*'I'm not going into battle,' Bannick retorted.*

*'I killed her husband, Bannick. That makes things a little difficult.'*

*Bannick chuckled to himself. 'Pylos, there are times I think you're afraid of women! I really do.'*

*Pylos glared at his friend's spirit. 'Don't you have somewhere to go?'*

'He just wished me well for the battle ahead.'

Pedaeus slapped Pylos on the back and gave a hearty laugh. 'You must think me stupid, Pylos! Bannick would never say that.' Pedaeus noticed that Pylos was uneasy by his comment. His face had reddened. 'He said something about Jehenna Canna, didn't he?'

Both men looked up at her moving among the troops with more confidence than anyone either man knew. She was marching up and down the Sessymirian lines giving orders and advice. Incredibly, as boorish as the Sessymirians were, not a single man questioned her – they just listened attentively to all she had to say. Even the drunk ones.

'If I fall today, they will follow her,' Pylos said. 'They all will.'

'You won't fall.'

Pylos looked across the darkening island and frowned. 'Where are they Pedaeus? It's dark enough for them now. They should have appeared by now.'

'You don't think this is a ruse do you? What if Caliban attacks our homelands? We have left them undefended.'

Pylos nodded. 'I have worried about that continually. The Ghaddar agreed to watch over all the breaches they could, but they are few and the Ghul are legion. However, I do not believe Caliban would avoid a battle he does not believe he can lose. There is pride at stake here. And sibling rivalry. I doubt Caliban could walk away from this fight.'

Pylos' faith in this point of view was sorely tested as the night drew on. The stars wheeled by overhead and the moons rose and fell. Despite his conviction that the Ghul would appear, the brief night passed without incident. The Myrran troops stood at the ready, waiting for some sign of the Ghul. But none came and though the night was only a few hours long, by the end of it, there were many soldiers whose nerves were frayed.

'The sun's about to rise,' Pedaeus said. 'There's not a cloud in the sky. It's going to be a bright day.'

Suddenly a subterranean rumbling was heard across the land. Snow shifted upon itself like flour being sifted. Pebbles of ice jumped

crazily as the rumbling intensified. Over by the ruins, the peg'ii whinnied nervously, disturbed by the shaking ground.

'They're coming,' Pylos said gravely.

He instructed the army to move back. The rumbling was at its most vocal in the middle of the island. The Myrrans edged back as they waited for the breach to appear.

Whether it was by design or by chance, the breach appeared the moment the sun rose over the flat horizon of the sea. It's light cascaded across the waters at the same moment the snow and ice in the centre of Usnach fell away to reveal a massive rift five leagues long. It ran from the northern tip of the island to the southern coastline, effectively dividing the land in two. Shelves of ice 500 yards long slid into the crevasse, sending up a plume of dirt and snow that hung in the still morning air.

After a time, the rumbling ceased and the land eventually came to rest.

The breach was dark. No phosphorescent glow bled out of it, just darkness. Nothing moved. Nothing could be heard.

'I don't understand,' Pedaeus exclaimed. 'Why now?'

'The Pryderi,' said a soft voice behind him. Lara Brand had slithered through the armies to see what she could. The small white hillock Pylos and Pedaeus stood upon offered the best view of the breach so she decided to join them.

'What about them?' asked Pedaeus. 'Did they open the breach?'

'I imagine so,' Lara replied. 'But they also mean to do much more. With their help, the Ghul could attack at any time.'

'But what of the sun?' Pylos asked.

'Oh dear gods, Pylos!' Lara gasped. 'The Pryderi will block it out.'

Pedaeus' eyes widened. 'They can do that?'

'Months ago, when Sumi, Tagtug and I were fleeing Providence, a coven of witches supporting the Ghul tried to stop us by covering the sky with thick clouds. They almost succeeded.'

Pedaeus' expression remained stunned. 'Are you saying they could cover the whole island?'

'I really don't know Ambassador. It would take a lot of witches to sustain such a spell.'

'Why would they wait until now?' Pedaeus said. 'Wouldn't it have been easier to attack us last night?'

Pylos was nodding to himself. He understood. 'It was a good tactic – to wait until daylight. Short as the night was, it has exhausted our troops. The waiting before a battle is the hardest part.'

Suddenly there was movement in the breach. A dense cloud of shatterbugs at least 200 hundred yards thick and two leagues long rose out of the breach, like a luminous spirit rising from the dead. When they had reached the cold open air, the bugs flew off in all directions, but none left the island.

Pylos turned to Lara. 'Caliban doesn't want Remiel to miss a thing.'

Pedaeus face wrinkled up as confusion settled upon it again. 'What does that mean Pylos?'

'It's a long story Pedaeus,' Pylos said dryly. 'I'll save it for another day.'

Pedaeus shook his head. 'I'm beginning to think there won't be another day.'

An hour passed. The breach remained silent. Only the fluttering of shatterbug wings could be heard. As beautiful as they were, any shatterbug that strayed too close to Pylos, Lara or Jehenna was quickly introduced to an early demise.

A Scorian scout rode up on a chestnut-coloured snorse. 'Excuse me General but we've spotted some movement in the breach. Northern end.'

'They're Pryderi alright,' Jehenna said. She sat astride her snorse peering into the breach flanked by Pedaeus, Pylos and Lara. In its dim light, they could make out a long line of Moraens slithering up a thin path on the far side of the breach.

'We need to shoot them down now!' Pedaeus said with earnest. 'We need to stop them before they are a threat.'

'I'm not sure I can do that,' said Pylos.

'You have no choice!' Pedaeus argued.

'Actually you do,' said Lara. 'You can choose not to shoot. You would be wasting arrows anyway. They have put up a protective spell around their bodies. Your arrows would just bounce off and fall into the pit.'



Pylos turned to the scout who had brought them to the northern end of the breach. 'Alert all companies. Sound the horns. We are about to be attacked.'

The scout frowned. 'With all due respect General, the sun is—'

The look he received from Pylos warned him against finishing his sentence. 'Tell all the companies to light torches. Stoke the bonfires. It's about to get dark.'

The scout rode off leaving the four of them looking at the faint line of witches slowly making their way up out of the Endless.

'Surely it takes more than a few weather witches to cover this island with clouds,' Pedaeus said hopefully. 'How many witches would they need? To darken these skies?'

'It took about ten of them to cover the bay at Providence for a few minutes,' Lara answered. 'I'd say it would take at least a hundred or more to keep this island in darkness.'

'What about a thousand?' Jehenna said ominously.

'What?'

She pointed down into the breach. More lines of Pryderi appeared. Jehenna wasn't joking. There was at least a thousand of them.

'That would mean that Caliban has emptied Morae,' Lara gasped. 'He has ensnared every witch alive.'

Once they had all had emerged they slowly made their way to the western end of the island, about a league away from the breach. Clearly, Caliban did not intend for them to fight. That role would fall to others. The Pryderi had been given only one objective – to cover up the sun. They sat in coiled heaps facing the island and began their incantation, a low, indecipherable hum. In the skies above, a dull rumbling echoed the witches' chant.

'The soldiers are making their best efforts to ready themselves, but this is an unfortunate turn of events,' Sela observed. 'Some of the troops had started entertaining the idea the Ghul were too scared to show.'

'They were foolish, Sela,' Pylos sighed. 'This is no set back. After all we came here to fight. You make sure they know that.'

'Yes sir,' Sela answered as she leaned over the long neck of the peg<sup>ii</sup> she was riding. There was a time when she would have scolded

Pylos for speaking to her in such a way. But that was a different time. 'Is there anything more to be done?'

'Yes. I want you to fly from company to company. Tell the captains to move their troops forward. I want our front line to be no more than fifty yards from the breach. When the Ghul finally appear, I want to be within striking distance.'

The skies were now thick with black thunderclouds, illuminated sporadically by the flash of unnatural lightning. On the Myrran side of the breach, thousands of torches were lit but it was not enough to dispel the gloom. It was dark enough for the Ghul to emerge.

And emerge they did.

At the front of the Myrran armies, the Sapphyrro stood on the lip of the breach watching the black shapes making their way over the rock and ice below. Though it was early morning, the Ghul did not burn. The clouds above gave them more than enough shelter from the pain of daylight.

The Sapphyrro all raised their slingshots. None hesitated, and as sacred as life was to them, none seemed to have any qualms about taking aim at the Ghul. In fact, it was the sanctity of life that explained why the people of the Skyfall had taken their place so assuredly in the vanguard of the Myrran alliance. If they faltered, none would survive the marauding evil that was about to consume the world.

The slingshots were released and almost every Ghul within range was felled. And they stayed dead. The bodily eruptions that signified the fiery demise of the Ghul lit up the breach like a birthday cake.

Above them, each Sapphyrrian loaded another lump of shatterstone into his slingshot and fired.

The air was filled with the sound of Tuirrenian and Acoran bows being released, followed swiftly by the sharp, soft sound of arrows slicing the air. No-one could hear the gentle thud of the shatterstone shafts hitting the leathery hides of the Ghul, but the conflagration that grew in the breach indicated the archers had hit their targets. Before a single Ghul had left the breach, at least a thousand had been killed.

Lieutenant Lucetious looked up at the carnage above him. The western wall of the breach was ablaze with dying Ghul, but still he pushed his

troops on. Above the falling, flaming bodies, he could see the cloudy skies beyond and this gave him strength.

‘Clearly Lucetious, you failed in reclaiming all the shatterstone from the Myrrans,’ Arinna Brine said coldly. ‘You are vulnerable.’

Lucetious turned to face the witch. He did not like the fact she was free to roam amongst them, but she had Caliban’s favour so he accepted her presence without a word of complaint. ‘Can you provide us with protection witch?’

The breach must be at least five leagues long,’ Arinna scoffed. ‘Even I do not have that power. I can protect us here. That is all.’

‘It does not matter. We are innumerable. They will run out of things to throw at us long before we run out of soldiers.’ He turned to the hordes behind him and raised his sword of bone. ‘Continue into the breach! A feast awaits! Onward and upward, my Ghul!’

The pallid warriors marched on. The air inside the breach became acrid with the brimstone stench of Ghul dying but they did not stop coming.

Pedaeus slapped a hand on Pylos’ back. ‘I think we have surprised our enemy. Pylos, it was a stroke of genius to tear all the shatterstone from Cessair Tower.’

‘It was difficult to convince the Chamberlain to agree to the plan. That tower has stood as a symbol of Myrran unity for over a thousand years. It took fifty years to build and only five days to strip it bare.’

‘A symbol is worth nothing on its own Pylos. Every person who fights here today does so with the knowledge that he or she faces a foe that can be killed. The tower has provided us with the weaponry we require to win this day.’

‘We will need more than weapons, I fear.’

‘But it’s a start.’ Pedaeus looked down at the shatterstone sword in his hand. ‘There’s one thing that confuses me. How did you do this without Caliban knowing. If what you told me about the shatterbugs is correct...’

‘It was something Remiel Grayson said when we were in Khepera. He told us that the churchwrens that nested in Garlot Abbey ate the shatterbugs. We spent months gathering every wren across the Myr and brought them to Cessair. They hid what we were doing from Caliban.’

A shatterbug fluttered down and landed on the icy ground between them. Pedaeus lifted his boot to squash the bug but Pylos stopped him. ‘There’s no need to kill it. Let Caliban watch. I want him to see everything.’

Out of the darkness of the breach came a terrifying volley in response to the Myrrans' opening assault. In the depths of the breach, huge catapults had been pulled in by colossal beasts of burden. Unseen by the Sapphyrro above, these great catapults had been winched, loaded and released. A dull *thud* was the only precursor to the butchery that followed.

The object that landed amidst the Sessymirians was spherical in shape and made of iron. It was the size of a small house. Hundreds of needleback spines adorned the object, sticking out of it through circular holes across its surface. The slow arc of its flight had made it easy for the Sessymirians to predict where the missile was going to land, and no warrior was within twenty feet of the giant, spiked ball when it slammed down upon the frozen ground.

However it was not until a full second had passed after the landing of the unfamiliar object that its destructive nature was realised.

The iron balls were bombs and very few Myrrans could have understood or imagined the science of their making. In the darkness of the Endless, Caliban had learnt many things, and this new technology was one of them. The balls were entirely mechanical. Upon landing, a spring was released within, which in turn unleashed all the needleback spines. They were released with such force that an entire row of soldiers were cut down by a single spike. Within moments of the first bomb landing, over one hundred Myrrans had been cut down in the most gruesome fashion.

A succession of these iron balls rained down upon Pylos' troops and he could not think of a single way to stop them. Lara Brand did what she could to shield the soldiers with her magick but as more and more balls were cast out of the breach, it was obvious to all that she could not stop the terrible casualties from mounting.

Pylos sounded a horn and the Myrran forces dropped back as far as they could. The terrible barrage continued to cull their numbers for some time but eventually it stopped.

Pylos rode forward and lamented what he was seeing. On the western side of the breach he could see thousands of Ghul pouring onto the land. It was a flood and he could do nothing to stop it. The Ghul had set up a series of long vine bridges that spanned the breach. There were hundreds of them.

Pylos gave the signal to return to the breach. His armies pushed forward and prepared for the worst.

Things got worse. The Cabal appeared.

The first to rise was a monster the Myrrans had never seen before. It looked more comical than frightening but that did not diminish Pylos' concerns. It had a long, fat, furry body covered in blue and purple stripes. The creature was bereft of legs but it was not a serpent. Hundreds of tiny wings lined its body and these flapped furiously, struggling to keep the awkward creature airborne. Its face consisted of a pair of tiny yellow eyes and a broad, smiling mouth. Underneath this mouth hung a massive gullet that wobbled as if it were a skin of wine.

As it rose over the Sessymirian troops near the front of the Myrran ranks, the call went out to fire at the creature. A cloud of Acoran arrows filled the sky and the odd creature was struck a hundred times over. Many of the arrows perforated the gullet hanging from its head and this had a most unexpected result. Hundreds of spouts of green liquid shot out of the holes the arrows had made and this showered the Sessymirians beneath. The noxious smell of the liquid hit them hard and many gagged as the potent odour swept over them.

Captain Gudrun pushed through the men on the front line until he found Pylos. 'General, it's the blinding agent – I recognise the smell,' he shouted.

'Then it is time to draw the Ghul into our trap. Are your soldiers are up to it?'

Pylos got the answer to his question immediately. The Sessymirians were wandering about like blind men. They fell over, they clutched their eyes. Some even bumped into one another and fell down giggling, despite the fact they were in the middle of a battlefield. Pylos cringed to see such dreadful acting. The Sessymirians moaned unconvincingly or shouted out painfully obvious lines such as, '*My eyes, my eyes,*' and '*I can't see a thing.*' Pylos was convinced that the Ghul would not fall for such an obvious ruse, but he was wrong.

The Ghul had no reason to doubt that the Sessymirians had been blinded. Lucetious put out the command to engage the vulnerable Sessymirians in hand to hand combat. Some Ghul climbed onto winged skitteriks that darted about the breach in erratic movements. Others just raced forward across the foot bridges, impelled by the carnal joy such an easy fight would provide. They could see how harmless their opponents had become. The sight of the stumbling Sessymirians was overwhelmingly seductive to the opportunistic Ghul – they had no fear of shatterstone when wielded by hapless, blind men. They rushed across the

vine bridges, disposing of the tactics and discipline that Lucetious and Caliban had instilled in them. Their bloodlust had become uncontainable.

The Sapphyrro had moved aside to give the Ghul full access to the Sessymirians. Gudrun pulled his men back, so a large hole appeared at the front of the Sessymirian ranks. This empty space quickly filled as more and more Ghul approached. In the desire to slaughter the Sessymirians whilst they were vulnerable, the Ghul who had crossed the breach had allowed themselves to be flanked on three sides.

The Sessymirians continued to stumble about dramatically. The Ghul kept coming.

But the Sessymirians were far from helpless. Apart from having to stomach the offensive smell of the apothecaries' blinding agent, the Sessymirians were in fine condition. As the Ghul drew their blades, Gudrun's troops abandoned the pretence of blindness and focused their eyes upon the merciless enemy they had trapped. They swung their broadswords and the Ghul were – once again – consumed by the fires that shatterstone sparked across their colourless skin. Sessymirian pikemen quickly lifted their lances and drove them into the bellies of the skitteriks that flew overhead. Their riders fell to the ground where the Sessymirians made short work of them. The Ghul tried to retreat but they found it hard to keep their footing on the bloodstained ice whilst the Sessymirians who spent every day with frozen ground underfoot were balletic by comparison.

It was a perfectly executed plan and it had brought about the deaths of over one hundred Ghul. The blaze of burning bodies that arose as the result was met with great excitement amongst the Myrran troops. For the first time in recorded history, the presence of the Sessymirians on the battlefield was looked upon favourably by other Myrrans.

Meanwhile the creature that had leaked the vile liquid over the troops limped out over the seas surrounding the island and was never seen again.

There was one Sessymirian on the field who was not shouting triumphantly. From the other side of the breach, Lokasenna Hagen looked upon the rout with pure rage. 'They knew!' she screamed. She turned to Arinna who had also viewed the slaughter. 'They weren't blind at all. Somehow they anticipated the move. They tricked us!'

Arinna raised an eyebrow, surprised that Lokasenna felt so betrayed. Her eyes roamed over the Sessymirian's blackened face,

intrigued by the way her shining blue eyes contrasted with her burnt skin. Her eyes were the only thing about her that connected her with her race. She no longer had the flaxen hair common to Sessymirians nor did she have their creamy complexion. In a way, she resembled the Ghul than she did her own people.

When Lara Brand had set fire to the Hollow Hills, burning Lokasenna to an inch of her life, she had changed the Sessymirian irrevocably. She no longer fought for her father. She did not even fight for herself. Lokasenna was on Usnach for one reason alone – she hated life and hated it as much as any Ghul.

Arinna shook her head dismissively at Lokasenna. ‘Of course they knew. They’re not stupid.’

Lokasenna’s face twisted as much as her shell of burnt skin would allow. ‘Did you know of their plans, witch? I hear you can read minds.’

Arinna tapped her head and scowled. ‘With so many here in such a heightened emotional state all I can hear is noise.’

A number of Sessymirians tried to cut down the bridges but quickly discovered that even their sharpest swords could not cut through the vines – Arinna had cast a protective spell over them so they were as impenetrable as steel.

The use of shatterstone weapons had taken the Ghul by surprise and they did not try to cross the bridges again. They retreated to the western end of the island, out of range of the shatterstone arrows the Tuirrenian longbowmen had been firing without pause.

Underneath the bridges, more Ghul continued to spew from the Endless.

‘It is as I said it would be,’ Lucetious said to Arinna. ‘They’re running out of shatterstone. The Sapphyrro no longer fire upon us.’

He was right. The Sapphyrro had stopped their bombardment and had withdrawn from the edge of breach.

‘It will not be long before the archers run out of arrows as well. They cannot maintain this assault forever.’

‘Will you continue to hide at the far end of the island all day Lucetious?’ Arinna said reproachfully. She pointed to where the Ghul had gathered around the Pryderi on the western edge of Usnach. ‘Their presence is distracting my coven, and you don’t want that to happen, do you?’

‘They will rejoin the fight in due course. There is no hurry. If there is one thing I have learnt from Lord Caliban, it’s the importance of patience.’

‘You are giving the Myrrans a chance to rest whilst the Pryderi exhaust themselves covering the island in darkness. You should cross the bridges and attack.’

Lucetious shook his head. ‘If we cross the bridges we will be picked off by archers. But do not worry, witch. There is always another way.’

The next creature that appeared seemed to pose no threat at all. Its wet and scaly pink body was thin and sickly looking. Long tentacles ending in broad, flat cups dangled at the creature’s side. These tentacles didn’t seem to be of any use to the creature. It did not use them to pull its limp body along nor did it use them to steady itself despite the difficulty it was having scaling the steep western side of the breach.

Though the beast was at least 100 foot long, it was only a few yards across. It appeared to have very little strength for it fell back into the breach twice as it tried to slither its way up to the icy surface of the island.

After the second failed attempt to scale the walls of the breach, the creature disappeared for some time before emerging once more, this time attached to countless vines that were hauled across the ice by hundreds of Ghul.

Pylos watched this activity with a sense of foreboding. On his left Kip Stoops sat on a white snorse. On his right a much older man wearing white robes and a garland of ivy around his head had his face buried in a book.

‘Kip, I want your people to concentrate on the vines. The Ghul are going to a lot of trouble to get that thing out of the Endless. It must be important to them.’

‘Really General? It looks a bit sick to me.’

‘If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not find out what use they have for it.’

‘We are running out of arrows sir.’

‘I know. It was inevitable. Soon it will be time for others to influence the day. No-one ever won a battle with archers alone.’

Kip Stoops sped off on his snorse and within a minute the Tuirrenian longbowmen were training their arrows upon the ropes lashed to the creature.

‘General, its name is Nausasis,’ said the man at Pylos’ side. It was Senator Leippa, the man who had opposed Pylos so many times in the past. Now he was doing everything he could to support him. Leippa held



up the ancient book he had been madly flicking through when the creature had first appeared.

‘I don’t care about its name, Senator – just how to kill it. Tell me what it does.’

‘The book doesn’t really say!’

‘I think we’re about to find out, Pylos,’ said Jehenna pointing out to a stretch of ice on the far side of the breach.

The Ghul had successfully managed to haul Nausasis out of the breach. Although its pale pink skin was covered in arrows as were the thick green vines the Ghul had wrapped around the creature, the longbowmen were not able to stop it from being brought up onto the ice.

Nausasis sat in a coiled heap with its head raised slightly. Its sad white eyes looked out over the confusing scene before it. The Ghul had laid out its long tentacles in a rough circle around its coiled centre. There were twelve tentacles in all. Each one lay flaccidly on the frozen ground.

The Ghul surrounding Nausasis placed themselves down in the cups – twelve Ghul, one to a limb. In a perverse way, it looked as if they were each taking a seat in a wagon.

Another Ghul walked to the hub of the creature and kicked at the coils lying lethargically upon the ice. Although Pylos couldn’t hear anything from that distance, he could see that this particular Ghul was shouting at Nausasis. Suddenly, it rose up, twisting its body around and around. The cups at the end of its limbs stayed where they were despite the increasing tension upon each limb. The Ghul sitting in the cups unsheathed their swords even though there were no enemies near them.

Suddenly the tension pulling at the cups by the creature’s twisting body was too great and they twirled up into the air. As they spun around in a massive circle, the Ghul soldiers let go of the cups and allowed themselves to be hurtled out over the breach and into the midst of the Myrran troops.

Nausasis had thrown them far. They landed in the midst of the Sedomo who struggled to understand what was going on. It was not until twenty Sedomo lay dead that they turned their spears upon the incoming Ghul.

Another beast sprung out of the breach. It was green and it was massive. In many ways, it resembled a common friggs having the same webbed feet, bulbous eyes and pulsating air sacs on the size of its head. But it was thousands of times bigger. When its body landed on the ice, it

crushed an entire regiment of Pelinese knights, proud men who never got the chance to swing their swords in battle.

The creature's air sacs trembled and then exploded releasing a host of Ghul among the surviving knights.

The Pelinese knights were not the only ones to be taken by surprise. Two leagues to the north, the Kompiran and Susanese forces had sustained heavy casualties. Their eyes had been focused westwards, upon the breach. They were caught unawares when the ice behind them caved in and released a gargantuan beast with hundreds of claws hanging from its dark red body. It scuttled over the stunned warriors, snapping its claws as it went, claws large enough to slice a person in half. There was little more than a bloody river left of its victims when it moved deeper into the throng.

Behind the creature, hundreds of Ghul exited the rift the creature had made in the ice. They ran out into the Myrran troops firing crossbows as they went, cutting down the opposition before they had a chance to strike at them with a shatterstone blade. The battle was turning.

Whilst all this was taking place, the Ghul had dragged three colossal catapults up out of the breach. The vast iron buckets at the rear of each of these massive weapons were quickly loaded and sent hurtling forward before the Myrrans had any idea as to what the Ghul were sending across the breach.

Each projectile was different, but they had one thing in common. They were Cabal.

The catapult on the left sent a spherical, yellow creature hurtling into the ranks of the Mabbits on the southern edge of the Myrran troops. Although they were caught by surprise, their incredible reflexes saved them from being pounded into the ice. At first, the yellow ball did nothing other than roll to a stop in the middle of hundreds of curious and frightened Mabbits. It shook slightly and then a score of mouths appeared on its oily yellow skin. These widened to form smiling lips which slowly parted to reveal a long green tongue darting about inside each mouth. Suddenly, the tongues shot out and twenty Mabbits found themselves ripped off their feet and into the smiling orifices. It was a death as quick as it was obscene.

The Mabbits all fled, except for one, who stood bravely, waiting to be taken by the creature. In his hand he held a large purple fruit.

A pair of lips parted and a tongue darted out and lashed around the Mabbit's neck. He disappeared into one of the beast's broad mouths.

Moments later, the boomberry he held exploded and the strange yellow creature was little more than a smear mark upon the ice.

The second catapult had deposited its payload among the Tethrans. It was a tall brute of a creature with massive claws that shone like steel. This bipedal beast was a thing of pure fury. It raked its claws over any soldier within reach and the effects were devastating. The claws sliced through flesh and bones as if they were sand. The metal plates covering the Tethran's skin posed no difficulty for this monster. Within seconds of the creature landing at least ten Tethrans had lost their lives. Many more had lost their limbs.

The beast that had landed amongst the Arnakki was much smaller than the other two but just as deadly. It was no taller than a man, covered in soft grey fur and had no distinct shape. But it did have a distinct smell. A green mist hung around the creature's body like a cloak. It swirled and it waved but it didn't dissipate. It seemed to have a life of its own.

One of the Arnakki thrust his sword forward and the green mist wrapped around the blade and slithered up the man's arm. By the time it reached his face, he was dead.

Another Arnakki soldier lashed out with a heavy mace, crashing it down upon the creature's head. Against the mist rose up and took hold of the mace and before the man could release it, he lay dead next to his comrade.

The creature shuffled forward into the thickest part of the crowd of Arnakki. The mist rose out to anyone within a few feet of its body. Moments later another seven Arnakki soldiers lay dead.

'How can we fight something we can't hit?' screamed one of the surviving soldiers who was backing away from the creature's advance.

'That's easy,' said Lara Brand's soft voice. 'You throw it away.'

She stuck out a hand and lifted the creature high above the soldiers. It floated there above their heads like a large dust mote before Lara gave a flick of her hands and sent it flying out to sea.

More and more Cabal were released upon the Myrrans. Wherever he looked Pylos could see many of his troops being whittled away. The Myrrans were besieged on all sides and try as he might, he could not think of tactics to combat the diverse and unpredictable assault Caliban's forces had mounted.

Taking advantage of the chaos the Cabal had created, the Ghul had flooded across the bridges spanning the breach. Pylos spent much of his time galloping up and down the line, trying to keep order and focus. He had sent his troops to line the breach and to stop the march of the Ghul and they fought with the courage and determination for which Helyans were famous, but the sheer number of Ghul was overwhelming, and his men were quickly becoming exhausted by the relentless onslaught.

The Sessymirians were also distinguishing themselves. What they lacked in finesse they made up for with obstinacy and brute strength. But even that proved to be insufficient when they were met with Aventail.

Leippa had warned Pylos of this one. Among the ranks of the Cabal it was considered to be one of the most dangerous. It was a hooved beast with six legs and a long mane of silver. Its long neck resembled that of a snorse, but its head was more like a fish. Its back was covered in strange lumps that resembled barnacles on a ship.

When it first appeared up on the ice, it did not harm anyone so the Helyans and Sessymirians ignored it, choosing to focus on the ever-growing numbers of Ghul rather than a beast that seemingly posed no threat.

However, when Pylos saw the beast, he shouted to all the men near it to focus their aggression upon it. They soon learnt why. As Aventail had galloped about, tiny colloid lumps fell from its body. These had rolled out from under the shells on its back and dropped to the ice, ignored by all except those who had the misfortune to stand on one.

The lumps were actually eggs and from these eggs hatched the most ferocious monsters Pylos had ever seen. Everything Leippa had told him about Aventail was quickly shown to be true.

The slug-like creatures that exploded from the eggs were little more than a collection of savage teeth in a slimy, limacine body. These teeth sliced into the ankles of the soldiers and the bite was so ferocious that it severed the foot from the leg. Screams of pure agony cut through the air as soldier after soldier fell to the ground, the battle forgotten as they clutched at the stumps of their legs only to have the slug attach itself to their necks.

'We have to stop that thing spawning these devils.'

A group of Sessymirians to his left sheathed their swords and took long drinks from flasks that had been hanging from their waists. In the middle of them was Captain Gudrun.

‘This is no time for drinking Captain,’ Pylos snapped, amazed at the lack of discipline he had just seen.

Gudrun gazed back in Pylos’ direction but his eyes weren’t focused upon him. They were focused upon Aventail. The beast was standing amidst a throng of Ghul standing near the breach. Gudrun’s pupils had dilated and the veins in his neck were pulsating. Froth had collected on his bottom lip. All the soldiers around him were the same. They resembled wild animals. In a berserker rage they raced off chasing after Aventail with no thought given to their own safety. At least a hundred Ghul stood between them and the beast they sought to slay.

There was nothing intelligent or strategic in the Sessymirian attack and many fell before they had covered twenty yards. But most ignored the wounds they received and pushed on. A number of Sessymirians even had their feet sheared off by the savage slugs Aventail had dropped, but this wasn’t enough to stop them. Ghul heads flew through the air before exploding in fire. Gudrun and his men did not stop until they had reached Aventail and killed it. But killing it wasn’t enough. They dropped their swords and tore the flesh from its bones. Their sheer brutality was almost enough to unsettle the Ghul.

Pylos knew what he had just witnessed. Although he was contemptuous of the Sessymirians’ use of an apothecary’s potion to give them an advantage on the battlefield, he was in awe of their terrifying presence. The Sessymirians had literally torn apart one of the worst Cabal in existence. This done they set about hunting down all the slugs. Some of them even picked up the gnashing creatures and strangled them with their bare hands.

Pylos looked around him. Despite the efforts of the Sessymirians, things were still desperate. Myrran troops were being pared down by the endless procession of Ghul troops spilling out onto Usnach. Fortunately, the Cabal had proven itself to be a finite entity. It seemed that the last of these monsters had dragged itself out of the depths of the Endless. This was small consolation to the fact that a dozen were still rampaging across the frozen waste, making their presence known in the bloodiest ways possible.

On a small hummock in the centre of the field, Pylos sat on his mount Lampetia and wracked his brains for a way to shift the battle in his favour. At the very far end of the island, across the breach, he could make out the Pryderi. He had thought to focus all his efforts upon them,

but huddled in a cocoon of magick he could not hope to penetrate, they were untouchable.

His feelings towards them were conflicted. He was one of the few who had seen what Caliban was prepared to do to their offspring. He had seen how they had been manipulated. And yet, despite his sympathy, he was appalled by the Pryderi's decision to support the monster who held their children hostage. The coven could end the battle in an instant, dispelling the thick cover of clouds that protected the Ghul from the sun. But that was never going to happen. They had gone too far down a dark road on which they could not turn around.

Pylos looked to his right where he could see Lara and Jehenna fighting back to back where the fighting was thickest. Lara's tawny brown hair streamed out in the cold air as she cast spell after spell with consummate ease.

Despite the bleakness of their situation, Pylos found a grain of happiness. It was the sort of happiness only a soldier would understand. His ranks were being decimated but they kept on fighting. And it wasn't just the Helyans, the Sessymirians the Acora and the Arnakki, races with a rich history of warfare. Even the Myr's peaceful peoples, the Mabbits and the Sapphyrro, fought as if they had been born into battle. The entire host demonstrated the compelling unity of a people pushed to the edge.

'Pylos, what is that?'

Pedaeus' bloodied face was a portrait of confusion as he pointed up to the dark clouds above the battlefield.

'What is what?' Pylos said brusquely.

'What is *that*?'

In the sky above, massive shapes appeared, moving through the clouds slowly like great ships on the sea.

'I don't believe it,' he gasped. 'They're skyships.'

Jehenna strode up the hill to join them. Her face was as bloody as Pedaeus' but she was unharmed. 'Do you think they're on our side?' she said apprehensively.

'There must be at least ten of them. Can you see who mans the ships Jehenna?'

She squinted and then a flash of recognition lit up her eyes. 'Caquikki! On the port rail of the largest ship I think I can see Lokota Fall. They're on our side!'

Suddenly the ships above unleashed a barrage that hammered the island. Spiked iron balls rained down upon Usnach. Boiling oil fell like a deluge across the frozen plains. Lumps of Cold were fired from the

ships' guns, resulting in great explosions of rock and ice. This would have lifted the Myrrans' hearts had it not been for one significant aspect – the bombardment was aimed at them.

'Somehow Jehenna,' Pylos said wryly, 'I don't think they're on our side.'

## Chapter Fourteen Above The Empty Isle

Gerriod was delirious. He had lost count of how many days he had been imprisoned. He had lost sight of why he had been imprisoned. All he had been told was that he was going to Usnach where he would learn the error of his ways. ‘You chose the wrong side!’ his quadrupedal captors had said with scorn, but he had forgotten whose side he was on.

For days he had been manacled to the floor of the ship. He had been confined in the belly of the vessel and the floor of his cell was the very hull of the ship. Strangely, he heard no sounds of water nor did he hear the cries of gillygulls, a sound he had associated with maritime travel since he was a boy. And then he would remember – this was no ordinary ship. It sailed the skies.

Occasionally Caquikki came in to either taunt him or give him enough water to stay alive but not enough to quench his thirst, but for the most part he was left alone. He could hear voices bleeding through the floors above, but they were muffled by the timber boards and brass plates the skyship was made of. The ship did not creak the same way Gerriod’s ship *The Crimson Dawn* had creaked and he found the absence of such familiar sounds to be disconcerting. The only noise that had accompanied his laboured breathing was the sound of a loose six-inch bolt rolling up and down on a metal plate near his head. It had followed an endless cycle of *roll-thud-roll* for many days and Gerriod thought that if one specific thing would be responsible for sending him mad, it would be that loose bolt.

Fortunately, he was afforded one of the best views on board. When the Caquikki designed their skyships they realised that the most spectacular view was downwards. With this in mind, they placed portholes along the ship’s keel, from bow to stern. Gerriod was chained over one such porthole so he could witness – as Caliban had requested – the final folly of his people. His hands were fixed into iron manacles so that his gaze was directed downward through the glass of the window upon which he lay.

Gerriod’s lips were cracked. He was dehydrated and starved. For all their civilized veneer, the Caquikki treated their prisoners with absolute contempt. The mariner bore the bruises of countless abuses but his skin had stopped registering any pain long ago. He was numb. In mind. In body.

For days he had drifted in and out of a listless sleep. A fog had descended upon his brain and it had become hard to separate his reality



from his dreams. He had pictured Usnach countless times before they actually arrived above the island. Having heard the tales of the island in his childhood, he knew what to expect. His father would be waiting for him to bid him farewell. Caliban had robbed him of his reunification with his father in the Endless but there was nothing the madman could do to stop them meeting at Usnach. In his exhausted stupor, Gerriod had played out their final farewell so many times, there were moments he would wake from sleep in an anxious state, unsure whether the conversation in his head was real.

He twisted his head to look at his manacled hands. They were thin and skeletal. All colour had drained out of his skin. Had he a black heart to match, he could almost pass for a Ghul. His fingers resembled twigs and his knuckles pushed through his flesh like granite boulders on a dirty hill. His skin was falling off in large flakes. The decay was almost complete. It had started the moment he held the Tethran dancer's leprous hands that night when the Worldpool sucked them into the Endless. It was an act of stupidity and kindness he was now paying for with interest. The disease had taken hold of his body and it was an embrace that would be maintained until death wrested his soul away.

'You know, you don't look too good,' said a voice he had not heard in over a year.

'Dad?' he gasped as he lifted his head upward.

Sitting on one of the steel ribs that curved down to the ship's spine was his father. Gamelyn was still wearing the maroon and gold scarf that he had worn all his life. His face was free of the cuts and scars that had covered it when Gerriod had last seen him. He looked as healthy and robust as he did when he stood at the helm of *The Melody*.

'Hello Gerriod. Still with us are you?' he said with a wry grin on his face.

'I've drifted off course Dad.'

'You will find your way back. A good sailor will always find a way home.'

Gerriod looked at his emaciated limbs and felt embarrassed before his father. 'There's not much left of me, I'm afraid.'

'But your heart's still beating isn't it son?'

'Barely.'

'As long as it's beating.'

Gerriod looked sadly at his father. He wanted to reach out and embrace him but his hands were fixed hard to the hull of the ship.

'Dad, what's it like where you are?' Gerriod asked tentatively. 'You're not in pain are you?'

'No, son.'

'I wish I could go with you. I can't remember a time when I was at peace.'

The serene look vanished from Gamelyn's face and he stuck out a hand and gripped Gerriod roughly by the chin. 'You'll have plenty of time for peace when you're dead Gerriod.'

'I doubt I will have to wait long to find out.'

Gamelyn shook his head. 'No! That's not the way of it. You're still alive.'

'I have nothing left Dad.'

'No. You've still got some fight in you boy.'

'Fight? I can't even remember who it is we're fighting.'

'It will come to you, son. Gerriod, I am so proud of you. You have grown up to be a fine man. I just wish...' He paused and cast his eyes down into his lap.

'Just wish what?'

'I wish I had been around to watch you grow up.'

'You were never really far away.'

'No. In fact I was just under the lake. If you had a line long enough you could have pulled me back to the surface.'

The sound of a key turning in the cabin door cut through the air.

Suddenly the fog that had surrounded Gerriod for so long dissipated. He knew where he was. He knew why he was there. And most of all, he knew who he was fighting.

The Caquikki Consul Tawhawki Fall stepped into his cell. His hooves clattered upon the boards that lined the floor of the small, dark room.

'My father has asked me to come down and check on you, make sure you're awake,' he said. He pushed his spectacles up onto the bridge of his nose as he gazed down upon his captive. 'He said Caliban wanted you to see everything.'

Gerriod tilted his head back and glared at Tawhawki. 'Get out!' he screamed at the traitorous consul. His voice was coarse. He had not used it in months, not since Caliban had handed him over to the Caquix without any explanation.

Gerriod could see the irony. Caliban had been manacled to the deck of *The Melody* when Gerriod had unwittingly given him the means to effect his escape – the knife Caliban had used to cut off his own hand.

It was an innocent mistake but it had catastrophic ramifications. Caliban would make sure the mariner saw the carnage whose ancestry lay in that mistake.

The thought of Caliban gave him an idea. A desperate foolish idea, but he had nothing to lose.

*'Desperation can make a man do astounding things Gerriod.'*

Gerriod pulled his left hand down as hard as he could trying to slide it out of the iron manacles that bound him to the floor. As he pulled, he could see his dead skin building up in flakes and folds where it met the metal of his shackles but this did not deter him. He felt no pain. His leprosy had seen to that. Ordinarily even a leper would not have been able to escape the shackles he was placed in, but the Caquikki's failure to adequately feed him had reduced the thickness of his wrist to half its normal size. His hand slipped free of the iron that had held it.

Tawhawki had no time to react. Gerriod quickly grabbed the bolt that had been rolling near his head. He did not have to look to find it. He rammed the bolt into Tawhawki's fetlock with all his strength, shattering the bone upon impact.

With an agonized groan, Tawhawki fell to one knee. Still armed with the iron bolt, Gerriod threw his arm around wildly. It connected with something but this time there was no jarring impact nor did he hear the cracking of bone. All he heard was the tinkling of glass breaking, then a soft squelching sound, followed by a heavy *thud*, as Tawhawki's head hit the deck. Gerriod turned his head to see that he had buried the six-inch bolt deep in his Tawhawki's left eye socket.

The porthole beneath him had a lever but it would not budge. He could hardly believe he was considering exiting the skyship via the porthole, but he knew he didn't have any other options. Between the cell they had put him in and the main deck of the ship lay five other decks full of Ghul and Caquikki soldiers. If he went that way, he would be cut down before he had gone five yards.

Luckily Tawhawki had the keys to his manacles and Gerriod was able to free himself from his bonds quickly. But it would not be long before someone noticed Tawhawki's absence. Gerriod was almost paralysed by the thought of losing his newly won freedom and his hands shook as he tried to open the porthole. He could see the edges of the glass had frosted over so he assumed the lever had frozen in place.

He swivelled around onto his backside and kicked at the recalcitrant lever. 'Open, damn you!' he growled, but still the lever would not move. He kicked again but his foot slid off the lever and

slammed down hard on the glass window. It broke instantly. The glass was not particularly thick – the Caquikki had never considered that anyone would actually want to break through it – and it had become brittle as the frigid air outside embraced the hull of the ship.

The cold air burst into the small room and everything subsided into shocking clarity. Gerriod stuck his head out through the porthole and was sickened by what he saw.

It was not the drop below that unsettled him, though that would have been enough to make most men retreat. It was what he saw below that nauseated him.

Thousands of Sapphyrran carapaces littered the frozen landscape. Behind them a black smear spread over the ice. Here the black shapes of Helyan soldiers lay under a veil of burning oil.

Behind the line of Helyans, the Acora futilely tried to stand their ground against a gargantuan creature which ground their bodies into the ice as it moved forward with little speed but immeasurable force. Even from this great distance, Gerriod could see the terrible losses the Myrran forces had incurred at the hands, claws and teeth of the denizens of the Endless.

Directly below him Gerriod could see countless Ghul, some on foot, some riding strange beasts he had never seen before. Behind them at one end of the island he could see the Pryderi. They numbered in the hundreds. They were not directly engaged in the fighting but he suspected they were influencing it more than anyone else – the entire island was covered in darkness even though he had watched the morning sun glinting on the sea beneath his porthole only hours earlier. He had heard that some witches could influence the weather, but he was astounded to find that they had covered up the sky.

Between the two warring sides he could see the breach, a dark wound in the bloodstained flesh of Usnach. He could see hundreds of Ghul pouring out the rift. They were like a flood. There didn't seem any chance of stopping them.

In plain sight of so much carnage, Gerriod's concerns for his personal safety seemed trite. He pulled himself out the porthole and looked for a way to scale the outside of the ship. The hull was broad much like the shape of *The Crimson Dawn* before it was crushed in the merciless grip of the Worldpool. Its flat bottom would not make for easy climbing. It was not as if he was unaccustomed to climbing – forty years of scaling masts had given him better balance than most – but the underside of the skyship was something else altogether.

'I'm going to die,' he said as he shuffled out the porthole.

The arctic wind buffeted his frail body as he clung to the keel into which the porthole was fixed. A thick brass beam serving as the ship's keel ran all the way from the decorative bowsprit to the flat transom at the stern of the vessel. There was a small gap where the keel met the oaken beams that comprised the ship's hull. The space was less than an inch wide but it was enough for Gerriod to wedge his fingers into it and maintain a reasonably firm grip. Straddling the keel upside down he slowly edged his way towards the bow of the ship.

As he shuffled along, he twisted his head about and saw more and more Ghul continue to spew from the dark hole in the middle of the island below.

'Somehow, I've got to stop this,' he grunted to himself. He returned his eyes to the brass keel he was clinging to, but his focus remained upon the breach far below.

And then an idea came to mind.

Gerriod's tenacity would have made a Helyan proud. But he had not even covered a third of the distance to the bow when he realised beyond any doubt that he wasn't going to make it. It wasn't his willpower that failed him; it was his body. Months locked away in a dank cell in Caquix had weakened him; lack of food and water had caused his muscles to atrophy. He simply did not have the strength to hold on to the keel.

Moments before he fell, a smile crept across his worn face. Despite all the failure, all the torment and death, he had reached a peaceful place. Everyone he cared about was either dead or dying and that knowledge gave him a perverse sense of comfort. He had nothing to lose. Weariness peeled his fingers from the keel and he tumbled out into the cold skies above Usnach.

He did not fall far. He landed ten feet below the ship on the back of a sky snorse. Sela's hand shot out and grabbed Gerriod by the shirt before he slid from her sky snorse. She hauled him up so he could wrap his arms around its neck.

'Now where were you going?' she said in a playful tone that was in total contrast to the precariousness of their situation.

'I was trying to get up onto the deck of that ship,' Gerriod answered, deciding that now would not be the best time for him to ask her questions about what she was doing there.

'And what were you going to do once you got up there?'

'I thought I would take this boat and send it crashing down upon that hole. I want to sink into the breach.'

Sela turned and looked over the side of her peg'ii at the breach. She then looked back at the great ship hanging over their heads. 'That doesn't sound like a bad idea at all.'

She smiled and Gerriod realised he had never seen a Tamuan's face before. 'Do I know you?' Gerriod asked. 'Your voice sounds familiar.'

'I'm Sela Noye, the Tamuan consul.'

'It's nice to meet you,' he said weakly. 'I'm –'

'You're Gerriod Blake.'

'Sela Noye,' he said having a vague memory of her in the Cloud Chamber. He seemed to remember that she complained a lot. 'Are you here to rescue me?'

'Actually, we were planning to attack these ships.'

'We?' said Gerriod.

She pointed behind her where ten Tamuans bobbed up and down in the sky bestride the beautiful peg'ii of Cephalonia. 'Do you know anything about what we are facing here?'

Gerriod nodded. 'A little. I think there are ten ships in their fleet. The capital ship is captained by Lokota Fall. It's a troop carrier. The crew is Caquikki but the boat's hold is overflowing with Ghul.'

'And the other ships? Do they have Ghul on them?'

'I don't think so. I'm not really sure. I'm sorry.'

Sela dismissed his apology. 'Well, there's only one way we shall find out. We're going to board the ships.'

'So you have a plan?'

'The ships have guns. They're held in the air by big balloons. That's the plan.'

It was Gerriod's turn to smile. 'It's complicated but it might just work,' he said laughing in spite of the terrible odds facing them. His feeling of peacefulness had not subsided. He was free. Even though he knew he would probably die as soon as he set foot on the deck of the ship above, he was going to die a free man and that made all the difference. 'I have one thing to ask. You leave this ship to me.'

She nodded. 'You may try, Gerriod Blake, but we cannot wait forever. This ship must fall. If it looks like you have failed to achieve this, we will do what we can to pluck it out of the sky. We have our orders.'

'I understand.' She was looking skyward. The Caquikki fleet drifted in and out of the low-lying clouds like phantoms. He turned around to face her. 'Do you think we can win this?'

‘I do,’ she said with great confidence. He did not remember her as being characterized by bravado, but here, moments before the most reckless assault ever conceived, she seemed incredibly self-assured. ‘The Caquikki are cowards and they’re not prepared for an assault. They have wrongly assumed that we are all land-bound.’

‘Take me up onto the deck above.’

‘Gerriod you can’t do this on your own,’ she said mirroring his earnestness.

‘I’m not sure how, but I will bring this ship down.’

‘Then take this.’ She pulled a long, black blade from a scabbard that had been hanging by her side. ‘It’s shatterstone. It should help a little.’

‘More than a little,’ said Gerriod happily, ‘but won’t you be needing it?’

‘I never was very good with a sword. I have other weapons.’ She gave her body a shake and Gerriod’s eye was drawn to the blanket of quills that was lying flat against her back. The quills were spreading out slightly, extending. He was glad he was sitting in front of her. Her quills made the shatterstone sword look like a child’s plaything.

‘It is time,’ Sela whispered to the other Tamuans and without a second thought, the peg’ii peeled away from one another and disappeared into the blanket of clouds surrounding them. They rose high so they could approach the ships from above, obscured by the clouds and the great balloons that held the Caquikki vessels aloft.

When each sky snorse was close enough to its appointed ship, it rolled in the air allowing the Tamuans to dismount in a fluid and silent manoeuvre.

On each of the skyship’s deck, the soft sound of each Tamuan hitting the deck went unnoticed. The Caquikki’s focus was outward, upon the battle that raged over a thousand feet below. The Tamuans’ curled up bodies shook momentarily before the savage onslaught of spines was unleashed across the ships.

A few seconds after landing on the skyships the Tamuans turned the cold air above the decks into a thick cloud of quills. Some of the ships’ balloons – the ones that hovered above midships – were ripped to shreds.

So were the Caquikki. The lucky ones were torn apart instantly, but the majority of Caquikki did not die straight away. They were incapacitated in the most brutal fashion. The quills pierced throats and faces. They speared into limbs and hammered into muscle. The Caquikki’s broad, round bodies resembled poorly made barrels from which spouted hundreds of nail-like spines.

The air was momentarily coloured by agonized screams and blood the colour of wine as Caquikki after Caquikki fell to the deck where they lay like giant pin cushions.

‘That’s the price of your damned treachery,’ sneered Sela as she watched the Caquikki crumple to the deck.

Once the Tamuans had cleared the deck of all opposition they ran to the ship’s guns. Most of these were Cold-powered cannons which were mounted on platforms on both sides of the ship. At the bow of the vessels a great harpoon took pride of place behind the ornate, brass bowsprit. Sela paused momentarily to decide whether to fire the harpoon or one of the cannons and quickly realised it did not matter. As long as it put a hole in the remaining balloons, it didn’t matter what she fired. She decided to man a cannon that was facing another vessel just thirty yards to port. She turned the wheel beside the cannon so that it was angled upwards. When she was satisfied with the cannon’s pitch, she set about loading it with a lump of Cold that lay in a wicker basket nearby.

Despite her lack of experience with weaponry of this sort, Sela had managed to aim and load the cannon within a minute. Now she just hoped her compatriots had managed to do the same. The booming sound of cannon fire that filled the air told her that they had been successful.

When Gerriod dropped to the deck of the skyship that had been his prison, the deck was awash with activity. More and more weapons were brought to bear on the Myrrans fighting for their lives on the frozen island below. Cages packed with snarling creatures dragged out of the depths of the Endless were cast over the sides of the ship. Lumps of volatile, blue Cold were also dropped. If it could maim or kill the troops below, it was thrown overboard.

Gerriod crept around the large crates that lay on the quarterdeck, confident he had not been noticed by any of the Ghul or Caquikki above deck. He looked down at the shatterstone sword Sela had given him. Its black surface even shone in the dull light above Usnach.

A *crack* sounded to his left and another to his right. On either side of him, long bone spears reverberated in the timber of the crate he thought had kept him from view. Another spear thudded into the deck at his feet. A quick glance behind indicated he well and truly had the full attention of all on board.

‘The prisoner!’ cried one of the Caquikki crew. ‘He’s escaped!’ He looked at Gerriod with a stunned expression that quickly dissolved into anger. ‘Kill him!’



The Ghul need no encouragement. The ship's light cannons were quickly swung around in an attempt to shoot down the surprisingly evasive target of the Tuathan mariner. Gerriod leapt onto the poop deck as the Ghul took aim. The cannon lurched upon the gunnel as the Ghul marksman jammed the trigger and a spiked iron ball shot viciously through the air towards him. Gerriod dived to his left and the ball whizzed over his head, its spikes narrowly missing his scalp.

He quickly picked himself up from the deck and sprinted towards the Ghul soldier who had fired the cannon. As he ran, he waved the shatterstone sword up high for all to see. The Ghul manning the cannon recognised the deathly metal immediately and quickly set about arming the cannon for another shot.

He ran out of time. Gerriod's blade sliced through his neck, sending the head that sat atop it sailing over the side of the ship. He quickly threw himself behind the cannon and aimed it at one of the enormous balloons that kept the ship aloft.

His fingers shook on the trigger. Adrenalin had given him a surge of energy, but he could now feel his body beginning to falter. He had to make the shot count. He wouldn't get a second chance. With the vast balloon in his sights, he fired the cannon...

And missed. The shot had splayed high above the balloon, missing it by a good ten yards. Gerriod dropped his head. It was over. He could hear the Ghul approaching. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw them raise spears and crossbows. He shut his eyes and braced himself for death.

But it didn't come. Instead he felt the sun upon his face. At first, he thought he was hallucinating, but the warmth of the light upon his skin was undeniable. He opened his eyes to see the Ghul who had surrounded him all burst into flame as a narrow beam of sunlight fell upon the deck. His wayward shot had a most unexpected effect. It had pierced a small hole in the cloud that the Pryderi had cast over the island and through that hole burst a thin ray of hope.

Gerriod looked around. There was no sign of the Ghul other than a pile of ashes that quickly dissipated in the cold wind that blew across the deck. Other Ghul who had witnessed their comrades' demise had hastily retreated to the darkness below deck, but Gerriod knew they would return. Already the clouds overhead were sealing the tear he had made.

He picked up the shatterstone sword and made his way down to the bow of the ship. The Caquikki crew did not engage him. They were not soldiers and did not know how to react to him. This pleased him. As

much as he hated them for their treachery, Gerriod had no time to waste on hand-to-hand combat. All that mattered was bringing down the ship.

He clambered up the platform that held the harpoon above the bowsprit. The purpose of the harpoon was unfathomable and Gerriod was fearful the weapon was merely decorative – what could a Caquikki airship hope to hunt a thousand yards above the world. His fears were allayed when he took the harpoon's large golden barrel in his hands and found that it swivelled. It was even more satisfying to find that it was also armed. The blade of the harpoon protruded from the barrel of the weapon, patiently waiting its release.

Gerriod lined up the balloons that ran from stem to stern. This time, he would not miss. And then he saw something that made him forget the balloons altogether. Or rather someone.

Lokota Fall was wrestling furiously with the ship's helm. He turned the great wheel in his hand and the ship slowly swung to starboard. 'If he can steer the boat, so can I,' Gerriod said as he did the unthinkable. He put the Caquikki ambassador in the harpoon's sights and fired.

The ten foot long metal shaft shot across the deck and nailed the unsuspecting traitor to the thick timber wall at the rear of the bridge. He flailed around helplessly and Gerriod punched the air. The harpoon had sheared right through his stomach and back. It was remarkable that he was even moving.

'You!'

Gerriod strode up onto the bridge with his sword held before him. He marched over to the writhing figure of Lokota Fall and rested the blade against his face.

'Do you come here to gloat, Gerriod?' Lokota gasped as blood poured into his massive lungs. 'All my fleet is sunk and I am dying. Put down your weapon Gerriod. I am no threat to you. All my crew have fled the bridge in light of your brutality.'

'My brutality!' Gerriod growled. 'What of your treachery to your fellow Myrrans?'

'*Fellow Myrrans!*' Lokota scoffed. 'We have no more in common with you than we do with the Ghul. We do not look like you. We do not think like you.'

Gerriod was amazed. 'How could you do this?'

‘Our decision to support Caliban came down to nothing more than pragmatism. We could see a war was brewing and we just did what we could to ensure that we were on the winning side.’

‘But in the Cloud Chamber... you told us things we did not know about the Ghul. About the Cabal. You helped us prepare –’

‘It was a necessary concession to achieve a greater deception. Nothing we told you affected the outcome.’

‘Outcome? This story has not been written. The winner is not known.’

Suddenly an explosion rocked the ship. At the bow of the vast vessel, one of the balloons had exploded in a ball of flame. Ghul who had ventured out onto the deck scurried back below as shreds of the flaming fabric fell upon the skyship. Without the support of the front balloon the skyship listed forward. Looking out over the bowsprit, Gerriod could see the white ice of Usnach and the dark stain of the breach. The ship was sinking in the sky.

‘It seems your allies grow impatient. They are prepared to shoot down this ship with you still on it.’

Gerriod ignored the comment. ‘They are merely following orders. You have no such excuse.’

‘I offer no excuse. I am not repentant. The Ghul will prevail.’

‘How long have you sided with them?’

Lokota coughed and a thick wad of blood stumbled over his lips and rolled down his chin. His face scrunched up as he tried to speak. ‘Many years ago, I came across ancient texts that detailed the rise and fall of the Ghul. One thing was clear to me – the Ghul would return, and I made sure I was prepared if fortune chose for such an event to occur in my lifetime.’

‘And so you conspired. Helped Caliban commit genocide.’

‘The slaughter of Spriggans? We had nothing to do with it. We were merely beneficiaries.’

‘Beneficiaries?’

‘For decades the Spriggans and Kobolds have denied us the iron filings we required to produce the lighter-than-air gas that keeps us afloat. It could only be found in northern Camulos. The eremitic Kobolds wanted nothing to do with us, and the Spriggans – out of spite and jealousy – would not even sell us what we needed. But after the Ghul had finished stripping Camulos of all its shatterstone, we entered and gather enough iron filings to float a thousand Caquikki skyships.’

‘But your allegiance to Caliban? He is our enemy!’

'He is *your* enemy Gerriod.' A spasm of pain shot through Lokota and his hooves stamped upon the deck as he stifled his urge to scream. 'I regard him as a friend and have done so for well over thirty years.'

'*Over thirty years?*' Gerriod gasped.

'Oh yes. I knew him before this terrible tale began. It was I who brought the knowledge of the Ghul to Caliban in the first place. It was I who taught him of the Endless, the *Incanto*, the Pryderi and one hundred other things that he has used to orchestrate his beautiful revenge upon an insidious brother. Unlike Maeldune, I was well aware of the necessity of staying in the shadows. When I heard word of the seal of Sarras being broken, I knew it was time to open the breach under Caquix City. I have been liaising with Caliban long before you discovered your father in the Endless.

*Gerriod stumbled through the half-light of the underworld realm.*

*At one point, he noticed hoofprints in the dirt. He guessed that the hoofprints must have been made by another inhabitant of the subterranean labyrinth. However, he had heard of a hooved race of people living on an island off the coast of Ankara.*

'Hoofprints,' he gasped. 'In the Endless. I remember seeing hoofprints in the dirt.'

'Ah, they would be mine. Or my son's. I introduced him to Caliban.'

Lokota stared out past the harpoon shaft in his belly. He pushed his spectacles up onto the bridge of his nose despite the fact that one of the lenses was broken. He could see the growing blackness of the breach off the bow and he nodded. 'I see what they're doing Gerriod! They've taken out the bow balloon. We're headed into the breach. They plan to block it with the ship.'

'You don't have to explain it to me,' Gerriod said. 'It was my idea.'

'You're only delaying the inevitable. The remaining Ghul will break through and your sad coalition will be finished.'

Gerriod stepped closer to Lokota and slapped him in the face. 'What sort of father are you? You brought your son into fellowship with scum like the Ghul.'

'Tawhawki has more brains in his tail than you have in that battered skull of yours. He was capable of making his own mind up. He didn't need me to tell him what to do.'

‘Well you have condemned him by your choice of friends. He is dead. I killed him.’

‘Dead is he?’ Lokota said whimsically. ‘Then I join him shortly.’

‘And I will join my father,’ Gerriod added.

Lokota twisted his head around. ‘Gamelyn’s not dead.’

Gerriod’s face dropped. ‘But I saw him... in the ship. I thought the island below must have –’

‘Ha! You fool!’ Lokota laughed delighted by Gerriod’s confusion. ‘You have been delirious for a long time Gerriod. Your father is not one of Usnach’s lost souls. Not yet anyway.’

It was a revelation both promising and full of despair. Gerriod was plummeting to his death upon a suicidal mission that seemed perfectly reasonable a minute before. But now he had been told his father was still alive, he could think of nothing worse than dying. His father was alive. Someone had to save him. But no-one else knew. ‘*I have to live,*’ the mariner said to himself, ‘*I have to live.*’

A winged shadow passed over the deck. It was a sky snorse bearing two riders, one of whom slid from the flying beast and fell awkwardly to the deck in front of him.

‘Ow!’ she groaned as she picked herself up. She pulled her long brown hair back, lifted her head and smiled at him. ‘Hello, I’m Lara Brand.’

‘I know you. You’re the Moraen from the Assembly.’

‘Yes. I see you’ve become suicidal since we last saw one another,’ she said looking at the ground rushing up to crush them.

‘My father’s alive. I could use some help.’

‘That’s why I’m here.’

‘What are you do –’

They were in a swirling bubble of pure magick. It felt like they were swimming in it, but he could breathe and he did not feel wet. The bubble looked as if it would pop with the slightest bump but as the timbers around them shattered and the brass plates bent, the bubble remained intact. A dull, red darkness enveloped them and Gerriod knew, he was back in the Endless.

## Chapter Fifteen The Empty Isle

Wrapped up in thought, Pylos stood still as he watched Sela and her fellow Tamuans take to the sky. He did not enjoy sending her on such a dangerous mission, but everything that day was dangerous and he had to stop the carnage the skies had dropped upon them.

‘Do whatever you can to take down those ships,’ he had said to her and then she was gone, along with ten of her bravest compatriots. He watched them soar up into the sky until they vanished in the clouds that swirled around the hulls of the vast skyships.

As the battle continued to unfold around him, he kept looking up to the skyships, daring to hope that she could do what he asked. His face was grim. They could not win the battle whilst the skyships owned the skies.

As the ships began their earthbound descent, euphoric cheers broke out amongst the Myrran troops. It was not until the first of the vessels slammed into Usnach, that Pylos let himself smile. It was a grand sight to see so many ships brought down at once. For a short time, the ships had hung in the air like crooked paintings on an invisible wall, but they did not stay there long. The Myrrans looked up in wonder as each of the airborne behemoths fell ponderously to its end. Those that fell into the ocean soon disappeared with only a temporary swell in the surrounding water to mark their passing. The ships that hit the frozen land had a much more dramatic effect. Timber and metal slammed down upon the island sending up a thick cloud of snow and ice. Although most of the Ghul managed to get out of the path of the falling skyships, many lumbering Cabal were not so fortunate. The fallen Caquikki fleet took out more of Caliban’s monsters than the Myrrans could hope to defeat.

Some of the skyships’ balloons were still intact and into these Tuirrenian archers fired volleys of flaming arrows. The air still trapped inside the balloons was set alight and fantastic balls of flame erupted across the Ghul ranks incinerating hundreds of soldiers at once.

‘That’s the end of the Caquikki,’ said Jehenna as she sidled up to Pylos.

‘Yes. It’s what the traitors deserved,’ he replied.

Traitor. The word hung heavily between them. Although neither of them said anything, they both thought of Maeldune. Both were relieved when Sela swooped down from above to report to Pylos.

‘General, all ships are accounted for but one,’ she said proudly, hovering in the air before him.

As appreciative as Pylos was, he had to ask the question on his mind. ‘You could not take down the lead ship?’

‘The mariner is up there. He’s still alive,’ she said quickly. ‘He means to stopper the breach with the ship.’

‘Gerriod’s still alive?’

‘I can fly to him,’ Sela offered, ‘but I’m afraid I’m too weak to fight – there are Ghul aboard that ship.’

‘I will go,’ said Jehenna purposefully, but before she could take a step towards Sela, she was intercepted.

‘No Jehenna, you will not,’ Lara Brand said as she rose up on her tail so she could reach Sela’s sky snorse. ‘With all due respect, I have a better chance of bringing down that ship and saving the mariner.’

To prove her point, Lara gave a wave of her hand and a roiling ball of fire came into existence immediately. She threw the ball into the air and it grew as it flew out over the breach and slammed into a thick crowd of Ghul on the other side. Sela, Pylos and Jehenna were all taken aback by the witch’s prowess. As if to answer the question each one of them was thinking, Lara said, ‘I’ve been practising.’

Without waiting for Jehenna’s approval, Lara carefully placed her hands around Sela’s waist and hoisted herself onto the sky snorse’s back. As they two of them were carried up into the sky, Jehenna said, ‘I don’t remember her being so tough, do you?’

Pylos shook his head. ‘No, but I wouldn’t want to argue with her now.’

As they stared at Lara’s attack on the great ship, Pylos could hardly contain his ebullience. When the balloon over its bow exploded his right hand raised his sword up high to signal to his troops that victory was still within their grasp. He clenched his left hand in triumph only to find that Jehenna’s fingers had entwined with his.

‘Ow!’ she said. ‘You almost broke my fingers.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I didn’t realise they were there.’

‘Well, I put them there,’ she retorted, rubbing her fingers.

He nodded, unsure of what to say next. After a long, embarrassed silence, he said, ‘Is it always going to be this awkward?’

She grinned. ‘Relax, Pylos. In a few hours, it might not matter anyway.’

He took her hand back and held it softly. They said nothing as they watched the prow of the massive skyship pitch forward at a steep angle

and begin its final voyage. It was not long before the ship had slammed into the sides of breach, dragging with it countless Ghul who were clambering up to the surface. The entire island shook and many troops lost their footing as the great vessel came to a halt halfway down the crevasse, like a lump of food caught in a giant's throat.

The unexpected turn of events was not enough to distract the Pryderi coven from their relentless incantation. They were safe in their cocoon of magick, ignorant of the ebb and flow of the battle. The heavy clouds they summoned remained overhead, blotting out the distant sun.

Disguised as a Ghul soldier, Addison Cole had walked among Caliban's troops all day but she did not fight with them.

She made her way into the coven at the eastern end of the island. The witches did not even acknowledge her presence.

'Where is Arinna Brine?' she screamed, but they did not answer her. Their full attention was upon the spell they had cast over the island. Without their magick, the Ghul would burn, and they would pay. Their children would pay. And Arinna would be angry. They continued to chant the incantation.

But Addison Cole was in no mood to be ignored. She took hold of the nearest witch and shook her. 'Tell me where Arinna is!'

The witch slowly turned her eyes to the Morgai but did not focus upon her. It was as if she had been woken from a heavy sleep. She looked blankly at Addison but said nothing. She then closed her eyes and resumed chanting.

Addison was furious. She extended a withered hand, lay it on the Moraen's chest and drained the colour from her skin. Just as she had done to Claudia Kallady back on Cephalonia, Addison had turned her victim into stone, trapping her mind within.

On the far side of the island, a ray of sunlight broke through the cloud and set fire to a group of Ghul grenadiers who had been picking their needleback spikes from their paralysed victims.

Addison saw the sunlight appear and watched it fade as the clouds squeezed back together.

'I'll find her myself,' she muttered.

'Pylos, what is that?' Pedaues asked as he pointed to the east.

'What is what?'



‘What is *that*?’

In the sea beyond the island’s eastern coastline massive shapes appeared, slowly moving through the sea mists.

‘I don’t believe it,’ he gasped. ‘The Hulks.’

‘Do you think they’re on our side?’ Jehenna said even more apprehensively than before.

The massive prison boats slid up to the frozen shore. At the bow of the first ship to make land appeared a thickset man whose forehead shone in the light of the lantern in his hand.

‘I don’t believe it!’ Jehenna gasped.

‘Please tell me it’s good news,’ Pedaeus pleaded.

‘Well that really depends,’ Jehenna quipped.

‘Who is it?’

‘It’s Gunther Ross.’

‘I thought you could use some help,’ Gunther said as he sauntered up to Pylos who stood amazed as thousands of prisoners disembarked from the boats. They were some of the meanest-looking individuals Pylos had ever seen, but he didn’t care. If they were willing to fight, they were welcome.

‘They’ll find plenty of weapons among the dead,’ Pylos said bluntly. ‘They’re welcome to whatever they find, just as long as they use it on the Ghul.’

Gunther chuckled. He ran his hand up to his head and lovingly touched his new metal-work. Instead of the slightly rusting steel he once wore across his forehead, he now had a thicker strip of dark metal, shaped in a spike. Similar spikes stuck out of his shoulders, back and chest.

‘You’ve had some work done,’ Pylos said, trying to sound impressed.

‘Shatterstone, no less!’ Gunther said proudly.

‘You look like a cross between a Tamuan and a Kheperan,’ Pylos laughed.

‘You watch your tongue Pylos,’ Gunther smirked.

‘Shouldn’t you be dead?’

‘Probably. I had a bit of luck and they didn’t execute me.’

‘Luck?’

‘Yes. Do you remember the Magistrate called the Stretcher?’

‘I do.’

‘Well, he’s the one who took me in. It’s true what they say. He does have a rack and he does cut off people’s legs!’

‘But you’re here now! What happened?’

'I'm six foot. I was strapped to his table but failing to be longer or shorter than the rack, I escaped torture and execution. They just dropped me in the dankest, darkest cell on the Hulks and forgot about me. But I have friends. I demanded to see the Warden.'

'Of course!' exclaimed Pylos. Barbarossa. He had taken over the wardenship of the Hulks.

'I managed to talk him into letting me assume command of the prisons. I brought them here.'

'I'm glad you came.'

'Don't get sentimental on me Pylos. I didn't come here for you. I've got some unfinished business to attend to. These monsters must pay for what they have done.'

Gunther did not stay to watch the rest of the prisoners disembark. He looked over the bloody field and ran to where the fighting was at its thickest. When he got to the breach, he dropped his head and sprinted across one of the bridges, impaling Ghul on the shatterstone spike he bore on his head.

Arinna, Lucetious and Lokasenna could see the battle wasn't going as planned. Caliban had underestimated his opponents' resourcefulness and guile. The Myrrans were well-equipped with shatterstone, the Caquikki ships were all brought down, the Cabal had all but been defeated, and the recent arrival of the Hulks had bolstered the Myrran forces in such a way that it looked as though they had a chance of winning.

'This would be a shameful defeat,' Lokasenna said. 'I will enter the fray and do what I can, but I fear our end is at hand.'

'No,' said Lucetious. 'We still have more to throw at the overworlders! We have not used—'

'Then it is time to use *them*!' Lokasenna snapped. 'They should have been here from the start.'

Lucetious tried to smile but he could not achieve the effect he was hoping for. 'Your father does not believe in using all his pieces at once.'

'That might be wise when you're playing games,' Lokasenna barked, 'but we're about to die out here. We're about to die for him!'

Arinna shrugged. 'Perhaps you lack the mettle needed for this conflict, Lokasenna. Our end is not at hand. The Caquikki ship is simply blocking the breach and has delayed *their* arrival. I will move it.'

She looked down at a Ghul grenadier by Lucetious' side. 'You – come with me. Whilst I am conducting the spell to remove the ship, I may need some protection. You will watch over me.'

The grenadier snuck a look at Lucetious who nodded to approve of the arrangement: 'Go with her. Do what she asks. We need that ship out of the breach.'

As the witch slithered off followed by the Ghul soldier, Lokasenna's eyes narrowed and her burnt lips curled up in a snarl. It seemed her hatred of all Myrrans extended to Arinna as well.

Semiramus was in charge of the Helyan troops and he had led them flawlessly all day. They had killed all the Cabal but one and it was proving to be a most difficult foe to vanquish. It was the clawed creature that had burst through the ice behind the Kompirans and Susanese.

With the support of the Black Shields, Semiramus had attacked it with just about every weapon they had brought to Usnach. Swords bounced off its thick hide, as did spears, scimitars and lances. Arrows, crossbows bolts and throwing stars were similarly impotent against it. Anyone who got close to the creature was quickly mutilated in a flurry of snapping claws. Semiramus had tried to catch the creature in ropes but these were shredded like cobwebs.

All he could do was retreat. He was tired of retreating.

Despite the fury with which Pylos wielded his shatterstone sword, the Ghul kept coming. He hacked away at them, revelling in the acrid smell of their burning bodies, but he knew he couldn't maintain his effort. Sooner or later, he would collapse and the Ghul would tear him apart.

That is, if the approaching beast didn't get him first.

Semiramus looked over at Pylos who was clearly unaware of the monster behind him. Its many claws hummed as they drove it forward over a thick carpet of flesh.

'Gen... gen... gen...' Semiramus tried to say but he couldn't get the word out. He had to try something else. 'P... p... p...' He had as much chance of getting out the word *Pylos* as he had with the word *General*.

The clawed juggernaut was almost upon Pylos who continued to fight on oblivious to what approached him from behind.

Semiramus had no choice. He picked up a chunk of ice and threw it at his general. His aim was true and the missile smacked into Pylos' skull.

Despite all his grave wounds, and the press of the Ghul around him, Pylos spun around and glared at Semiramus. 'Why did you do that?'

Semiramus pointed at the massive beast behind them.

Pylos quickly reached down and pulled a knife from his belt and threw it at the creature. The blade spun in the air and sliced through the small pair of eyes that poked out the top of its shell.

The creature died instantly but its highly charged nervous system continued to operate. It kept coming. Pylos leapt up onto the creature's back and watched it cut through the Ghul he had been fighting.

When the clawed behemoth finally stopped moving, Pylos walked up to Semiramus and said, 'Lieutenant, if we live through this, I want you to promise me that you'll have that stutter seen to.'

'I pr... pr...pr...'

'Promise?'

Semiramus nodded his head vigorously. 'That was am...amazing General! How did you manage to slice both its eyes off with one throw?'

Pylos grinned as he recollected Gerriod Blake laughing at his poor aim many months ago in the Stone Forest, when he had tried to kill a single swiggu and missed the entire flock. 'Actually Semiramus, I was aiming at its head.'

Arinna stood at the edge of the breach and gazed at the wreckage below. When she was a child she dreamed of great magick but never imagined she would be able to perform it. She breathed deeply and let the mystical energies surge through her veins. She felt it in every pore. From the ends of her hair to the tip of her tail, she could taste the raw, dark power the *Incanto* had given her. She let it take her and she became the magick.

The metal screamed and the timbers groaned as Arinna Brine lifted the massive vessel from its grave. It rose as if suspended by its balloons. Once it had cleared the breach she gave a nonchalant wave of her hand and threw it out to sea.

When the magick was done she became acutely aware of movement behind her. She spun around to find Lokasenna Hagen standing behind her with a knife in her hand. At her feet lay the Ghul grenadier who did not even get the chance to use the needleback spine he carried.

Lokasenna thrust the blade forward until her fist rested against Arinna's stomach.

Arinna raised an eyebrow and smiled. 'You hope to kill me... with *that*?'

Lokasenna looked down to find she was holding a feather, not a knife.

'Stupid Morgai!' Arinna laughed. 'I have become so much more than you now. You thought to disguise yourself as Caliban's daughter so you could approach me. I have been aware of you and your murderous thoughts all day.'

Arinna gave a flourish of her fingers and Lokasenna's burnt features faded from Addison's body. Arinna sneered to see such a small, frail-looking old woman standing in front of her.

'What?' Addison gasped. 'Have you grown so powerful?'

'Yes Addison – I have.'

'You arrogant pup! I brought you the *Incanto*. I gave you this power.'

'Then you should appreciate the irony of your death. You should have listened to Lilith Cortese. She warned you about coming here, but foolishly you thought you were powerful enough to thwart destiny. You're not.'

Arinna didn't even give Addison a chance to respond. She held out her hand and Addison fell to the frozen ground, writhing in agony. Her shape kept shifting through all the guises she had worn in her lifetime. Arinna recognised Bormanus and Jehenna, but was intrigued by the number of forms the old woman had taken. Addison rolled about, trying to shake the pain that consumed her. She felt every change, felt the skin ripping and her bones warping. When she finally died, her skin just faded to white and peeled from her body like a leper's.

So rapturous was Arinna in her victory over the Morgai, she failed to notice the needleback spine lying on the ground next to the fallen Ghul. She did not even feel its scratch. But when her body began to stiffen, consumed by the paralysis the spine induced, there was nothing her magick could do to stop it.

The breach no longer marked the separation of the opposing sides. The fighting had spread out to all corners of the island. With no more Cabal to combat, the battle shifted back to the Myrrans. Armed with shatterstone swords they ploughed through lines of Ghul, whittling away the numbers opposing them.

‘Could it be?’ Jehenna panted as she cut her way through to Pylos. ‘Could it be we might just win?’

‘We are almost spent. But we still live.’

Jehenna glanced back towards the east and her face dropped. ‘Wait. It’s not over.’

From out of the breach came the Kobolds. They were armed.

‘By the gods, no,’ Pylos said falling to his knees. He rested his head upon the pommel of his sword. ‘No.’

And in the moments to follow, Pylos’ fears were shown to be well-founded. A Sapphyrran standing at the western edge of the breach extended his long arms towards one of the Kobolds in a gesture of fellowship. In one fluid motion the Kobold pulled the double-headed axe up from his side, swung it around in a wide arc and took off the Sapphyrran’s head.

Jehenna dropped her sword in disbelief. ‘We cannot survive this.’

The Kobolds marched through the remaining Sapphyrran ranks without pause. They were met with no resistance but that did not stop them from killing every single one of them. There was no malice in their blows, there was no passion and there was no mercy.

There were thousands of them. Every Kobold living marched across the Empty Isle, slaughtering any Myrran foolish enough to stand in their way. They were not vulnerable to shatterstone. They were not vulnerable to the sun. The only thing they were vulnerable to was the goodness in their souls but that had been taken from their bodies by Succellos and she would not be giving it back.

Pylos couldn’t kill them. Jehenna couldn’t kill them. The criminals who had been brought in on the Hulks thought nothing of slaying the Kobolds, but they did not have the numbers to oppose them.

Pylos looked around. His ranks were broken. All was lost. Most of his friends were dead. Most of his countrymen were dead. No more than a hundred Myrrans still breathed on Usnach. Pedaeus still breathed. Jehenna still breathed. Sela still breathed. And that was it. He didn’t know anyone else still alive.

As the Kobolds closed in, watched closely by the Ghul behind them, one soldier – a Helyan – threw down his sword in surrender. He dropped to his knees before the Kobolds and begged them to let him live.

Pylos burst forward crying, ‘No! We will not ask for mercy! We will not ask for mercy!’

He ran to the soldier and picked him up. He was just a boy. 'I'm sorry son,' he said sadly to the youth who was staring fearfully and the Kobolds and Ghul closing in. 'We can not ask for mercy. They have none to give.'

Pylos didn't even see the flat of the axe blade that was brought down upon his head.

Lucetious stepped forward. 'Do you remember me Pylos Castalia?'

Pylos sneered, 'You all look the same to me.'

'Your wit is wasted upon me General,' Lucetious said as he divested Pylos of his shatterstone sword and tossed it away. 'You are beaten. It is over. Your lands are Caliban's now.'

Pylos sneered. 'It is not over whilst I breathe.'

'Then breathe your last. None of you will be shown any mercy. You will all suffer the humiliation of dying at the hands of your own.'

The Myrrans were made to kneel on the frozen ground. Their hands and legs were bound with strips of clothing torn from the dead. The Kobolds stepped forward, their axes dripping with the Myrran blood they had already spilled.

Pylos refused to die so submissively. It had taken four Kobolds to pin him to the ground. He had struggled to the end. He could do nothing more but lie on his back and wait for death. A Kobold, perhaps a little older than the rest, planted a foot on Pylos' chest and raised his axe for the killing blow.

## Chapter Sixteen The Endless

‘I call him Tiberius.’ Samuel Melkin carefully stroked the small animal that nestled in his lap.

‘What is it?’ asked Trypp, amazed that Melkin would be prepared to touch such a dangerous-looking creature.

‘It’s one of the few creatures the Ghul have bothered to name down here. It’s called a needleback, for obvious reasons.’ He needlessly pointed at the long, white spikes running down the creature’s back. ‘You wouldn’t want to touch these. Apparently one prick from the spikes will throw a person into a paralysis. The Ghul use them as weapons.’

‘Aren’t you scared patting it?’ Trypp said nervously.

Melkin gave him an odd look, as if the question was irrelevant to their conversation. ‘Scared? Now there’s a thought. I can’t really say I’m scared of anything anymore. Besides, this little beast is nothing to be afraid of. It’s just a baby. When it grows to your size, maybe then I’ll be scared.’

The needleback lifted its head, yawned then lay back down. Despite its appearance, it was clear to Trypp that Melkin cared for the creature.

‘Where did it come from? Why haven’t I seen it till now?’

‘Its burrow lies somewhere underneath us. When I was first thrown down here, it would come out and sniff around me and retreat back into its hole. The day you arrived, it disappeared, probably frightened by your appearance.’

Trypp raised an eyebrow. ‘It is frightened of me?’

‘They’re quite timid creatures, but worth getting to know,’ Melkin said with a mischievous grin. ‘I think they’ll come a time when we will be happy we made Tiberius’ acquaintance.’

Somehow Gerriod and Lara had survived. Whilst all around them had shattered apart, Lara’s protective bubble had remained intact. Her strained face reflected all the effort it took to maintain the spell in the midst of so much chaos. By contrast, Gerriod’s face was statuesque in its serene stillness. For the first time in months he had hope and though it was only a sliver, it was enough to give him a reason to keep going. A reason to endure. He now had the one thing all mariners needed – a direction – and at the point of Gerriod’s compass was his father.



The suffuse red light of the Endless bled through the broken timbers beneath them. They had fallen far. The breach lay around them like a clenched fist, holding the crumpled mass of brass and wood in its fingers, unwilling to let it go.

‘Where to from here?’ Lara asked weakly as the mystical bubble surrounding them disappeared, leaving them unprotected in the midst of the unstable wreckage. The sound of cracking timber informed them that this was no place they could stay.

‘We go down. Into the Endless,’ Gerriod said with steely determination.

‘I was hoping you would say that.’

Whilst it was not difficult to extract themselves from the ship, their departure from the wreckage was not without incident.

At one point, Gerriod had thought he had snagged his leg on something. Looking down to see what it was, he was presented with the sight of a thin pale hand clutching him around the ankle. The Ghul soldier the hand was attached to lay buried under a thick, splintered beam. Whilst the soldier was in a wretched state, his hand held Gerriod in a fierce embrace. Gerriod looked around frantically for something to free his leg from the ghoulish finger wrapped around it. To his left a thin sheet of brass capping had torn free of the joist it had covered. It was only a small strip, but it would be enough.

Gerriod rammed the brass sheet down upon the hand. It sheared straight through the Ghul’s wrist, severing the hand cleanly.

Gerriod took a step to leave, but a short squeal from Lara made him pause. He spun around to see her eyes wide open, staring at the hand he had just cut off. It lay upside down, its open palm facing them. The fingers twitched and then the hand started clutching at the air. Then, in an unexpected spasm, it flipped itself over so that it rested on its fingers. Suddenly the hand exploded into movement, scurrying across the timbers like a fleshy, white insect. It moved towards Gerriod and when it was within a foot of him, it jumped forward onto his robe. The mariner was too stunned to do anything, and the hand quickly crawled up his tattered clothes towards his exposed neck.

Fortunately before it got too close, Lara cast a spell that enveloped the hand in a ball of flame that neither burnt Gerriod nor the surrounding timbers. As the incinerated hand curled up into a pile of ashes, Gerriod smiled appreciatively to his companion.

‘Thank-you,’ he said. ‘I’m glad you’re on my side.’

'My pleasure,' she replied. And she meant it. After so many months of repressed anger and absolute fear, it felt good to be on the offensive. They were taking the fight to Caliban. They were taking control. It was a strange feeling, unlike anything she had ever experienced before. For the first time in her life Lara Brand felt... confident.

Gerriod and Lara were no strangers to the peculiar creatures the Ghul used as boats, so the sight of such a vessel moored to a nearby pier made them both smile.

As Lara slithered into the boat, Gerriod untied the vine the Ghul had lashed around the thick piece of bone that served as a bollard on the pier. Within moments the boat moved off into the crimson darkness and all Lara and Gerriod could hear was the sound of its long limbs stroking the water.

They never heard the sound of marching that slowly filled the cavern behind them.

Trypp could not remember the last time he had eaten. Neither could Melkin. It seemed the Ghul were no longer interested in keeping the pair alive. Beneath the carapace of his shell, his body was withering away. His skin had changed colour dramatically and hung loosely from his bones. His eyes were empty wells

'There's something going on,' said Melkin. 'They're distracted.'

'I can still hear noises up there,' Trypp said in a whisper. 'I think they've just left a couple of Ghul to mind us.'

Melkin's gaunt head lolled to one side. 'I think it's now time you left me.'

Trypp's face became a portrait of sadness. 'I'm not sure I can.'

'You have to. Otherwise, hundreds of shatterbugs will have died in vain.'

Trypp was unsure whether this statement reflected sympathy or insanity.

Melkin reached into his private recess and extracted the iron hat containing the shatterbug goo. 'I'm not sure it will be adequate.'

Trypp looked into the makeshift bowl. 'It shall suffice.'

He dipped his hands into the shatterbug slime and applied it to his skin. There was more than enough to cover his hands and feet. He tested its properties on the wall beside him. His hand stuck firmly. A slight tug

and it tore free of the smooth wall accompanied by a satisfying, sucking noise. 'It will hold me,' he said happily.

'Of course it will,' Melkin chided him. 'Now leave. Go save the world or whatever it is you were doing when you came down here.'

'I'll come back for you. I promise.'

'I know you will, Trypp Elan,' Melkin said with a smile. His face had changed. The madness in his eyes had faded. His smile was not the lunatic grin that had first welcomed Trypp to the pit. It was one of tenderness.

Trypp scuttled up the wall with ease. With a sense of irony, he remembered the day upon the Skyfall when he had almost fallen from the cliffs to avoid crushing a shatterbug that had landed on the thin ledge he was intending to use as a handhold. A lot had changed in that time. He had changed and the shatterbugs – once a benign source of beauty – were believed to be the means by which Caliban had spied on the Myrrans and kept in motion his cruel plans.

'Scree! Look! The blue one's trying to escape!'

Trypp had been spotted by one of the Ghul left behind to guard the pit, but he didn't stop climbing. He didn't have to. He had Melkin watching his back.

Two Ghul appeared at the edge of the pit high above with crossbows fixed on Trypp. As soon as they appeared, Melkin slung a volley of small, needleback spikes at the pair. Although most of the spikes missed their intended targets, two hit and that was all that was needed to administer the paralysing poison each spike contained. The Ghul's stiff bodies toppled over the lip of the pit and moments later slammed into the hard rock floor at the base of the hole.

'Oh look Tiberius,' Melkin said, turning to the needleback that lay at his feet. 'We have visitors!'

Trypp made his way down the passageway. He walked carefully, listening out for any sign of Ghul, but there was nothing to be heard. It seemed the Endless was empty.

When he was dragged to the pit after suffering a comprehensive beating at the hands of the Ghul, he noted all the activity occurring in almost every chamber he passed. He had seen Ghul mounted on skitteriks dragging weapons and supplies down to the docks to be loaded into the strange boat-shaped creatures he had seen on the Nessian Sea. He had even caught a glimpse of a cavern where a number of huge behemoths slept behind massive bars of bone.

But now, there was nothing to be seen, other than empty chambers and deserted pathways. Although he was pleased to be able to make his way through the Endless unopposed, the emptiness was unsettling. Somewhere Caliban's forces had massed and it filled him with dread to think of the world above sullied by the presence of such vile creatures.

He passed the vast wharf he had noticed months ago when the Ghul had dragged him at the end of a rope down the dim avenues of Caliban's realm. The wharf too was devoid of life. Not a boat remained, nor was a single Ghul left behind to guard the area.

Trypp sat down on a rock and picked up a shard of bone to scrape away the shatterbug goo that still lay on his hands and feet. The goo was slowing him down and the sucking sound each of his feet made as he walked across the rock threatened to alert anyone who remained in the Endless that he was approaching.

As he sat there, he became aware of a sickening but familiar smell. It was the same rotten odour that he had experienced when he and Gerriod emerged from the dark lake at the bottom of the Worldpool.

A warm orange light floated down the passage ahead and Trypp dived behind a collection of boulders that lay on the side of the subterranean road. The light drifted closer and it was exactly what he feared – a cloud of shatterbugs. It seemed odd to fear such a small, peaceful creature after all the dangers he had faced, but the last thing he needed was for Caliban to know that he had escaped from the pit.

Trypp abandoned the main passageway and followed a narrower route that led in the general direction he wanted to take. He was led by his sense of smell. The stench that had greeted him upon his arrival in the Endless hung thickly in the air. Similarly thick was the sound of the surging torrent of the Worldpool. He was not far from the underground lake. He had no idea how he was going to find Caliban, but the lake seemed like a good place to start.

On his way down this passage, he passed an opening in the wall that led down to a small grotto. He could hear the sound of water flowing through this chamber and it was soothing when compared to the tumultuous roar coming from the cavern up ahead. Then he heard something else. It was a groan but it was not an animal nor was it the Ghul.

In the centre of the grotto, two large bones had been set in the rock, crossing over one another so that they formed the shape of a X. Upon

this crude structure, an old man had been tied with hempen rope. His body was covered in lacerations. The cuts were so fresh, they continued to bleed. Although Trypp had never met the man, he knew exactly who it was. He had stumbled upon Gerriod's father.

Fortunately, there were no signs of any shatterbugs that would reveal his presence to Caliban. Walking slowly in case he alert any Ghul that were nearby, Trypp gazed curiously at the old man's prison. Gerriod had described to him in gruesome detail the creature Caliban had used to keep Gamelyn in perpetual torment, but there was no sign the serpentine beast – only the marks of where it had bitten into Gamelyn's frail body.

'Captain Blake?' he said tentatively as he approached.

The old man did not move.

'Captain?'

'Gerriod?'

Gamelyn lifted his head slowly to face Trypp. His haggard features could not disguise the optimism in his eyes as he raised his face nor could they disguise his disappointment he experienced when he realised his visitor was not his son.

'I'm sorry,' Trypp said. 'Your son is... not with me. I know him, but I do not know where he is.'

Gamelyn nodded sadly as he adjusted to the situation. 'I see. Do you know if he is safe?'

'I'm sorry sir. I cannot answer your question. Many months ago, he was here with me – here to bring you home – but now... I just don't know.'

Gamelyn said nothing as he took in this news. Then, after a long pause, his face brightened and a knowing grin spread across his broken lips. 'He's a tough boy. He will be here soon enough. But you, Master Sapphyrran, why are you here? This is far too dark a place for someone like you,' Gamelyn said hoarsely.

'My name is Trypp Elan, sir, and I do not intend to stay long. Here, let me cut you down from there.'

Trypp had been carrying the shard of bone he had used to scrape off the shatterbug goo and it made light work of the old ropes the Ghul had used when they had fixed Gamelyn to his crucifix.

Gamelyn fell into his arms. Trypp was amazed at how light he was. He was no heavier than a child. 'Here sir, let me carry you out of this dreadful place.'

Gamelyn shook a hand frantically, as if Trypp's idea was a terrible one. 'No! No! No! Sit me here upon the ground and lean my back against my cross and let me die.'

Trypp shook his head demonstrably. 'No. You're not dying. I won't let you sit here and fade away.'

'That is very admirable of you, but the decision is not yours to make,' Gamelyn said with a humourless laugh.

'We can bandage your wounds. You can be healed.'

Gamelyn smiled at what he took to be endearing naïveté. 'If only it were that simple, Trypp.' He took a deep breath before continuing. 'For thirty long years I have been lashed to that cross by –'

'Gerriod told me about the serpent that kept you here,' Trypp interrupted. It was not in his nature to cut someone off in the middle of speech, but he wanted the old man to save his energy for more important matters – such as escaping the Endless. 'But it has released you now. The beast is gone and you still live.'

Gamelyn held Trypp in a firm gaze. 'And you intend to walk out of here, with me in your arms.'

'Yes.'

'But that's not the only reason you came to the Endless, is it Trypp Elan?'

'No.'

'Then you must go to do what must be done.' Gamelyn smiled anticipating Trypp's next question before the Sapphyrran had a chance to open his mouth. 'I know you are here to kill Caliban. If you have been careful, and I am sure you have been, he will not know of your escape... yet. You must move quickly. You cannot be hampered by an old man who has not walked for many years. Seek out Caliban and do what you set out to do.'

Trypp shook his head and his snowy white hair swished from side to side. 'I can't leave you. I have already left someone behind, someone who helped me escape from the pit I was thrown in. I can't walk away.'

Gamelyn reached up and patted Trypp on the side of the neck in a paternal fashion. 'You are a good person Trypp. I can see that. You would walk from one end of the world to the other just to save a single soul. But there are other lives at stake here. Countless lives.'

Trypp's broad brow furrowed. 'We once left someone behind. A Spriggan by the name of Mulupo. He fell into Caliban's hands and was handed over to Succellos because we didn't have the courage to stay when we should have.'

'This isn't a matter of courage Trypp. It's a matter of wisdom, as I'm sure it was when you abandoned the Spriggan. If you need a reason to leave me behind, use him. If you cared for him at all, or for Gerriod, or for the gentle folk of Skyfall Town, put an end to the chaos that Caliban has created.'

Trypp studied Gamelyn's face. It was an interesting face, rugged but kind. Though they were misty, his eyes sparkled with the same determination that Gerriod's did.

'Very well, Captain Blake. I will do as you ask. I will leave you for now. Hide yourself away but do not go far. When my business is done, I will return for you and together we will find your son.'

## Chapter Seventeen The Endless

Trypp made his way across through the Ghul village. It was abandoned. A perverse cottage made of maritime wreckage rested on a small hill overlooking the village and Trypp knew this would be Caliban's abode. His heart quickened as he contemplated a confrontation. The Sapphyrro held all life as sacred. In Skyfall Town it was an easy ideal to uphold, but in the crimson light of the Endless, things did not seem so defined. Would he kill Caliban? Would he take a life to save many?

Had not Remiel made that very mistake? He had temporarily forsaken his principles for the greater good. And as a result the world had been plunged into chaos.

Trypp did not know the answer. He wanted to close his eyes and lose himself in a dream that would bring him back to a world of blue waters and tall cliffs where the only black shapes that appeared in the sky were those of kestra and haaks soaring above the Skyfall in the warm light of day. But no such dreams would come. They belonged to a different time.

Remiel had remained in the cavern where he had been reunited with his twin, held firmly in place by his father's statue. Little had changed. Cribella still hung in the centre of the cavern and the shatterbugs still fluttered above, although there were fewer of them now. Many had flown to Usnach so that Remiel could watch the fall of the Myr with his brother by his side.

Remiel on the other hand had changed much since he was taken captive. He had not eaten in weeks. His body had faded away to little more than a collection of bones wrapped in sallow skin. His face was gaunt, partly due to the loss of weight but also because he felt nothing but despair as he watched the terrible battle unfold in the countless facets of Cribella's abdomen.

Caliban had dispensed of his Pryderi guard. He did not need them. Arinna had cast a protection spell over him – in the unlikely event that Remiel found the strength to use his Morgai abilities, Caliban would be unharmed. He could feel her protective energies upon his skin, a mystical suit of armour that Remiel's Morgai powers could not hope to penetrate.

Caliban had not left the cavern since the battle had begun. He was delirious with excitement as he watched the twists and turns of the confrontation on the frozen island to the north. He provided Remiel with



a comprehensive commentary of the conflict, occasionally breaking out into obscenities whenever the battle shifted momentarily towards the Myrrans.

Over Remiel's neck and shoulders Caliban had draped the serpentine beast that had fed on Gamelyn Blake's blood for so many years. Remiel's skin had been punctured so often by the creature, it was caked in a layer of dry blood that occasionally cracked to reveal small but deep wounds.

Remiel was finding it hard to focus upon the images that danced upon Cribella's shimmering skin. Caliban had struck his brother many times across the face and Remiel's battered eyes barely opened at all under the weight of their bruising.

Occasionally he caught a glimpse of Pylos, Jehenna and other heroes who refused to buckle under the weight of opposition, but Cribella's facets had increasingly displayed depictions of good people dying and it was almost impossible to look upon the scenes without a sickening sense of dread.

Tilting his head to one side Remiel glowered at his brother. 'I have seen enough Caliban. Kill me now. It is over.'

Caliban feigned concern. 'Oh please don't look at me that way Remiel. You make me feel terrible.' He cackled with glee to see his brother breaking. Soon he would be nothing more than a husk.

Caliban separated Remiel's robes so that his torso lay bare. He walked over to where a long spear of bone rested against the cavern wall. It was no coincidence the weapon was there. Caliban had planned the day down to the finest detail. What happened next was not a cruel act of whimsy – it was a pre-mediated act design to further crush his brother's spirit.

He held the spear in his hand and rested on it as he would lean upon his staff. He knew Remiel was waiting for his next move and he drew the moment out with poorly suppressed glee. Then with a swiftness that seemed beyond him, Caliban lowered the spear and rammed it under Remiel's rib cage. Remiel bit hard on his lip so that his cry of pain would not escape his lips. A thin spout of blood shot from the wound. Caliban dropped the spear and picked up a goblet that was sitting at the base of Gideon Grayson's statue. He thrust the goblet over the hole he had made and within seconds his chalice was filled with his brother's blood.

The green beast that Caliban had slung around Remiel's neck slithered about on his torso so that one of its coils lay under the fresh wound. One of the creature's many mouths opened and a small pink tongue flicked out to lap up the blood running down from the incision Caliban had made.

Caliban swirled the blood around the goblet like a fine red wine. 'Perhaps I might be lucky and get a taste of the Morgai power that has been running through your veins all these years.' He laughed and raised the cup up high. 'To fraternity.'

In an obscene gesture, he endeavoured to swallow the contents of the chalice, but much of it ran down the pitted skin of his chin. Caliban winced at the taste of it but kept his mouth open under the upended cup. He gulped as he swallowed the last of the blood, struggling to get it down his throat. 'Well what do you know – it is thicker than water.'

Remiel's eyes showed only disgust. He opened his parched mouth to speak and the dark green beast around his neck quivered as if agitated. A number of its mouths snarled but it did not bite him.

'You want to say something don't you?' Caliban hissed.

Remiel grimaced as he tried to find the strength to speak.

'What do you want to say to me brother?'

'How did you become such an impure thing?' Remiel groaned.

'Impure Remiel? Are we not alike in that? Every creature you see on and under the Myr is nothing more than impurity. The stuff of which we are made, each element that has been brought together to compose our bodies, is nothing more than a cancer upon the void. They say that only emptiness is pure Remiel, and if that is true, then I have the purest heart of all.'

Remiel had no response. There was nothing to say. Caliban no longer resembled the man he once knew. He no longer resembled a man.

Having found Caliban's cottage deserted, Trypp made his way down to the black lake at the heart of the Endless. There was something about the cavern that compelled him to explore it. He couldn't say what it was but he was drawn to it. Something there was calling out to him. He considered that he was experiencing the onset of madness, but he knew he couldn't leave the Endless until he had returned to the lake that had caught him when he had fallen into Caliban's world.

It had not been hard to find. The crashing downpour from the Worldpool and the foul-smelling odour coming from the eggs encircling the lake lay down a path easier to follow than a paved road.

When he entered the cast cavern, there was no sign of Succellos and no sign of Caliban. The great space was empty.

He sat down on the deserted dais and considered his situation. An overwhelming sense of disappointment rose up within his breast.

‘There’s nothing here,’ he muttered to the lake lapping the stones at the edge of the dais. ‘Perhaps I am going mad after all.’

He decided that he should not waste any more time on thought, not whilst Gamelyn Blake and Samuel Melkin were awaiting his return. He would find them and lead them up into the sunlight. He had failed in his mission but his discovery of these two souls was more than enough for the Sapphyrran to feel that his efforts were not in vain.

He stood to leave but something on the edge of his hearing made him pause. There was a sound that could be heard amidst the tumult of the torrent crashing down upon the lake. It was not a voice, nor was it the sound of an animal. Oddly, it hummed. It had been there when he and Gerriod emerged from the lake months ago but he had failed to register it.

And yet, there was nothing in sight that would produce such a sound. Nothing but the strange eggs that encircled the lake. Gerriod had said something about the eggs when he spoke in the Cloud Chamber a year ago. A lifetime ago.

As Trypp approached the eggs the noxious smell grew more potent and the buzzing grew louder. Trying to stifle the urge to vomit, Trypp knelt down beside one of the eggs and placed his large blue hands upon its shell. Though the surface felt like solid rock, the egg was most definitely hollow. His hands tingled as he touched it. He felt intense vibrations rising up from within the egg as if it contained hundreds of flying insects all wanting to burst free.

A soft *tap-tap* on the path behind him compelled him to quickly glance over his shoulder. A sting as long as a sword came sweeping down upon him, slamming into his back like an executioner’s axe.

Luckily for Trypp, his rock-hard carapace was more than a match for Succellos’ sting.

The impact of Succellos’ attack sent him flying twenty feet into the air. He slammed into one of the eggs further down the path. He hit it hard but did not shatter its strange stone shell. A small crack appeared and from this crack shot out silvery rays of light as if the egg contained the Myr’s moons. Moments later a stream of small, delicate creatures broke out of the egg, fleeing its confines for the vastness of the cavern.

At first Trypp thought they were shatterbugs as they had wings and glowed, but the creatures were not similar at all. Their bodies were insubstantial, as if they were composed of light rather than merely producing it. They were not animals – they were far too beautiful.

Strangely as Succellos came at him with her needlelike legs flailing about malevolently, he felt surrounded by happiness.

'Stay still, little blue beast, so I may taste you,' Succellos hissed, frustrated by the ease with which Trypp had managed to evade her furious attempts to stab him with her legs and sting. She was accustomed to her victims being held in place but there were no Ghul about to do her bidding. She would have to work for this meal and that did not please her.

She shrieked with rage and her scream echoed across the chamber. And then it was joined by another scream and it chilled Trypp to the marrow.

He had heard that scream before, atop the highest reaches of the Skyfall. From the violent heart of the waterfall burst forth the Morrigu.

Trypp was stunned to see how it had changed since he had encountered it that dreadful day atop the Skyfall. Its oily black fathers had been burnt off leaving behind blackened flesh that made the beast look even more frightening. What was most intriguing was the long sword was wedged deep in the Morrigu's throat. The sword seemed to be made of glass and though Trypp had no recollection of any of the Myrrans in the other squads having such a weapon, he hoped dearly that one of them had delivered the blow.

He hopped onto one of the eggs and noticed a look of fear cross Succellos' hideous face. She bent low and snarled, 'Get away from my babies!'

She moved in and Trypp leapt at her, catching her around the neck. She rose up high and tried to shake him off but his grip would not be broken.

The Morrigu's black eyes twinkled when it saw the Sapphyrran – it recognised him. Though over a year had passed since it had last seen him, it remembered Trypp, remembered his defiance, remembered how he had escaped its clutches. It spread its featherless wings and thrust its talons forward. He would not escape a second time.

Trypp swung himself behind Succellos' torso and clasped his legs around her waist. She had no way of removing him and she spun around in a frenzy, vainly trying to shake him free. She tried scraping her back against a wall in an attempt to knock him off, but her thick abdomen restricted her movements and Trypp was in no danger of losing his purchase.

'Get off! Get off!' she cried in a thin and furious voice but her demands went ignored.

Trypp looked up to see the Morrigu bearing down upon him. The creature looked so incensed that it seemed obvious to the fact the

Sapphyrran was straddled upon Succellos. It opened its sharp claws ready to tear him apart.

Succellos twisted around so she could see him. 'You are a wily one!' She had realised what he had planned for her.

Trypp stared back into the black soulless pits of the Succellos' eyes. A silent shape grew in those orbs – the reflection of the Morrigu silhouetted against the dull glow from the waterfall. Its long talons were fully extended.

Trypp let go of Succellos and fell. Her vision was momentarily filled with the sight of six needle-sharp talons as the Morrigu careened into her. They effortlessly sheared through her skin, separating her head and torso from her araneidan body.

Trypp had landed badly, twisting his ankle on the uneven slope between the path and the lake. He rolled onto his knees and tried to stand.

The Morrigu quickly jumped across the space between them. One of its talons crashed down heavily upon Trypp's shell. He was pinioned to the rock. He twisted his head around, so that he could face his nemesis before it stole his life away. Thirty feet about him, the Morrigu's sharp beak hovered, ready to strike. It would skewer the Sapphyrran in his shell. The beast was assured of its victory and protracted the inevitable execution, leering at Trypp with a degree of malice he could never understand.

Suddenly, inexplicably, the Morrigu's expression changed. Its eyes rolled back and an ear-shattering scream erupted from its mouth, to be followed seconds later by thick wads of purple blood. And then she fell dead, rolling to one side to reveal an old man holding a shatterstone sword.

'Captain Blake!' Trypp exclaimed.

Gamelyn stood proudly and bowed to the Sapphyrran. 'I got tired of waiting for you to come back,' he said with a wry smile on his face. 'I found this sword by the lake. Sticking it into that monster seemed the right thing to do with it.'

He fell to his knees and the sword clattered on the ground. His withered hands splayed out on the ground as he leant forward. Trypp crawled over to him and lay him on his back.

'I am dying. There is no hope for me now.'

'Not if I have anything to do with it.'

Lara Brand slithered forward followed closely by Gerriod Blake.

'Gerriod my boy!' Gamelyn cried. His voice shook with joy. 'I knew you would come back for me.'

‘Dad!’ Gerriod rushed forward and clutched his father to his chest. He held him hard as if worried that his father would slip out of his grasp. He looked up at Lara. ‘Can you help him?’

Lara smiled warmly and lay her hands upon the old man. ‘He will be fine. Leave him with me.’

Gerriod stepped back to let Lara cast her spell. He picked up the sword and examined it. ‘Trypp – this was Pylos’ sword!’

‘He must have lost it when we entered the Endless months ago.’

‘We are indebted to him then,’ Gerriod remarked.

‘Perhaps we can pay him back,’ Trypp said excitedly. ‘Gerriod. The eggs – I think I know what they are.’

Gerriod gazed curiously at the Sapphyrran. ‘The eggs?’

‘Yes. Look around you. I think the eggs are vessels containing the souls that Succellos has stolen. She attacked me and I collided with one of the eggs. It broke open and...’ He pointed at the shimmering silver lights that were darting about the waterfall in the middle of the cavern. ‘They’ve been freed.’

Gerriod smiled as he slowly appreciated what Trypp was suggesting. As fantastical as it seemed, it all made sense. When he had first arrived in the Endless, he had touched one of the eggs and he had felt something inside. Something alive. Now he understood why Succellos never left the chamber. She was protecting her hoard. The putrid smell must have been her way of warding off any who would come too near. But Succellos was dead now and the smell was not strong enough to drive them away.

‘Free them Trypp,’ he said, handing the sword to the Sapphyrran.

Trypp nodded. It was a most astounding proposition. He would use the shatterstone sword to liberate Succellos’ victims.

He took up the weapon and limped his way to the nearest egg and without pause drove the sword into the shell. Searing light burst forth and a cool wind escaped as countless trapped souls were freed. Suddenly he felt an uncharacteristic surge of passion flare up inside him. Ignoring all his injuries, he swung the sword like a blood-crazed Helyan, moving about the chamber, breaking the stone eggs and setting free the spirits within. As more and more souls were emancipated, Trypp could feel an incredible strength build up inside him. Hundreds upon hundreds of eggs were smashed under his blade as he made their way around the vast lake. It was like a dance. The cavern became a blinding maelstrom of swirling silver. The shimmering vortex of souls built in intensity, circling round and round the cavern before sweeping up through the Worldpool and out into the Myrran skies beyond.

## Chapter Eighteen The Empty Isle

The axe glinted in the crystalline air of Usnach. Pylos had depleted his stores of fortitude and desire to fight; he laid himself open to the cold hand of fate. He had given up. Hope was gone. Death and ruin were all that were left on the island. The Myr would fall.

Pylos realised there were so many things he had never done in his life. He had never held a baby in his arms. He had never read a book, or gone fishing. Pylos' life had been little more than a series of military exercises designed to improve his prowess on the battlefield. He had never experienced the ordinariness of just *being*. He had never got out of bed in the morning and got back in because it was too cold. He had never stopped to watch clouds drift over a meadow. He had heard tales of travellers climbing the Skyfall, but had never considered doing it himself. Here – at the end of his life – he measured what he had achieved personally and found himself wanting. He had protected life but not actually lived it.

It angered him that in the moments before a Kobold's axe fell, he should realise such a thing. His mind shifted from its tragic reverie and he focused upon the eyes of his executioner.

Strangely, the eyes held no malice in them, only sadness. The bottom lids were quivering almost imperceptibly and to Pylos' surprise, tears were slowly welling up inside them.

And then the axe was swung. It swept high over Pylos' body and buried itself in the face of Caliban's loyal lieutenant. Lucetious' head split open like rotten fruit.

Pylos looked up to find that the Kobold was not alone in his act of rebellion. All across the battlefield, Kobolds swung their shatterstone axes at the Ghul. Though there were many more Ghul than Kobolds, they had no defence against the shatterstone weapons and the Empty Isle quickly became ablaze in the fiery explosions of Caliban's army.

As more and more Ghul fell, the confidence of the Pryderi – no longer led by Arinna Brine – faltered and before long the sun appeared above the island, released from the prison the witches had set around it. As thousands of Ghul burned in the warm sunshine, Pylos could not remember a brighter day.

The battle had been won. The Pryderi offered no resistance as they were rounded up and bound in chains.

There was only one who continued to fight. It was Lokasenna Hagen. She fought furiously, even though the Ghul were all gone and the Cabal all but destroyed. She stabbed and slashed at the Sessymirians who endeavoured to take her alive, but exhaustion got the better of her and she fell to the bloodstained ice in a heap. From this defeated position, she continued to hurl obscenities at the Myrran troops, but no-one responded. In light of the wounds they had sustained and the screams that had filled their ears that day, the sound of empty words was almost like music to their ears.

‘Do not look upon me with such pity, Pylos.’

‘I know who you are. I do not blame you for fighting for your father.’

Lokasenna sneered. ‘Then blame me for killing Will Stoops! Blame me for killing Sir Edgar Worseley! Why, I even had a hand in the Mabbit’s death!’

‘Yes and you will be held accountable for your crimes.’

‘Then kill me now!’ she screamed.

‘Look around you Lokasenna. The blood lies so thick on the ground, nothing is white anymore. I think we have had enough of killing for one day.’

He turned away and left her lying amidst the ruins of war where she wept until the sun disappeared behind the misty horizon and darkness descended upon the land.



## Chapter Nineteen The Endless

Caliban staggered forward, amazed by what he saw in Cribella's abdomen. Every facet presented a similar image. Kobolds putting down their axes or turning them upon the Ghul around them. He saw the Pryderi lose heart without the guidance of Arinna Brine. He saw the Myrran forces swarm over the remaining Cabal and he saw the sun break through the clouds and bathe Usnach in its glory.

'How can this be?' Caliban gasped. 'How could I lose?'

There was no doubting the defeat. It was captured in countless facets upon Cribella's shimmering body.

He turned to face the statue but Remiel was no longer there. He was standing beside him with the green serpent still around his neck. The beast was gnashing away at Remiel's skin but he didn't seem to care. Although his face and body were coated in blood, he had a contented look upon his face. He was at peace.

'Come my brother,' he said as he reached out for Caliban. 'Let's leave this world as we entered it – together.'

'No!' shouted Caliban hysterically. 'This was my revenge! Not yours! Not yours!'

'This is not revenge, Caliban,' Remiel said softly. 'It is something else. Something akin to pity.'

Caliban screamed as Remiel pulled him close. Hundreds of eyes opened across the serpent's body and not one of them regarded Caliban with any mercy. The coils of the beast wound their way around Caliban's neck and torso and the twins became locked in a bloody embrace from which there would be no release.

When Gerriod, Gamelyn, Trypp, Lara and Samuel Melkin entered the cavern later than day, the green serpent was gone. It had slithered away leaving behind a bloody trail that no-one saw a need to follow. There wasn't much left of the bodies of the Grayson twins. The only thing that remained was a collection of bones that lay at the base of their father's statue.

'Let's go,' Lara said as the distant sound of crying children floated through the Endless. 'Let's get these babies back to their mothers.'

## Epilogue Cessair Tower, Cessair

Airships dotted the grey skies above Cessair. Autumn had come. The fields surrounding Cessair Tower were no longer crowned with the soft purple petals of flowerfall. Even the crimson lake that lay around the great tower seemed to have lost much of its colour.

Cessair Tower was also undergoing a period of change. Although no-one opposed the peeling away of the tower's shatterstone skin to combat the Ghul, the naked tower had been a hard sight to bear in the months following Caliban's defeat.

The Ghul had disposed of all the shatterstone they had accumulated so Llyr dismissed the idea of returning the tower to its former glory. Instead he called upon the Acora and the Kobolds to work together to create a tower from glass-steel. It was a massive undertaking, but people travelled from all over the Myr just to be a part of it.

Rebuilding the tower was the first step towards rebuilding the Myr.

Chamberlain Llyr sat in a large, leather chair staring at the door to his apartment. He tapped the chair's rounded arms as he waited. It was late afternoon. His visitor would arrive at any moment.

Despite his focus upon the door, the Chamberlain was startled when his visitor finally knocked. Llyr rushed across the luxuriant red rug that lay upon the polished ironwood floor.

'Thank-you for coming Pylos,' the Chamberlain said appreciatively. 'We have much to discuss.' He smiled broadly, but Pylos could see it was not heart-felt. Sadness hung around the Chamberlain like the clouds upon the distant hills. Llyr's intense blue eyes had lost their lustre. They were no longer piercing nor did they sparkle with the energy that once ran through his body like blood.

Much had changed since Empty Isle, and the Chamberlain's exuberant disposition was one of many things to fade that year.

The pair exchange pleasantries but it seemed Llyr did not have the heart for small talk. Pylos stood looking down at the rug as an uncomfortable silence descended upon the room. He was much relieved when the Chamberlain recommended they step outside. It was easier to endure such silences when there was a view.

They walked out onto the west-facing balcony. Pylos could make out a number of fishing boats out on the lake below. He could also see a

succession of ferries plying their way to the eastern landing of the Acoran Way. The Acora had opened up the route under the mountains to all Myrrans. The days of secrecy and aloofness were put in the past. After the deceit and subterfuge of Maeldune Canna, Queen Ana of Acoran felt it was important to change the perception many outsiders had of the Acora.

‘On a clear day, you can see the tops of the Acoran Ranges,’ Llyr said gruffly, disappointed that the tall spine of the Acoran mountains was covered in clouds.

‘Yes, Your Grace,’ Pylos said politely – he had seen the snow-covered caps of the Acoran mountains many times from the vantage point of the Cloud Chamber a few floors above. He did not feel it would be appropriate to bring this to the Chamberlain’s attention.

‘I believe congratulations are in order Pylos.’

Pylos blushed slightly and mumbled, ‘Thank-you Your Grace.’

The Chamberlain noted Pylos’ subdued response and rebuked him for it. ‘Oh, come now Pylos! You should be proud! You have married the most desired woman in the world. Don’t hang your head as if you are ashamed of it.’

‘I’m not ashamed Your Grace. It’s just... well, Jehenna was Maeldune’s wife and I...’

‘Pylos, you are not to mention that man’s name in my presence again.’ He wasn’t being flippant. Chamberlain Llyr’s face took on an earnest expression to match his voice.

‘I’m sorry, Your Grace. I won’t speak of him again.’

The Chamberlain walked to a small table to one side of the balcony where a carafe of wine and two goblets were awaiting his attention. ‘A drink Pylos,’ he said assuming a more congenial manner. ‘In fact a toast! To your wife, the bravest, most beautiful woman to ever set foot on the Myr.’

Pylos smiled appreciatively and drank the contents of the goblet he was given without pause.

‘Tell me, have you had any word from her. Is she still in Amasis?’

‘Yes. She is helping her mother rebuild.’

‘And Claudia Kallady, she is...’

‘She is as well as can be expected, Your Grace. Lara Brand undid the terrible magick the Morgai traitor performed, but it will be some time before Claudia Kallady is herself again.’

‘Lara Brand,’ the Chamberlain mused. ‘She will be a wonderful asset to us in our attempts to heal the world.’

‘She has a mighty heart, Your Grace.’

‘She has indeed Pylos. Not unlike your own.’

Pylos blushed once again.

The Chamberlain sat down on a bench that was suspended by chains above the balcony. He bade Pylos sit with him. When both men were seated, the Chamberlain pulled a small golden lever that had been built into the arm of the bench. The chains above their heads suddenly went taut and the entire bench was lifted off the balcony. The ornate iron railing before them opened out like a farmyard gate and the bench swung out through the space so that it was hanging out in the cool air that swirled around the sides of the great tower.

‘You’re not scared of heights are you Pylos?’

‘Not at all, Your Grace. I don’t like confined spaces. That is all.’

‘Well you couldn’t get less confined than this. Remarkable piece of engineering this,’ he said proudly as he ran his hands over the hanging bench. ‘Those Kobolds can build anything.’

‘Yes, Your Grace. They are a most amazing people.’

‘Which brings me to the subject of our meeting today. I have asked you here to pick your brains. I would like to hear your opinion on various matters.’

‘Me, Your Grace?’

‘Don’t sound so surprised Pylos. Your decisions helped us defeat Caliban. I will hear your thoughts whether you like it or not.’

Pylos stared out at the bank of clouds before him. He knew the clouds were changing shape but he couldn’t see it when he watched them. One had to look away to see those changes.

‘Pylos, what are we to do? This war has left some terrible scars.’

‘May I speak frankly, Your Grace?’

‘I would expect no less of you.’

‘Then I say this. There are many types of victims. Some lose their lives. Some lose their minds. Some lose their way. But there is one thing common to all. Something so simple, something so obvious, we risk overlooking it.’

The Chamberlain was intrigued. He would never have expected Pylos capable of such lyricism. ‘What is this one thing, Pylos?’

‘The need for compassion.’

The Chamberlain nodded but nothing in his demeanour suggested he agreed. ‘Are you speaking of the Kobolds specifically, Pylos?’

‘They are not to blame, Your Grace,’ Pylos responded without hesitation. ‘They should be released from the Hulks immediately.’

‘There are those who say we should do nothing for them,’ the Chamberlain said softly. ‘There are some who are baying out for the Kobolds’ blood.’

Pylos nodded. ‘I know. Many people are rightfully angry. I understand that. The Kobolds opened up the breaches that caused so many Myrrans to lose everything. They are looking for a place to focus their anger. But it would be wrong to hold the Kobolds accountable for what they did.’

‘It staggers me to think how close we came to losing everything,’ Llyr mused.

‘Yes,’ said Pylos. ‘All the more reason to cherish what we have left.’

Llyr turned to Pylos. His eyes darted about the Helyan’s face. He was nervous. ‘But Pylos, the voice of the people had to be heard, irrespective of how unfair it seems.’

Pylos said nothing for a while. The clouds before him had changed yet again. They had not only altered their shape. Their colour had also changed, along with their mood. They had grown darker. It looked like it was about to rain on Cessair.

‘Chamberlain Llyr, I was but a boy when you first came to power, but I remember you. I remember what people said about you back then. They adored you and not because what you did was popular. They respected you for the conviction of your beliefs. You influenced public opinion, not the other way around. Is it not enough that the Kobolds can remember everything they did? They had no influence upon their actions! They are more deserving of our compassion than any other race upon the Myr. They have suffered the longest and will be haunted by their deeds for the rest of their lives.

‘I know there are also people who want to see hundreds of Moraen witches hanging from gibbets in Murdertown. Have we not had enough blood spilled already? Now is not the time for vengeance. We have seen what becomes of vengeance. This entire war arose out of one man’s desire for revenge.’

It was Chamberlain Llyr’s turn to fall silent. The first drops of a light rain fell upon them, but Llyr seemed oblivious to them. He sat there staring out at the grey shroud that had been thrown over the entire sky.

‘I... I can’t see the way ahead,’ he said eventually.

Pylos shook his head. ‘Your Grace, it is not for me to say what your next move should be.’

‘Pylos, I address you not as a subordinate, but as an equal.’

‘Then set free the Kobolds immediately. ‘They have suffered enough as have the Pryderi.’

'Pylos, the Pryderi were not under Succellos' influence.'

'They were put in a most difficult position. They say the bond between mother and daughter among the Pryderi is something other Myrrans cannot understand. I do not think we can judge them by our own standards.'

The Chamberlain raised his hand to his chin as he pondered this last comment. His fingers tapped the skin above his lip and his brow creased slightly. Pylos realised Llyr was in the process of making a decision. An important one. 'I will appoint a new Minister for Justice,' he said finally. 'Her first undertaking will be the matter concerning the Moraens.'

A light drizzle was falling about them but Pylos ignored it. 'Her, Your Grace?'

'Lara Brand.'

Pylos smiled.

'You agree General?'

'I do, Your Grace.' With a mischievous glint in his eye, he added, 'I don't think you could do much worse than the last one.'

Chamberlain Llyr could not bring himself to smile. His mood remained sombre as he moved on to his next topic. 'Tell me Pylos, what are your thoughts on the situation regarding the Caquikki?'

Pylos shrugged. He wasn't sure how to answer the question. 'It is difficult, Your Grace. I watched hundreds die when the Caquikki bombarded the battlefield on Usnach.'

'The parliament of Caquix City has argued that Lokota Fall was not acting on their behalf. Whilst they approved of the building of the skyships, the Caquikki Prime Minister claims that Lokota and his people stole the ships. The Prime Minister has described the Caquikki we fought at Usnach as a *renegade faction*.'

'Do you believe him?'

'It is too hard to know what to believe.'

'Your Grace, I'm not sure it would be wise to continue the conflict. Perhaps we need to take the Caquikki at their word.'

The Chamberlain cocked an eyebrow. 'It is unusual to hear a soldier advocate clemency and peace.'

Pylos grinned. 'The battle is over, Your Grace. I cannot be a soldier forever.'

The Chamberlain nodded. 'That is true Pylos. And you will be so much more than a soldier.'

Pylos wiped the drizzle from his brow. 'Your Grace, what of the Endless? What are you intentions?'

‘It’s a good question Pylos. We could follow the example of our forefathers and seal it up, hoping that whatever still lurks there, stays there...’

‘But?’

‘But only a fool repeats his mistakes. We have another option. The Ghaddar proved to be valuable allies in the battle for Skyfall. They also helped guard all known breaches whilst the Battle of Empty Isle was in progress. I believe we can support them in their efforts to re-establish themselves in the Endless. I think this will benefit us in the long run.’

‘The long run,’ Pylos mused. ‘I wonder what waits for us in the long run.’

The Chamberlain swivelled about and smiled warmly. ‘Let’s not look too far into the future for now, Pylos. Let’s just take things one day at a time.’

‘That’s sounds perfect to me,’ Pylos said.

Shortly after the Battle of Empty Isle, the Chamberlain sent the newly-appointed members of the Cessair Guard down into the Endless to find the creature known as Cribella and to bring it back to Cessair. It was a difficult task, but much to the amazement of the soldiers charged with the task of removing Cribella from its home, the vast beast did not struggle as it was cut down from its web. Once it felt the sun on its massive body, it took on a radiance that lit up the night.

A scaffold was erected for it in the courtyard before Cessair Tower. Cribella took to her new home without hesitation and quickly became a focal point of life in Cessair. People would gather around it all day and night, hoping to see images of loved ones in distant lands. In time, people took on shatterbugs as pets and this heralded an era of communication in the Myr that was unlike anything its people had ever known.

One of the most joyous days following the end of the conflict with Caliban took place six weeks after the battle on Empty Isle. A small enclave of Spriggans was found on the Isle of Antaeus, one of the few places on the Myr not to be despoiled by the hand of Caliban. Shocked and distraught, they returned to Sarras and, like most people during that time, devoted their days to rebuilding their community.

Chamberlain Llyr died before autumn passed into winter. The public was told he slipped on the stairs whilst on one of his late night strolls around the tower, but a rumour prevailed that he had committed suicide as a

result of his inability to reconcile what he perceived to be his failures during Caliban's rise to power.

Llyr was succeeded by Samuel Melkin. It was a logical choice. Melkin's political experience gained him the approval of the Assembly of Nations and the stories of his courage and guile in the Endless made him incredibly popular amongst the people.

On of the most significant changes to take place in the months following the Battle of Empty Isle took place in Helyas. The Senate decreed that the brutal festival known as the Forging would be discontinued. The Helyans had emptied its lands to fight at the Battle of Empty Isle and their losses were higher in number than any other nation. Taking part in a physical contest where the weak were killed was not only regarded by many to be impractical, but also a relic of different time. The decree had no stronger supporter than Pylos Castalia who quickly found himself elected to the position of senator within months of returning to Sulis.

Far away in Skyfall Town things eventually returned to normal. People came from all over the Myr to witness the majesty of the Skyfall, but many more came to see the Sapphyrran who had ventured down into the Endless to save the world from evil.

Trypp Elan found a way past Maru Lem. What had seemed impossible for so many years, was not as difficult as his imagination – and its reputation – had made it. Once past the overhang, the rest of the route up the Skyfall was quickly made.

He stood atop the great waterfall and looked around. To the east lay lands that no-one had explored before but he was much more interested in what lay to the west. Myriad colours from an inventive god's palette were splashed recklessly against the canvas of the sky. Countless shades of blue coalesced with vermillion hues and a gentle sun set upon the Myr.

He drew a deep breath. 'Well, I'm back,' he said.









