

Caliban's End
What Lies Beneath

Paul Francis Stewart

What Lies Beneath

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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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Cover photograph *Lake Wakatipu* by Shaun Quinlan, 2006
<http://www.morguefile.com>

This book is dedicated to

My father, John Stewart,
a real-life gentleman and scholar
who taught me the joy of reading
and the honour of the pursuit of wisdom

My wife and confidante, Gabriele,
who knows me better than I know myself
and sticks around anyway

Sophie Hughes
who hopefully is sitting somewhere right now
writing something wonderful

*'Thou thoughtest that I was
Altogether such a one as thyself.'*

– David, Psalms 50.21

Caveat Emptor

A Preface

Perhaps preface is the wrong word for it. Forewarning seems more appropriate. Please indulge me as I make one or two comments before your boots get muddy in the world of *Caliban's End*.

Firstly, a confession. This pair of books (*What Lies Beneath* and *Akin to Pity*) was not written to be popular fiction. It breaks most of the conventions of such fiction and ignores almost all the sage advice given by writers who know a lot more about the craft than I do. These are not books that are designed to be best-sellers. They won't pay off my mortgage any time soon.

This raises the question – why spend so much time on something that won't make bags of money?

The simple answer is that financial gain is not the only motivating force in the universe. These books have been a hobby of mine and I have enjoyed writing them as a hobby. Whilst I did not play by the rules in terms of structure, length, number of characters etc. I did follow one piece of advice – *write the book you want to read*. This advice rests on the premise that there will be others out there in shadowy corners of the globe who also enjoy this style of writing.

So in that context, I have succeeded. I think I've written the sort of books I would enjoy.

So what does that mean? Let me explain.

I've read *The Lord of the Rings* books three times. I've read Edgar Rice Burrough's *John Carter* series twice. I've read Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* novels three times each. As a child I even read the *Finn Family Moomintroll* series at least five times over. And in all cases, I found myself wishing for more. In my mind, I would expand the universe, follow the paths of characters who were only glimpsed at in the main narrative. For example, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, whatever happened to Radagast? I wanted to follow his journey further but could only do so in the form of conjecture.

Caliban's End is different. The world is made a little larger to accommodate the tales of ancillary characters. This first book *What Lies Beneath* spends some time in exploring the lives of a range of characters including lesser players (some of whom – unfortunately – do not make it to the end of the tale). A critic might dismiss this as undisciplined writing. Perhaps it is. But I wanted to properly explore this world I have

invented so occasionally I stray down little laneways that lead away from the central narrative.

This perambulation means that the reader has to walk a long and twisted path – it is a demanding read. At times there are more characters on the page than are probably necessary, but I am reluctant to remove them to make the book more accessible. The non-linear structure of the writing may annoy some readers, but I did not want to simplify things in order to create a book that could be enjoyed in an airport lounge. I revelled in creating a dense, intricate world. Some may dislike the novels as a result, some may find them convoluted and some may put the first book down having struggled to get up the rock-face in the opening chapter. But it is my hope that there are a few individuals who are captivated by it, readers who want to walk the longer road.

I hope you will be one such person.

– Paul Francis Stewart (October, 2008)

Dramatis Personæ

ACORA

CATE AUDREY, an Almoner
CLAUDIA KALLADY, a Scientist
FRANKLIN BAFFIN, a Boatswain
JONAS KALLADY, the Captain of *The Silhouette*
JEHENNA CANNA, the Consul for Acoran
MAELDUNE CANNA, the Minister for Justice
SIMEON KALLADY, the Captain of *The Intrepid*
TOMAS AUDREY, an Almoner

ANKARAN

RAMA TA, the Consul for Ankara

ARNAKKI

BANNICK LANDEN, the Consul for Arnaksak

CABAL

ABADDON
ANARESIS
FULGORA
KLEESTO
SUCCELLOS
THE KAGGEN
THE MORRIGU
THE RYUGIN

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

GHUL

BAGGUT, a Captain
CHABRIEL, a Major
CRADDOCK, a Soldier
DEFECIOUS, a Sergeant
DRABELLA, a Major
DROOLA, a Sergeant
GORMGUT, a Sergeant
LUCETIOUS, a Lieutenant
SCREE, a Servant
SLITHER, a Soldier
SPULLA, a Sergeant

HELYAN

AGENOR CALCARIA, a Senator
AUGUSTINE LEIPPA, a Senator
DECIUS SEMIRAMUS, a Lieutenant
PEDAEUS RHODES, the Ambassador for Helyas
PYLOS CASTALIA, the General of the Helyan Army
QUINTINIUS MEDIOLANUM, the Captain of the Watch
THASSUS PI, a Senator

KHEPERAN

ADZOBA AETHELFLAED, the Mayor of Mag Mel
HAFAZA HABID, the Ambassador for Khepera
JENDAYI AETHELFLAED, an Apothecary
SEFAR HADITH, the Consul for Khepera

KOBOLD

ABLO BOGLE, a Lapidarist
GARGO KORBO, the Mayor of Sarras
KALEN CORBO, the Owner of Korbo Industries

KOLPIAN

KALI

KOMPIRAN

HIRO NATANE, the Commander of *The Princess Orani*
TROJANU SATO, a Shogun

MABBIT

TAGTUG

MORGAI

ADDISON COLE
LILITH CORTESE

NESSAN

CARL GRAMERCY, the Captain of *The Quawk's Revenge*
FATHER GIDEON, a Priest
JOLON BLIGH, an Old Man
SALVATORE TARQUINIO, the Magistrate of Garlot
THE ARCHBISHOP OF GARLOT

PRYDERI

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

SAPPHYRRO

AKAMPA LODD, the Ambassador for Skyfall Town
HARTH GENLY, a Climber
TRYPP ELAN, the Consul for Skyfall Town

SESSYMIRIAN

HANDY, a Lift-operator
LOKASENNA HAGEN, the Foreman of Strom Mir Mine
VILA HELSTROM, a Keeler

SCORIAN

DR GARNETT SHAW, an Apothecary
CALIBAN GRAYSON, a Scholar
REMIEL GRAYSON, a Priest
SIR EDGAR WORSELEY, a Knight

SPRIGGAN

KAPPO, a Merchant
MULUPO, a Merchant

SUSANESE

MAI KIMURA, the Eldest daughter of the Emperor
MITSURU MIAKODA, the Helmsman of *The Princess Orani*
SUMI KIMURA, the Consul for Susano
YUU SANAKA, a Petty Officer

TAMUAN

KANIYA SAWOYE, the Ambassador for Tamu
SELA NOYE, the Consul for Tamu

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*
JOSHUU FISHER, a Rider

TUIRRENIAN

WILL STOOPS, an Archer

Prologue The Skyfall

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 rose above the Myr. Far below, scintillating points of light jumped and skipped across an immense lake. On the eastern shore of this lake, a towering waterfall lay in shadow, except for its crest which shone like a halo three sapphire leagues above the waters at its base. The cascading torrent was called the Skyfall and people came from all corners of the world just to see it.

At the base of the translucent, cerulean spire, Skyfall Town stayed in a fine mist all year, a glimmering lace veil keeping the beauty of the small city shrouded from the rest of the world.

The town replicated the delicacy of water in all its architecture. Buildings were crafted from iridescent blue marble brought in from the quarries of Sessymir thousands of leagues to the north-east. Skyfall Town's structures glistened, as if they were polished every night whilst the townspeople were asleep. The quiet metropolis was at its most stunning at dusk, resting in ethereal calm as the crest of the waterfall high above was gilded with the fiery colours of the setting sun while the town streets below were bathed in a ghostly blue light.

Skyfall Town was effectively split in half by the waterfall. These halves were linked by an incredible network of bridges and pulley ropes, some of them running hundreds of feet from end to end before and behind the Skyfall. Across this web of woven hemp, hundreds of townspeople and visitors to the region could be seen scurrying back and forth, dwarfed by the cascading torrent around them.

On either side of the Skyfall stood twin cathedrals. They were monuments to the architectural brilliance of the Sapphyrro, the strange but benevolent race living under the great waterfall. The structures were made from the same marble as the other buildings in the town, but no mortar had been used to fix the blocks. Flying buttresses stretched magnificently overhead and arched roofs held space and light as delicately as the night sky cradled the stars.

Behind the altar in each cathedral, a vast arch supported by two crystalline pillars rose 300 feet above the floor, creating a breathtaking open window framing the serenely violent, beautiful flow of the Skyfall beyond. The cathedrals' interiors were designed in such a way, in colour,

size, and shape, that the congregation felt as if they were in the heart of the waterfall.

However, over recent weeks the numbers of those visiting the cathedrals had grown considerably but for all the wrong reasons. Report after report of people going missing was made to the town's Magistrate. An unfamiliar feeling of fear had descended upon the haven of Skyfall Town. Something was horribly wrong and no-one could offer any insight into the inscrutable events. No race was safe, not even the Sapphyrro. There were whispers that the entire town of Palia to the west had been wiped out, but these rumours could not be confirmed as none who had ventured forth to check had yet returned.

Outside each cathedral, boards listing the names of the missing were erected and it was becoming apparent that the size of the boards would soon prove to be inadequate for the number of disappearances. There was no clear pattern to be found, save all the abductions had occurred out of doors, usually at night. Vague reports had circulated about a black shape in the sky and the muted sound of unseen wings.

Chapter One Skyfall Town

Trypp hung transfixed as he searched for a path up the rock-face. He was designed for climbing. All Sapphyrro were. Their unflappable dispositions allowed them to make decisions on the rock-face unclouded by fear or doubt. Strong hands allowed them to consider granite purchases invisible to others and their toes could grip the smooth rock like a vice. Their carapaces lessened the impact of the nearby torrent upon their bodies and their eyes enabled them to see easily through the mists and shadows adorning the Skyfall like a bridal veil.

Unusual-looking by most races' standards, the Sapphyrro stood five foot tall on average, with no significant difference between males and females. Sympathetic brown eyes as large as soup bowls peered out from benign faces of grey-blue. Hair as white as foam flowed from the back of the head onto a shell encasing a sinewy body covered in gossamer-thin, velvety fur. Stout, muscular legs and long arms ending in large, three fingered hands sprung from openings in the shell.

Trypp was one of the Okku, the name given to the skilled Sapphyrro responsible for taking adventurous visitors up the vertical face of the cliffs that stood as sentinels over Skyfall Town. No-one knew Skyfall's perpendicular paths like Trypp who smiled modestly whenever met with the frequent praise of fellow guides.

However even his climbs always ended in discretion, for about two thirds of the way up the precipice loomed Maru Lem– the impossible overhang.

The waters of the Skyfall did not permit access to a path around Maru Lem. The impasse of the overhang was compounded by the fact that it signified the point of no return; to go beyond it would mean climbing down in darkness, and this was simply too dangerous, even for the Okku. If Trypp went beyond the overhang, he had to be prepared to go all the way – to the top of the Skyfall. This decision was the most serious of choices presented to the Okku, as none knew whether the top could be reached in a day.

Maru Lem had repeatedly thwarted Trypp's attempts to conquer it, but, despite near falls and predictable defeat, never did he feel frustration. He accepted obstacles with a sense of equanimity that few other Myrrans knew.

With two fingers gripping a narrow arête, Trypp had gazed at the overhang for over an hour, examining its form, sensing its qualities, anticipating its mood. He fell into a trance, unmoving and docile. As time passed, he seemed to become one with the rock, appearing carved

out of the same material despite the hue of his fur. Haaks and kestra perched on the bluff stared quizzically at this strange new formation before them, then shifted their attention elsewhere to objects possessed of greater animation, such as the cirrus clouds above that were slowly being tinged with the amber colours of the western sun.

A way revealed itself.

About twenty feet above Trypp's head, a fracture in the rock not more than an inch wide could be seen, but it stopped right at the point where the vertical face started sloping backwards. This fissure had occupied Trypp's mind for the greater part of an hour, dominating his focus to the exclusion of other options. He had looked too long at the fracture trying to exploit any opportunity it offered him, and in doing so he had missed a less obvious but more accessible route to its right. Ten feet above his head, a small ledge lay; it was not much, barely a ripple across the surface of the cliff, but it would furnish him with a purchase that would allow access to a corrugated ridge further up Maru Lem. The ridge ran up the centre of the overhang, resembling the bumps and deviations of the spine of a gargantuan beast arching its back. Its path ran where the overhang's transition from vertical to horizontal was at its most dramatic and perilous, but it presented Trypp with possibilities, and three leagues above Skyfall Town, such opportunities were not to be squandered. He humbly accepted the lesson the journey had provided: in trying to seek out the easiest path, he had overlooked opportunities that were right before him. The Skyfall was his teacher, and rarely would a day go past without a lesson being taught. The Skyfall was subtle and the Skyfall was patient, allowing its students to find their way at their own pace.

Trypp eyed a handhold above his head just within reach. A small, winged arachna crawled out across the rock. It was a harmless creature and beautiful: eight legs, two pairs of silken wings and a crystalline abdomen. Only discovered by botanists less than a year earlier, the arachna – or shatterbugs as they had become commonly known – had increased in number exponentially over recent months. If they weren't so beautiful, their rapid spread over the Myr would have been described as a plague.

Unfortunately the shatterbug was perched on the only rock within Trypp's grasp. After an hour frozen in one position, his strength was fading and he could not wait for the shatterbug to flutter off, nor would he risk harming it. All life was sacred to the Sapphyrro, and the conviction was absolute. A Sapphyrro could not purposely kill any creature, or

even consider the proposition in any circumstance. It was more than a philosophy; it was innate. Trypp could no more kill another life form than a fish could walk on land.

Despite his skill as a climber, Trypp knew he was in trouble. His breathing had quickened and his focus became somewhat erratic. His fingers were beginning to cramp and his forearm felt like a solid, heated knot of muscle. He had to act swiftly. There was one climbing move he could try. It would gain him respite from the pain which was now racing through his arm like mercury. He had only seen the manoeuvre done once before, performed by his climbing master many years ago. But that was upon a training wall with the security of deep water only twenty feet below – he was in a far more precarious position. Closing his eyes and inhaling his breath, Trypp curled back, muscles quivering as he positioned himself for the move.

He kicked off the rock-face, back and up, swinging his head and arms down between his legs as he somersaulted around in the air three leagues above the base of the Skyfall. At the apogee of his leap, Trypp stretched out with his legs, his toes searching for the lip of granite two feet above the shoulder of rock upon which sat the shatterbug. For a split second Trypp's confidence faltered; he had misjudged the leap, his toes curled too early and his left leg missed its target. His right foot connected with the lip, and his toes clamped down desperately upon the rock. He swung heavily through the air but did not fall.

Trypp slowed his breathing down and carefully brought his left leg to the lip. When all his toes had cemented themselves to the surface of the rock, he curled the rest of his body up to the inch-wide ridge. For a brief moment, he indulged himself in the warmth that the security of stone and rock provided.

Suddenly, high above Trypp's head, a huge black shape exploded out from the cliff-face, letting loose a terrifying, chilling screech. Startled, Trypp's focus melted, and he lost all connection with the rock. The world circled in his vision, the sky became the lake and the cliff disappeared from view. An unaccustomed feeling of terror enveloped him, a saturating feeling unlike any he had ever experienced. Instinctively he shot out an arm in a vain attempt to avoid the sickening plummet to his death. His fingers brushed the rock and his nails dug into the granite. His body lurched with a jolt and his carapace thudded into the wall of stone. Incredibly, his grip held.

Trypp's heart was racing so fast he could not separate one beat from another. His body continued to swing for a few seconds and then all movement stopped. In the panic of his freefall, Trypp had clamped his eyes shut. It was not until his breathing had returned to normal that he

opened them. Looking above, he could see no sign of the terrifying black shape. Nothing moved above him except for a few crimson-hued cirrus clouds and the fluttering figure of a small shatterbug which hovered momentarily in the air before gently setting down to rest on Trypp's forefinger.

A night's sleep did not rid Trypp's body of the aches and bruises he had acquired on Maru Lem, but he felt strong enough to go to work. This morning he was to lead an eclectic assortment of travellers up the Skyfall. By the time he clambered out of bed, five other climbing groups had already left, many setting off before sunrise. Unheard by the exhausted Trypp, bells had been pealing all morning, each carillon heralding the departure of a new group of climbers, celebrating their bravery. At the base of the Skyfall where the crashing torrent of water relentlessly hammered the anvil of the lake, crowds had gathered to watch each string of climbers begin the merciless ascent, accompanied by their Sapphyrran guides.

Trypp arrived at the First Step Café to find his climbing party waiting anxiously for him. His assistant Harth had readied all the gear and prepared the party for the climb. Trypp apologised to his group for the minor delay as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. His dreams had been filled with black-winged creatures erupting from the Skyfall. He did not mention the creature or the dreams to his climbing party, nor did he speak to Harth about it.

His apology was most ungraciously received by three Helyans who voiced their disgruntlement at the sight of other climbing groups already high above the town. Trypp simply replied, 'It is the way it is.' This was not really understood by the Helyans, nor by the rest of the group which also included three travellers from the Susanese Archipelago and three Sessymirians.

The Sessymirians, two men and a woman, were large-framed and inappropriately dressed. They refused to remove their Keelii furs and half an hour into the climb they smelt terribly of wet fur and pungent body odour.

The athletic Helyans were clad in sleeveless tunics that fell just above their knees, kept close to their muscular bodies by leather belts. To the Sessymirians' dismay, the Helyans wore no undergarments. The Sessymirians complained incessantly about the view this offered them. Soon a long quarrel developed and the banter exchanged between the groups was unceasing and increasingly immature.

The Susanese were much quieter, customarily talking to one another in hushed tones. They proved to be superb climbers, their technique putting to shame the boorish Helyans and brutish Sessymirians. Trypp always enjoyed taking Susanese on climbs; their sense of discipline and focus was comparable to that of the Sapphyrro, and if they were more physically suited to climbing, their progress up the Skyfall would even rival that of the Okku.

The party's progress up the lower climbs was extremely swift, largely due to the physical prowess of this particular group. All climbers were tethered to a thin yet highly durable rope, woven from Tuathan hemp. Trypp was naturally at the high end of the rope, deciding the route up the rock face based on the climbing strengths of each particular group. At the far end of the rope the other Sapphyrran made doubly sure that the climbers were coping with each challenge the Skyfall threw at them.

The three Susanese, two females and a male climbed directly behind Trypp, emulating his every move with silent grace and precision. The youngest female, an innocent beauty by the name of Mai, was astonishingly skillful on the rock face. She quietly talked herself through each manoeuvre and her execution of some of the trickier moves was flawless. Occasionally, she giggled as she overcame the challenges before her, and her manner was a curious blend of humility and tenacity.

In stark contrast, below the Susanese the Helyans' every move was accompanied by loud, smug commentary. The three Helyan men were really no more than boys, youths carrying scars of a recent battle, seeking new challenges. They ignored the example given to them by Trypp and the Susanese, preferring to create their own way up the precipice. At times this placed great strain upon the line as Trypp's quiet but clear directions went largely ignored by the over-confident Helyans. Their bravado was to be expected. They were a race generally lacking in subtlety and humility – in many ways, the antithesis of the Sapphyrro.

Underneath the Helyans were the boorish Sessymirians, a position noted by each party with respective relish and contempt. The Sessymirians' climbing technique was incredibly poor in the eyes of the Okku, relying solely on brute strength, but they had managed to keep with the swift pace set by the others in the group. For the greater part of the expedition up the Skyfall, the focus of the northerners' minds was on the verbal exchange with the Helyans. Fortunately, as the hours passed, fatigue set in – in limbs and larynxes. By lunchtime the party had attained heights few groups could claim. Trypp forged on and by mid-afternoon they were 200 yards beneath Maru Lem. Trypp would not take them any further as the climb down was just as dangerous as the ascent, and he would not risk completing the expedition in total darkness.

The expedition sat on a narrow shelf, taking in the view and resting before the gruelling return to Skyfall Town, three leagues below. The sun had swiftly moved westward and the ghostly glow of Skyfall's silvery mantle shimmered above. From their vantage point, the curvature of the Myr reminded them of their smallness and all fell silent. The great, warm lake spread out before them all the way to the eastern horizon. It was speckled with fishing boats and distant islands. Far away, as close to the geographical centre of the lake as could be reckoned, was a strange dark stain. It was called the Worldpool, an incredible sinkhole in Lake Erras. All the currents of the lake led here – the Worldpool was the lake's heart, and a cold, cruel one at that. Few had seen this sight first hand and even fewer had seen it from this vantage point. Most fishermen and traders on Lake Erras hugged the shore, never risking the merciless, icy grasp of the vortex. Some of Erras' islands had settlements on them but the inner isles were shrouded in mystery as few boats could easily return against the terrible currents.

There was one island far from shore that had maintained communication with the outside world. Seven leagues from the Worldpool, a leper colony called Sanctuary had been established on this island. There were a small number of mariners on the lake who could navigate the currents to and from the colony. Trypp could see one such vessel glinting on the horizon and his gaze was so fixed on it, he failed to notice the argument that had broken out among the Helyans and Sessymirians.

One of the Sessymirians, a veteran soldier by the name of Loka, was getting quite irate and was trying to make his way across the shelf to throttle a bronzed Helyan who was taking great delight in ridiculing the older man. The argument had started earlier in the climb when the flaxen-haired Sessymirian had voiced his concern about all the recent disappearances. The young Helyan took it upon himself to turn this apprehension into a sign of cowardice and had proceeded to bait the older man at every given opportunity.

Loka's concern was understandable considering the night before three more people had gone missing, including a Sessymirian known to him. The Helyans considered voicing one's fears in public to be a sign of weakness, and on the cliffs above Skyfall Town, Loka had shown himself to be less than a man. And then it struck.

The beast's arrival was as soundless as it was violent. It burst through the torrent of water with such ferocity that none had a chance to react. A black wave of beak and claws broke over the climbers. The dark shape had dived down the waterfall having spied its prey minutes before. The resulting carnage was sickening. Screams floated into the air, but were drowned out by the gleeful clucking of the shadowy, avian beast. Talons as long as ten feet pierced bodies and broke bones, yet strangely no-one was fatally wounded. Pieces of cartilage and strips of flesh were splattered across the rock face, shreds of skin flayed from the sinews and muscles they once covered, but all lives were spared.

Then in one violent and elegant movement, the creature headed skyward, up past Maru Lem, to the crest of the waterfall, to the halo of the Skyfall, where it let loose a triumphant shriek. The climbers dangled heavily from its claws, like a bloody string of pearls in the claws of a thieving bird.

But it was no bird. Its name was the Morrigu and it had somehow risen from centuries of imprisonment beneath the mountains. The fiend was a terrible sight. Long, black oily feathers covered a body over fifty feet from head to tail. Its face was a mockery of a man's, expressive, cunning and cruel. A dark serrated beak was fixed in a maniacal grin above which eyes as dark as a starless night flickered and twitched ceaselessly. The Morrigu's huge wings ended in viciously sharp leathery claws. These claws released the climbers and they fell unceremoniously into a massive nest that was covered with countless bodies stolen from the town below.

The young Susanese woman Mai was slowly gaining consciousness, but the other members of the party were still out cold, battered senseless by the Morrigu's initial attack. Its talons were sifting through the inanimate bodies at the far end of the climbing rope. The Morrigu picked up the older Sessymirian Loka, held the battered head up to its quizzical gaze, tilting its own head this way and that, as if trying to recognize something familiar in the face of the unconscious man. Then after a decision had been reached, a claw flashed up and darted forward to spear Loka through the heart.

But the talon did not hit its mark. Having quickly detached herself from the climber's line, Mai jumped between the claw and its intended fleshy target, striking out with her hands clenched together. Although she had succeeded in throwing the Morrigu's aim out, it was at a great cost. The

creature's brutally sharp claw sheared through her wrists cutting both hands clean off.

Mai fell back to the cadaver-filled floor of the nest, howling in pain. The Morrigu's great beak floated menacingly above her head. Then, in a movement that was so fast, not even Mai's reflexes could evade it, the beast stabbed downward. Its beak pinioned Mai and Loka together in a gruesome embrace of death. Without delay, their bodies were carelessly flung aside. The creature moved to its next victim, the Sessymirian woman, and repeated its strange and murderous behaviour.

Trypp's shell had protected him from the brunt of the beast's onslaught. He was battered, his carapace had been cracked and his velvety skin was soaked in blood, but he was now conscious and able to lift his head which was pulsing with searing pain.

Twenty yards above, he could see a vast overhang over which the first waters of the Skyfall began their headlong descent to Lake Erras leagues below. He was just below the crest of the Skyfall. The fading light of day shimmered through the curtain of the waterfall surrounding him.

Trypp's olfactory sense was assaulted with the smell of rotting meat. He was lying on an uneven, wet and spongy surface. His hands felt around him and then pulled back into his body as he realized he lay on a bloody carpet of flesh. Corpses were underneath him and beside him. Trypp lifted his head and was appalled. Hundreds upon hundreds of bodies were piled in the Morrigu's nest. All races were represented in this fleshy cairn of death, but none were recognizable. Body parts were strewn all around, an obscene mosaic of violence. It was clear that the beast did not consume the meat of its prey, if indeed prey was the right word. Collection seemed more apt. The Morrigu was a hoarder, a crazed gatherer of bodies and upon the pile, it hopped and danced with lunatic joy.

But there was method to its madness. The bodies were brought to the nest for a reason. The Morrigu was looking for something. Or someone. Trypp watched it as it picked up the groaning body of Harth, his apprentice. It sneered disapprovingly at the body. It was not what he was looking for. The creature did not spear him. It had tried this once before on another Sapphyrran and had broken one of the needle-like nails on the end of its claws. The shells of the Sapphyrro were difficult to penetrate. The Morrigu raised Harth to its beak and tentatively bit down on the shell, testing its strength. It cackled and squawked with growing frustration. Then with frightening speed the creature swung its barely-

alive victim in a circular motion, finally thrusting the body into the rock wall of the cliff. Harth's skull was crushed instantly and his body, a broken puppet in the hands of a petulant child, was thrown across the nest.

'Harth!' Trypp cried and his hands went out to the limp body of his apprentice.

The Morrigu shrieked with malice and one of its razor-sharp talons kicked out, clutching at the Sapphyrran. Fortunately for Trypp, his shell, now drenched in the decay of the Morrigu's morbid collection, was not easy to hold and he managed to free himself of the creature's grasp.

Trypp tried to leap away but he was still tethered to the others. He pulled back on the rope towards the edge of the nest, and the Morrigu gave a crazed howl. The creature then lurched haphazardly at him. It would not allow any of its quarry to escape. The nest shook frightfully, the Morrigu's movement threatening to break it from its moorings to the cliff face.

Sensing the danger, the Morrigu paused for a moment, looking maliciously at Trypp who could retreat no further. Behind the Sapphyrran, the Skyfall hurtled into the great space above Skyfall Town. The rope was taut and the Morrigu, realizing Trypp had nowhere to go, edged carefully – talon by talon – towards him.

Then something flashed between the monster and its prey. It was a thin piece of bone wielded by the young Helyan who had earlier taunted the now-dead Loka. The Helyan was barely alive, but summoned enough strength to find something sharp, the femur of one of the Morrigu's first victims, and bring it down on the rope, splitting it with surgical precision. Trypp's body fell back to the edge of the nest and the Morrigu catapulted towards him. The nest pitched forward. Trypp had no choice. He hurled himself over the edge and into the Skyfall.

There was no way that Trypp should have survived the fall. He had plummeted over three leagues, bounced off rocks and slammed into the surface of the lake at a frightening velocity. He had retreated into his shell and thrown himself upon the mercy of the Skyfall. And impossibly, mercy he was given.

Trypp was alive – scarcely breathing and in a state of shock – but alive. He bobbed in the wake at the waterfall's base. Within seconds of landing at the base of the Skyfall, he was pulled out by Sapphyrro swimming in the gentle twilight under North Cathedral.

And then the full horror struck. The strangest sound could be heard from above; the sound of things falling and hitting the bridges, buildings

and streets like hail. The waters of Lake Erras popped and splashed as hundreds of corpses rained down on Skyfall Town. Many were caught in the bridges and pulleys, and were left dangling, a gory mobile of all the Myr's races hanging above its most peaceful town. The nest itself shattered across the roof of North Cathedral. A muffled thump sounded above Trypp who lay unconscious on a landing surrounded by death. Had he been able to open his eyes, he would have been met with the grotesque sight of his climbing party dangling from the rope bridge above. Only a few feet above Trypp, a Helyan youth swung lifelessly at the end of the climbing rope he had broken to save the Sapphyrran's life.

In the dim light of dusk, a deeper shadow fell upon the quiet hamlet of Skyfall Town. The unseen fear that had gripped the town now had a face. The Morrighu perched itself upon the broken roof of the nearby cathedral, cackling with glee.

Chapter Two Sanctuary, Lake Erras

Gerriod Blake had been a mariner all his life, just like his father. He was also responsible for delivering supplies to the many islands of Lake Erras, just as his father had been decades before. Gerriod often thought of him out on the lake, especially here – Sanctuary – where it was believed he had perished almost thirty years earlier. The late afternoon sun lit Gerriod side-on as he sailed south towards the leper colony. Similarly, the starboard side of Gerriod's trawler, *The Crimson Dawn*, was bathed in the sun's thick light, as was the maroon and gold flag of Tuatha which streamed out above the wake churned up by the ship's engines.

To aid his passage through the complex currents, Gerriod consulted a volvelle, a piece of maritime equipment his father purchased at considerable expense from a Spriggan trader over thirty years ago. The volvelle was a map of sorts, an intricate system of revolving copper disks ranging in size. It indicated the direction and speed of the brutal currents that lay just below the lake's surface. Very few sailors knew how to use the instrument properly, and even fewer would dare navigate the inner currents of Lake Erras. But Gerriod had been taught by the best and although Gamelyn Blake had long since departed, his son remembered every lesson he ever gave.

A small archipelago off his bow indicated it was time for Gerriod to swing the boat to port. Gerriod was the only man in Palia who could navigate a safe course to Sanctuary, the leper colony fifty leagues from the great lake's northern shoreline. The further out from shore a vessel ventured, the more perilous the passage, and the colony was so close to the insensate heart of the lake, the Worldpool, that only a handful of Myrrans had ever seen it, other than the 300 lepers who were made to call Sanctuary home.

The Worldpool defied natural law. Although the shallows of Lake Erras were temperate all the year through, the closer one came to the centre of the vast body of water, the colder the lake became. Five leagues from the churning vortex, translucent ice floes could be found, stretching out across the pale blue surface of the lake. Any ships that came within two leagues of the Worldpool risked being battered by tall icebergs that roamed the lake's centre like silent predators. The waters closer to the Worldpool were wrapped in mystery as no vessel had ever returned from wandering so close to the maw. Nothing escaped. It was believed that even time itself was disturbed so close to the malevolent sinkhole. The lake's centre was a turbulent place where waters made white by the

freezing heart of the lake succumbed to its darkness and disappeared into a forgotten realm below. And yet, inexplicably, from dawn to dusk, the sun always shone above the Worldpool as if the clouds were too scared to venture so close to the glaciated maelstrom. It was a black hole, reaching out and sucking in all it could under eternally sunny skies.

Sanctuary's close proximity to the Worldpool was deliberate; it meant that any desire a leper may have to return to the mainland was quashed by the irresistible natural force lying in wait in the dark, white waters beyond the colony's rocky beaches.

The people of Palia, Gerriod's village to the north, called the Worldpool by another name – Caliban's End. Thirty years earlier, an entry was made in the dock master's log in Palia. A vessel called *The Melody* had been chartered for passage to the Sanctuary colony. The manifesto listed two passengers: Remiel Grayson and his twin brother, a leper by the name of Caliban. The latter was particularly memorable. The day he arrived in Palia, he was placed in the quarantine station where all lepers destined for Sanctuary were kept until the boat taking them across the treacherous waters was ready to depart. Caliban had been brought into the station kicking and screaming. He pleaded with the locals to release him and when the Palians refused, he swore he would have the bloodiest of revenges upon the world and that the people of Palia would be first to bleed. Palia was a sleepy hamlet so the angry remonstrations of a seeming madman were long discussed and remembered.

'I know what you've done Remiel. I know what you've done!' This comment, whilst never understood by the Palians, was mimicked for years and eventually became part of the village's vernacular.

The Melody was captained by Gamelyn Blake and the crew consisted of a single cabin boy – Gerriod, his son. Six days after the boat's departure, it was found battered and broken three leagues up the coast. The boy was found wandering on the shoreline, his mind a blank, unable to explain how he ended up where he was. He was also unable to recall anything about the passengers. Worst of all, he had no idea what had happened to his father. From then on the fishermen of Palia called the Worldpool 'Caliban's End' named after the apparent demise of a man who had so made an impression on the people of the town days before.

Many years later, Gerriod followed in his father's steps and spent long years plying the waters of Lake Erras either fishing or making the lucrative run to Sanctuary. He became a respected mariner and knew the hazards of the lake intimately; but its darkest secret was hidden from him and had been so for thirty years...

The robed man had said very little since leaving Palia. He just stood at the prow of the ship looking ahead to the island. The sails above billowed in the eddying winds which restlessly danced above the sharp tips of the waves. The Melody navigated the labyrinth of inner islands with ease and was now ploughing its way across the North-West Strait with its destination – the leper colony – in sight. Her captain, Gamelyn Blake, proudly stood at the helm, his maroon and gold scarf licking at the air as the afternoon winds blew across the deck. Gamelyn's russet-headed son sat cross-legged at his feet, splicing new lines for the mainsail. The captain turned a brass knob on the console beside the steering wheel and The Melody's engine spluttered into life.

'I think we can take down the mainsail Gerriod. I'll run her off the engine till we get to Sanctuary,' Gamelyn called to his son, who jumped to his feet and proudly went aloft and set about lowering the ship's largest sail. On a bigger boat, this would have been a job for at least two men, but The Melody was a humble craft, a sixty foot trawler with three sails on top and an old boiler down below, and there was no need for a larger crew. The old ship was often the subject of ridicule at the Block and Tackle Tavern in Palia, but it was the only one who had a captain brave enough to make the Sanctuary run. Gamelyn looked up at his son retracting the booms and smiled. He had grown into a fine boy. Were his mother still alive, she would think so too.

Gerriod slid down the forestay connecting the mainsail mast to the prow of the ship, narrowly missing the figure at the ship's bow. His name was Remiel Grayson and he had kept his cowl drawn over his head the entire journey, as if his visage was too secret a thing for a common fisherman and his son to see.

'Gerriod, truss up the clews as well, would you?' Gamelyn shouted to the boy, who quickly moved amidships and wound the clew-lines around the lower corners of the downed mainsail. Gerriod moved tentatively around this broad area in front of the helm, for here lay the reason for this trip to the leper colony. The man's name was Caliban Grayson and just like his twin brother, he had barely moved throughout the passage. He was young – nineteen years old – but his broken skin made him look much older. Gerriod edged down the portside rail and Caliban seemed unaware of his presence until the lad tripped over a rusty killick, a small anchor which he had forgotten to place under the scuppers so it was out of the way. Caliban cocked his head slightly towards the sound of the young boy picking himself up off the deck, but this small movement was restricted by the long, metal chain that bound him in place.

Usually lepers were bound with hempen rope and escorted to the hold, contained there for the duration of the trip, but Caliban's brother had him brought on board bound in an iron chain so heavy he could barely walk. He was made to kneel on the deck and the chain around his arms was looped around his feet as well, leaving him with little mobility and even less comfort. As inactive as the prisoner was, under a coarse, woollen cloak his eyes depicted a flurry of mental activity. He surveyed everything, looking for a means to extricate himself from his dire predicament.

His gaze momentarily fell upon Gerriod and in face pocked by his leprose condition, Caliban's eyes shone brilliantly, animated by a curious mix of intelligence and desperation. Gerriod felt for the poor soul; although he recognized the necessity of confining the diseased to the lonely island, he found the manner in which the lepers were delivered to the colony to be disconcerting in the least. Sanctuary had a terrifying reputation and even the most decent and ingenuous of individuals found themselves considering all avenues of escape once the deadly contagion of leprosy had become obvious on their bodies. Many chose suicide before the passage to Sanctuary. Despite his youth, Gerriod had seen three lepers take their own lives en route to the colony.

It was uncommon for a journey to be made for a single leper. Usually, the lepers were held at a quarantine station in Palia until enough were collected to justify the dangerous journey. But Remiel had paid handsomely for the trip and had no interest in anything other than reaching Sanctuary as soon as it could be arranged. 'Captain Blake, how long till we reach the colony now?' he called from his position in the forward pulpit. In contrast to his grim appearance, Remiel was softly spoken. His speech was refined and his accent betrayed his Pelinese heritage.

'Not long now Mr Grayson,' Gamelyn answered distantly, his concentration fixed on the swirling waters beyond the ship's bow.

'Blake! Turn the ship around now!' Caliban Grayson's voice was little more than a rasp, his throat as raw as his contempt for his twin brother at the front of the ship. Gamelyn gave no indication that he had heard Caliban's demand and kept his eyes fixed on the shifting waters surrounding his ship.

Although the skies above had been overcast for the entire morning, patches of sunlight were appearing, a strange meteorological phenomenon to which Gerriod had grown accustomed. As cold as the winds were that blew across the centre of the lake, the sun always shone upon the darkness of the Worldpool. Gerriod watched the brilliant sunlight unfurl across the deck and it made his skin tingle. The leper

however had quite a contrary reaction. As the sun split the thinning grey canopy of clouds above, Caliban's body stiffened horribly under the chains, as if gripped by unimaginable pain. The light spilling across the deck seemed to have a corrosive effect upon Caliban's skin; Gerriod could see it bubbling and blistering as soon as the sun revealed itself. Caliban retreated under the folds of his tattered robes and whimpered. Gerriod could not endure this strange scene and asked his father permission to leave the bridge.

His request granted, Gerriod found himself in the ship's galley searching for a knife to scale the fish they had caught that morning. Away from the sound of the leper's suffering, he sat relatively happy in the hold amongst blocks of ice and slid the steel of his blade beneath the silvery skin of the morning's catch. It effortlessly peeled the scales off the fish's flesh. His father was pedantic about every single item on board his vessel and there was not a knife in the galley that did not shine with pride.

However, after an hour in the hold where the stench of fish hung heavily in the air, Gerriod became restless and decided to return to the deck above. It was not until he stood back on the maindeck, buffeted by the cold winds cutting across midships, that he realized that he had absent-mindedly brought up the kitchen knife and a half-scaled fish. Gerriod placed the fish down on the steps leading up to the quarterdeck and gazed out to sea. Sheets of ice floated past the ship, some of them occasionally crackling as The Melody's dense hull carved a passage through the unquiet waters. This was Gerriod's favourite part of the journey. He was excited by the sense of dread that accompanied being so close to the Worldpool although he could not help checking that his father stood at the helm steering them out of harm's way. A league to starboard Gerriod could see sharp icebergs which stuck out of the waters like the teeth of a submerged monster, ready to swallow them should they dare to come closer. The boy snuck across the deck to take a closer look.

'Wait!' mouthed Caliban as Gerriod edged past his shrouded figure in the centre of boat.

Realising he was still holding the knife, Gerriod tucked the blade under his belt and moved away from the leper, wary of any interaction with the prisoner.

'Gerriod!' moaned the huddled man softly, his voice wracked with a pain the boy hoped he would never understand. Gerriod looked over at Caliban hunkered down on the deck, only the light from his blazing eyes visible under the folds of his garb. The cabin boy quickly glanced up at the man at the prow of the ship and then back to the pathetic figure

cowering on the deck before him. 'Water. Please bring me water. I'm trammelled up like a fish here.'

Gerriod flicked a look over at his father who was deep in thought as he consulted the volvelle. He knew he should not talk with the prisoner, or go near him, but he seemed in such a wretched state than it was impossible not to pity him.

'Please...' the broken man implored. Caliban's head then sank to the deck as if exhausted by the mere act of speech and that was the end of the conversation.

Gerriod walked across the quarterdeck and dipped an old mug in the water barrel. He quietly made his way to the leper. At the prow of the ship, Remiel Grayson stood still, a dark figure in bright sunlight gazing at the blue waters surrounding the distant island of Sanctuary, whilst Gamelyn was concentrating heavily upon the navigation equipment. The boy inched forward, a cup nervously outstretched in one hand. This hand shook so much that half the mug's contents had spilled before he had reached the crouched figure on the deck.

Suddenly, Caliban's leg shot out into Gerriod's shin. The knife the boy had tucked under his belt skittered across the deck and Caliban pounced on it and it disappeared into the man's tattered garments. Under the robes, the leper was involved in a flurry of activity. A muffled cry of pure pain was a frightening prelude to something Gerriod would never forget – the grisly sight of crimson blood gushing from a severed hand, spreading out like a dark lake until it flowed away in thick straight rivers between the timbers of the deck. The boy was transfixed by what Caliban had done to himself. The blade had cut cleanly through his left wrist. His hand lay on the deck, a bloodied island of bone and skin, but curiously free of all the scabs and sores that were once covering it.

Gerriod's mind tried to gather itself in light of the violent act that had just been carried out. The gruesome act of self-mutilation went unseen and unheard by his father, nor had Caliban's brother witnessed it; both were absorbed in other matters. Caliban became still again, and lay in a foetal position on the deck. Although he knew better, Gerriod's concern for the leper overtook any concern he had for himself. He knelt down beside the man. 'Sir, are you alright?'

'Gerriod! What are you doing?' Gamelyn yelled desperately from the helm, noticing for the first time his son's close proximity to the prisoner. At the sound of Gamelyn's voice, Remiel Grayson spun around horrified to see his brother's severed hand lying on the deck amidst of pool of blood.

'Boy, get away from him!' Remiel screamed, his voice no longer soft or refined.

Caliban lifted his head and smiled at Gerriod. The smile was almost toothless. Blood burst from cracked lips as the grin dissolved to a snarl. 'Am I alright?' he sneered. 'I've never been better!'

Caliban exploded into activity. Without the encumbrance of his left hand, he pulled his left arm free of the iron chain, picked up the bloody knife and flung it at Gamelyn. It buried itself into the sailor's shoulder and he fell away from the helm.

Remiel had jumped from the foredeck and was sprinting across the wet timbers to suppress his brother. Caliban meanwhile had created a few yards of slack in the chain and stood clutching the rusty links as if he were brandishing a sword. His skin was bubbling in the bright clear light, but he seemed to be oblivious to any accompanying pain. Remiel leapt at him to knock him back down, but Caliban quickly stepped to one side whipping the chain around as he did so. Remiel howled in agony as the iron links slapped into his face, breaking his nose in the process. He fell back, clutching his face as it sprayed blood onto the deck where it mingled with his brother's, bringing a brighter streak of red to a darkening pool.

As Remiel staggered back, Caliban brought around the chain a second time. The metal links sliced through the air and welted across the back of Remiel's skull. His vision blurred and for a brief moment the pain of his broken nose left him as a more pronounced pain at the back of his head took over. He fell hard upon the deck.

Having dispatched Gamelyn and Remiel, Caliban set about his next objective – to place the ship in so much peril it would give him time to devise the means to escape capture. With unerring precision, he flung one end of chain around the helm and pulled down, jamming the links between the steering wheel and the metal post to which it was fixed. Almost instantly the boat went careering to leeward, and all on board felt the deck shift as the vessel embarked upon a new and significantly more dangerous route.

Gamelyn recognized the threat immediately. With the knife still lodged in his shoulder, he pulled himself up to regain control of his boat. The thick sound of the keel pounding the waves was accompanied by the discord of the waves slapping back, and the thick currents beneath shook the hull so much that the ship groaned trying to resist the pull of the water. Three leagues to the south, the Worldpool sucked the ice-strewn lake down into its belly, and the momentum of the ship suggested that it would not be long before she was added to the vortex's endless meal. Gamelyn tried to turn his vessel windward but the chain was wedged against the iron hub of the steering wheel. Weakened by the large fish

knife embedded in his shoulder, there was little the ship's captain could do to influence the direction The Melody had taken.

Suddenly a white explosion erupted across the ship's prow. It had struck one of the innumerable shards of frozen water that circled around the Worldpool. Splinters of ice rained down on the deck.

Caliban had somehow managed to completely free himself of his bonds and gathered one end of the chain in large loops at his side. Despite the impossible surgery he had performed on himself, he seemed to have found new strength and with little effort he marched up to Gamelyn at the helm and slung the chain around his neck and pulled tight. Gamelyn gasped for air as the rusted links bit into his neck.

Ten feet away Gerriod's mind was gripped in a paroxysm of guilt, confusion and rage. He could see his father sinking to his knees, his demise seemingly ensured by either end of the chain that had held Caliban so securely before he had stupidly given the leper the means to escape his bonds. Gerriod knew he could not beat off a grown man who had the audacity to cut off his own hand and the strength to ignore the searing pain of his flesh broiling in the sunlight, but he was consumed by a need to strike back at the one who had attacked his father and the only weapon he could see was the chain Caliban had used so effectively to turn the tables on them. All Gerriod wanted to do is take the chain and whip Caliban across the face with it. He wanted to inflict as much pain upon him as possible. It was a simple, thoughtless desire, and with less sense than courage, the cabin boy exploded into action.

Gerriod dived for the chain at the foot of the steering wheel just as the ship listed to starboard. A steep wedge of frozen water had careered into the portside hull. The boat swung on its axis, the portside tilting skyward whilst waters strewn with boulders of ice crashed over the starboard gunnels. Gerriod slid into the ship's capstan and clung desperately to its wooden trunk. His father and the crazed leper were not so fortunate. As the ship continued canting to its right, another white wall of water broke on the deck sweeping Gamelyn and Caliban from view. In the tumult of noise that accompanied the violent clash of water, ice and wood, Gerriod thought he could hear the rhythmic clank-clank-clank of the chain slithering across the deck and over the starboard gunnel. His head whipped around to see his father disappear into the churning waters of the lake. Caliban had already vanished beneath the Erras' turbulent surface. And all the while the sun stared down dispassionately from above.

Gerriod clambered to his feet just as the vessel was hit by another frozen broadside from the left. As he felt the ship shift beneath his feet, a stranger sensation overwhelmed him. White light flared up.

He was by the ship's wheel. The tall figure of Remiel Grayson was before him, kicking at the iron lifeline that tied his father to the boat. 'Your father's dead, boy. There's nothing I can do.'

The white light burned across his eyes again and Gerriod found he was where he was seconds before, clambering to his feet, his eyes upon the starboard gunnel over which his father had disappeared. Fuelled by the power of the Worldpool, now just over a league off the starboard rail, the water hit the boat with unabated malice. Gerriod was lifted up by the freezing surge and within the space of a second, sucked over the starboard gunnel, just as his father and Caliban had been moments before.

'Dad!' Gerriod screamed, panic and intense cold consuming him, hoping against hope that somehow his father had extricated himself from his dire predicament and was able to assist. But it was not the case. Now ten feet under the chilling water with a heavy chain wound around his neck, Gamelyn was losing consciousness and was in no position to help himself, let alone his son.

Gerriod instinctively clasped shut his mouth and held his breath in hasty preparation for the plunge into the depths of Lake Erras. But he was caught before the lake could claim him and the world swirled around him as he was aggressively swung back over the deck and into the stunsail rigging.

'Stay there!' barked Remiel Grayson who, having saved Gerriod, set out to save Gamelyn as well. Clutching the hard, wet ropes, Gerriod exhaled a fearful gasp and his eyes darted feverishly over the choppy water looking for some sign of his father. All that could be seen was the chain, taut against the gunnel, slicing diagonally into the opaque folds of the lake.

Again the white light flared.

He was clutching the wheelpost. Remiel's robes flapped beside him. Only ten feet away he could see his father's eyes roll back in his head as consciousness left him. Above the crunching sounds of ice being comminuted in the maw, Gerriod could hear a voice. A harsh voice, made harsher under the tranquil blue skies that mocked the white chaos below. 'You have to choose Remiel! He'll die if you don't bring me aboard.'

Everything blurred as the scorching white light signalled Gerriod's return to his immediate situation.

The Melody's portside was almost completely below the waterline. The bowsprit kept dipping treacherously into the lake. The water chaotically pulled and pushed the ship. The violence of the movement of the lake was chilling, as if the very water was in its death throes, vainly resisting, before being taken forever by the ever-nearing Worldpool. The deck was continually swamped by the lake, so much so that it became difficult to differentiate between the ship and the water. In no time at all, The Melody would be yanked under by the vortex.

Seeing no sign of his brother or Gamelyn, Remiel scrambled his way up to the helm of the boat. He kicked sharply at the chain caught between the post and the steering wheel. With abject horror, Gerriod realized what he was doing. 'No!' the boy screamed. 'My father. You've got to save my father!'

Remiel kicked again, and without looking up stated plainly, 'Your father's dead, boy. There's nothing I can do.' He kicked again at the chain. *It moved, but didn't free itself from the wheel. If Remiel did not get the ship to starboard, the entire vessel would be consumed by the Worldpool. He tried to turn the wheel but it would not budge with the chain still caught in it.*

Gerriod's face was a beacon of rage. Remiel's indifference to the fate of the men who had been swept overboard infuriated him, and he spat a Palian obscenity at him before he jumped out of the relative security of the rigging onto the shifting deck. Sped on by the callowness or bravery of youth, he raced towards the chain slicing into the oaken railing lining the ship's side and pulled with all his might. Gerriod's effort was more a gesture than anything else, as the chain did not move an inch, but it was enough to compel Remiel into action.

'Get behind me boy. You'll be more use to your father there.'

Gerriod turned to see Remiel straining with all his might, his feet locked against the iron bulwark surrounding the helm, his back arched. He was trying to bring in the chain. For a few seconds he resembled a statue, mute and still, but then the chain gave ground and Remiel's upper body leaned back as his hands scrambled down the links and gripped a new section of chain. A sweeping rush of water pushed Gerriod back towards the helm and he clutched at Remiel's robes when he was within reach. He slid himself into a position behind Remiel and grasped a length of chain.

'We pull on the next wave,' Remiel said, his voice soaked in the pain of the struggle. Gerriod nodded and the two prepared themselves for the next surge. They didn't have to wait long. Within seconds, the ship pitched to starboard as the lake crashed over the gunnel. Without any other signal, Remiel and Gerriod pulled as one, and managed to haul in five feet of chain. Their hands danced down the chain and clamped on the links. As the water receded, the chain seemed to double in weight and Gerriod would have slid forward had he not wedged himself between the wheel and the tall, robed man. But the boy was not concerned for his own safety; he peered around Remiel's hips but could see no sign of his father.

Another surge of water and another five feet of chain were pulled in. The waters swamped the deck again, but this time Gerriod could make out a shape in the guts of the swell. His father threw out an arm and with more luck than skill managed to hook it over the railing. He was as close to drowned as anyone could be, and if it were not for his shaking hand, Gerriod would have thought his father dead. Gamelyn's other hand was wedged between the chain and his throat. It had taken all his strength to stop the chain from snapping his neck. Blood leaked across his chest, swirling in the dark waters washing about him.

'Dad!' Gerriod screamed but he could not be heard over the deafening roar of the dark maw crunching on the frozen bones of the water only 300 yards off the starboard bow.

Remiel prepared himself for one last yank on the chain, but as the waters belted the deck yet again, he saw something that made him stop.

'Caliban!' he sneered under his breath.

A gnarled hand was curled around a length of chain behind Gamelyn. Caliban had not been taken by the maelstrom. Remiel's greatest fears were confirmed when the hand twitched and Caliban pulled his head free of the water and sucked in air voraciously – he had survived. The look on his face was one of triumph.

The Melody groaned as the coils of the Worldpool took hold. The ship was hurtling through the water, thrust forward by the serpentine currents that twisted around the rim of the great hole in the lake.

'Bring us in Remiel!' Caliban commanded. 'You'll kill us all if you hesitate. He can't hold on much longer. If he doesn't drown or get crushed, the cold will kill him.'

He was right. Gamelyn's head lolled about like a rag doll's and his hold on the gunnel was tenuous at best. His fingers shook as his blood started to freeze. For all his bravado, Caliban did not fair much better. His head bled where a chunk of ice had torn the skin from his skull. The rest of his flesh continued to blister in the brilliant sunshine.

Remiel grimaced. The weight of the chain was now unbearable. His mind was racing. If he did not remove the chain from the wheel within seconds, the ship would be claimed by the Worldpool. But that would mean throwing Gamelyn to the mercy of the vortex. And if he pulled him in, he would also pull in Caliban who held Gamelyn in a desperate embrace, and would never let him go. With unerring certainty, Remiel knew that he could not save Gamelyn without saving Caliban.

If he brought the pair on board, he would have to subdue Caliban, and that would take more time than they had. In less than a minute, the ship would be swallowed whole.

The enormity of the decision was crushing. Gamelyn's eyes were bulging, rolling back into his skull as the chain squeezed upon his flesh. He had lost consciousness and no longer held the gunnel. Only the chain kept him from the depths. Caliban, feeling Gamelyn's body go limp and realising that his life was in the hands of his twin alone, gazed maniacally at the grip Remiel had upon the chain. He bared his teeth and screamed, 'You have to choose Remiel!' Caliban's thin voice cut through the sound of the wind and waves. 'He'll die if you don't bring me aboard.'

To Gerriod's horror, despite the rising calamity around him, Remiel did nothing. His legs remained propped against the bulwark, but his arms did not pull in the chain 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?'

And a choice was made. Remiel turned to face Gerriod who had almost exhausted himself pulling on the thick chain keeping his father from a watery grave. Tenderly running a gloved hand through the boy's hair, Remiel whispered, 'Forgive me,' but the sound of iron chinks slithering back across the deck became the only sound Gerriod could hear. Remiel had released the chain and condemned Caliban and Gamelyn to the Worldpool.

Before Gerriod could do anything, in a move that was as shocking as it was swift, Remiel kicked down hard at the chain wedged between the wheel and the post. It broke free and the wheel started spinning wildly. The ship spilled to port and Gerriod caught a painful glimpse of his father's hand slipping beneath the waves, palm bared as if in some pathetic gesture of farewell. Remiel shot out a hand and managed to take hold of the wheel. He grunted loudly as he tried to gain control of the vessel, but the Worldpool had taken great interest in The Melody and would not let her go. He had no understanding of the rigging above nor

the engine below, but he knew he had to bring the ship to starboard if they had any hope of escape. Inch by inch, Remiel pulled down the right side of the steering wheel, but his efforts seemed to have no influence upon the ship's bearing.

Suddenly his back exploded in pain. Gerriod had taken hold of the killick he had tripped over earlier and slammed it into Remiel's spine. An agonized cry escaped from the man's lips as his hands reflexively swung from the wheel to his back. Gerriod held the killick up to bring it down on Remiel's skull but lost his balance as the ship canted to port. Remiel used the opportunity to grab the boy and sling him to the far side of the helm where he slid for five feet before his head slammed into the brass coaming that lay across the door to the galley below. Gerriod hardly had time to grunt before Remiel picked him up and threw him into the darkness below, stating emotionlessly, 'You'll be safer in there.'

The dark light was replaced by white and suddenly Gerriod felt himself thrust into a situation beyond his comprehension.

He was back on the deck of the ship but everything had changed. It was night-time and the ship looked different. The gunnels were lower and the hull shape was curved. Before him, shining in the brilliant light of a Myrran night, the Worldpool continued to dine on the frozen waters of Lake Erras. Someone was beside him. A leper. But not Caliban. She was clad in bandages. She was speaking to him. 'I was a dancer, you know....'

As the white light ingested him, he reached out and held her hand.

The darkness returned and Gerriod screamed out for his father. The only reply he received was the deep thumping sound of the hold door being shut. A thin, clicking noise indicated that he had been locked in. Gerriod wanted to break the door down, wanted to leap over the ship's side and save his father, but had no energy left. Gamelyn was gone, the door was unbreakable and he was exhausted. A sweeping sense of his inconsequentiality overwhelmed him and as the next wave belted the ship, Gerriod fell to the floor not even bothering to brace himself for the impact. The ship careened even further to port and he let himself slide into a corner of the hold where he curled up, sobbing until sleep took him.

The straggling stars faded in the growing light of dawn and in the eerie yellow glow of the binnacle light Gerriod could see Remiel, piloting the boat back towards Palia. He must have somehow pulled the ship away from the Worldpool and in the course of the evening brought the young boy back up on deck. He had placed a blanket over Gerriod and rolled up his outer robe to make a pillow for the lad's head.

The scene before Gerriod was serene. The movement of the ship was gentle and rhythmic. The engine throbbed reassuringly. He could hear distant bleating of gillygulls in the cool air high above. There was no hint of the violence of the day before. The surging water had washed the blood from the decks and things looked almost normal on The Melody.

But things were not normal. His father had been swallowed by the Worldpool and Gerriod was all alone.

He sat up and instinctively rubbed various aches and bruises acquired in the tumult of the previous day's battle. His head ached, his mouth was parched and he felt as if he had not eaten in days.

In his peripheral vision, Remiel caught sight of the boy's movements and made his way over to him. He knelt down on the deck. 'Boy, I am deeply sorry about what happened to your father. If there had been another way, I would have taken it.' He spoke slowly, purposefully. His voice quavered.

Gerriod was quite taken aback by the intensity of the man's emotions. The bottom of one of Remiel's eyelids shook almost imperceptibly, but enough for Gerriod to know that he was struggling as he tried to make his peace with the son of the man he had just condemned to a horrible death. He looked much smaller and Gerriod realised he was not much older than a boy. His face contained all the uncertainty of youth.

Remiel bit his bottom lip, hopeful that he would be granted a sliver of understanding, if not forgiveness.

But Gerriod would not let Remiel's sudden show of feeling influence his heart which was pounding with anger. His eyes darted around for the killick or some other heavy implement he could ram into the man's gentle face. 'There was another way,' he snarled, 'but you chose to save your own skin, and now I have no father.'

Remiel reeled back on his haunches as if physically struck. His brow furrowed and then he gave a small nod. 'I understand.'

'Do you? Do you?' shouted the boy. Above, the gillygulls, frightened by the outburst, flapped their wings and shot away.

Remiel put out a hand and then, thinking better of the gesture, pulled it back to lie flaccidly in his lap. 'Yes. I do. My own father is dying, and the thought of -'

Gerriod rose to his feet and shoved the tall man in the chest. Remiel fell back onto his rear and stared dumbstruck at the boy.

'How dare you!' Gerriod spat. 'You have no right to compare yourself to me. You have no right to say you understand.' Gerriod's voice increased in pitch as disgust gripped his throat. 'How could you say you understand,' he screamed hysterically, 'when you killed your own brother so easily?'

Remiel's eyes darted about as he tried to digest what the boy was saying. 'I'm not the —' But he knew better than to finish the sentence. In light of what had happened, he could not hope to convince Gerriod of anything other than the fact he was a cold-blooded murderer.

Gerriod had more to say. 'What was your brother's crime Mr Grayson? Leprosy? It's hardly a reason to kill a man.'

'You saw him attack your father. He was hardly innocent,' Remiel countered, striving to control his emotions by speaking slowly.

'You can hardly blame him!' Gerriod shouted. 'You bound him up like an animal.' Gerriod was surprised at his own sentiments. He cared less about the leper than his comments suggested, but the sight of Remiel releasing the chain that held his father was still fresh in his mind. 'What had he done Mr Grayson to make you hate him so?'

'He... he had...' Remiel was floundering. He wanted the boy to understand everything. After he had wrested the boat back from the Worldpool's grasp, an impossible act owing its success more to luck than skill, he had spent the night replaying the turn of events over and over in his head. By the time the last moon sank behind the curved horizon of the lake, Remiel had reconciled himself to the fact that his actions were at least justified. But there was no way he could acceptably explain his reasons to Gerriod, and that was not an easy thing to bear.

He stood up and returned to the helm. He did not want to enrage the boy further.

Gerriod spent the rest of the morning looking out across the bow of the ship. Although the course Remiel had plotted was generally north, it was clear that the man only had a vague sense of the direction of Palia. At one point, Gerriod wanted to taunt him, tell him that as soon as they got back to the village he would have the local Magistrate arrest him, but he decided to keep his plan to himself, lest Grayson attack him before he got the chance to hand the murderer over to the authorities.

It was a hot day but Remiel did not move from the helm. Gerriod's thirst got the better of him and he took a tankard from the hooks above the barrel, just as he had done for Caliban half a day earlier, and dipped

it in the water. He took a deep draught and as he did so noticed Remiel's gaze upon him. The man was staring intently as if waiting for something to happen. Gerriod glared back at him defiantly and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. The water was cool, but there was something odd about it. And just as this thought entered his mind, it started leaving it. His senses similarly were departing his body. It was like standing on a roadside watching all knowledge of taste, touch, smell and sight pass by, headed somewhere he could not follow. The last sense to leave Gerriod was sound, the sound of Remiel Grayson walking across the deck and whispering into his ear: 'Forget...'

‘Sanctuary – at last!’

A faint smile spread across Gerriod's grizzled face. He was only thirty-nine years old but the winds that blew over Lake Erras had weathered his skin making him look much older.

He stalled the ship and went down below to fire up the boiler for the dangerous passage across the straits. The bunkering before the passage was crucial. He recently fitted the trawler out with a new engine. *The Crimson Dawn* was now powered by a frozen fuel called Cold, which was brought in from the mines of Sessymir. Gerriod could not leave the helm during the crossing, so he stoked the boiler with the niveous, blue clumps of petrified ice. The blocks of Cold hissed as they were flung into the fire and within seconds an inferno bubbled and blistered in the guts of the boiler. Satisfied with the fire, Gerriod strode up the companion way and out onto the deck.

To starboard he could see the dark waters of the Worldpool adorned with icy white shapes, like snowflakes on a deep puddle. He could feel the tug of vortex on the prow of the ship. The stern started drifting to port and at this point Gerriod pulled down hard on the brass throttle and the vessel lurched forward. Waves hammered the ship, but she drove on steadily. Icy flocs passed by on either side offering little resistance as the bow-shaped iron hull sliced its way to the leper colony.

The passage of the North-West Strait took over an hour. *The Crimson Dawn* clawed through the water yard by yard and by nightfall had rounded a small isle marking the end of the strait. From this point the leper colony was only half a league away. Gerriod prepared to dock.

The procedure was always the same. *The Crimson Dawn* would only stay moored long enough to disgorge the contents of its hold. The stocks for the colony were always left at the end of the pier, where they would be collected some time after Gerriod's departure. The mariner was happy with this arrangement. Tomorrow afternoon, he would arrive back

in Palia where a small bag of gold coins would be waiting for him, courtesy of the Bank of Cessair. Gerriod made the trip out to the island every few weeks and this regular source of income from government coffers had allowed him to live a comfortable life in the quiet backwater of Palia. His life had stayed pretty much the same for the past twenty years and that was a source of great contentment to him. There were those who craved great adventure and new horizons, but not Gerriod Blake. He led a simple life unfettered by the unexpected. But that was about to change.

As *The Crimson Dawn* pulled alongside the long, rickety pier that led to the colony, Gerriod uncoiled the ropes and threw them around the thick, white bollards at the pier's end. As usual there was no-one to meet him, not even the warden of the colony who was a leper himself. Gerriod made his way across to the capstan and brought up the cargo from the hold below. Within an hour all the colony's supplies had been deposited on the pier.

With one hand resting on the top of a bollard, Gerriod paused before leaving and looked across at the Skyfall at the eastern end of the great lake. It was illuminated by Arma, the Myr's largest moon and stood like an ivory tower watching over the blue waters at its base. Gerriod felt at peace looking at the security of the Skyfall, always changing and yet always the same. The nearby isles were now cloaked in darkness, but the lake was lit with countless stars, each one rising and falling with the heaving of the water.

Gerriod turned his gaze to the leper colony. Lights could be seen in the dwellings beyond the small fortress wall. The gate at the end of the pier was also illuminated by a beacon fire which caused shadows to dance across the dock.

Gerriod squinted. Three shadows seemed to have taken on a life of their own and were moving towards him at a ferocious speed. Then he realized... he was about to be attacked.

The three shadows were escapees intent on taking his boat. Years earlier, some lepers had attempted this, but were foiled by his cabin boy who spotted them long before they reached the pier. But the cabin boy had grown up and left, and now Gerriod was on his own and his reflexes were slower. The escapees were almost halfway down the pier when he came to his senses and burst into action.

He quickly removed the lines from the bollards and jumped the gunnels landing ungracefully upon the deck. Gerriod groaned as the jarring impact reminded him that he was no longer the sprightly sailor

who – years ago – would think nothing of jumping down from the boom above. His thumping landing and subsequent groan were accompanied by a strange, scuttling sound, but he could not determine the direction of the noise. Gerriod looked behind him – the three lepers on the pier were no more than twenty yards away. He fired up the engines which groaned into life. Murky water swirled and bubbled around the ship's stern and after a seeming eternity, the vessel pitched away from the pier.

'Not so fast Captain!' a voiced rasped out of the darkness at the stern of the boat. A broken figure of a man lurched into the light of the pilothouse. The leper staggered forward brandishing a long knife. Without warning and at surprising speed, the blade flashed out at Gerriod, slicing across his cheek. Seconds later the warm touch of blood washed over his face and without seeing the wound, the mariner knew he had been cut deeply. 'That's just in case you think I'm only here to talk. Stop the boat.'

Before Gerriod could respond, two pairs of hands sprung out of the darkness and clasped themselves to him, one pair around each arm. A third pair whipped a short length of chain around his neck. This chain, rusted and cold, cut cruelly into his neck. He was choking but could not bring up his hands to ease the pain. His larynx was slowly being crushed. Despite the disease which had eaten away their flesh, the strength of the lepers was astounding, desperation fuelling their fractured bodies.

A gravelly voice, this time a female's, scraped against his ear: 'When we release you, don't speak. Just stop the boat and back it towards the pier. Okay?'

Gerriod nodded and the lepers who had pinioned his arms released their hold. He looked up at the man who had first spoken. He was dripping wet and clearly exhausted from the arduous swim he had just undertaken. The other three must have waited until he had reached the ship before they made their way down the pier. Whilst the man's covert boarding of the ship was unexpected, there was something else about him that was even more surprising: he wore an old denim jacket that had the word 'Warden' proudly emblazoned upon the lapel. Gerriod stared at the word dumbly, as the enormity of the occasion dawned on him – this was an insurrection.

With the iron chain still tightly wound around his neck, the mariner brought down the throttle to idle the engines and prepared to reverse the vessel as commanded. As he swung his head around to dock *The Crimson Dawn*, Gerriod obtained his first proper look at the three lepers who had jumped from the pier onto his ship. Their state of leprosy was significantly more advanced than the Warden's. The woman had lost most of her hair and the majority of her face was swathed in bandages.

The men with her were missing numerous fingers and toes. The man on the left, a member of the proud, beautiful Acora was nothing more than a mockery of his former state. He was stooped, misshapen and ugly. Where his nose should have been a seeping cavity lay, like a dark pit on a rugged landscape. The characteristic pointed ears of his race were nothing more than shapeless lumps. The other man was a Helyan and despite his affliction still upheld the Helyan tradition of wearing virtually nothing. His skin was just as ravaged as his companions.

The woman, a Tethran by her accent, spoke again. 'Slowly Captain.' Her voice was not so raspy that her contempt for him was lost. She held the chain tightly in a mottled fist and gave a cold, lipless smile. Gerriod knew at once that she would not hesitate to order his throat be slit open.

He looked over the gunnels to the pier to find it full of shadowy, decrepit figures. Sanctuary's walls contained close to 300 inmates and every one of them had piled onto the pier. Gerriod had been ambushed by the entire colony. With a rapidly increasing sense of dread, he eased the ship into reverse and she chugged back towards the dock.

The sight of the diseased mob cast panic out across his body. The closer he drew to the pier, the more anxious he became. The lepers looked so desperate, he doubted whether they would see any sense in keeping him alive. The ship was perhaps twenty yards astern of the pier. 'Enough space to get up speed,' he muttered to himself. The three men on his boat went to the gunnels to throw the lines back onto the bollards on the pier, but the Tethran woman remained beside him watching his every move. She gave the chain a savage tug just to remind Gerriod who was in charge. Unexpectedly, vague memories of his father danced through Gerriod's mind, teasing him.

He flung the ship into action and accompanying the lurching action of the ship, he could feel a momentary slackness in the chain as his captor's grip on it loosened. It gave him the opportunity he required. Gerriod dropped to the deck and rolled under the wheel. He rose on the other side, slipping out of the chain which he coiled around the hub of the wheelpost.

The Crimson Dawn surged forwards, slightly to starboard and the aft came about like a slow-moving pendulum. The back quarter of the boat slammed into the old pier. The timbers of the dock shattered against the iron keel and many of the advancing lepers were unceremoniously thrown into the darkening waters of Lake Erras.

The ship hurtled forward at maximum speed out into the lake. The Acoran on the forecastle lines had fallen into a pile of fishing nets and was thrashing about furiously to free himself. The other, the Helyan, had toppled over the side and within seconds sank to Lake Erras' stony floor

where he would die a lonely death. The Warden had also fallen awkwardly and clutched at his ankle which he had twisted when the ship struck the pier. His face was a portrait of rage. 'Kill him!' he screamed to the Tethran.

The woman rushed at him, pulling a knife from her waist belt as she came. For the second time, Gerriod's cheek was sliced open and blood spurted across the deck. His hand went up instinctively to the gash, but he had enough presence of mind to stay focused on his own survival. He kicked out at his assailant's legs and she fell back, her fall accentuated by the listing of the ship to starboard – the Worldpool's influence upon the vessel was evident even though the lake's churning heart was almost seven leagues away.

The Warden had picked up a rusty brown pike, used for gathering in the lines, and pulled himself to his feet. The man, enraged by Gerriod's defiance, lurched across midships, swinging the pike wildly as he came. 'We don't need you... just your ship,' he sneered declaring his murderous intent. He did not notice that he was crossing the grate above the main hold, but Gerriod recognised the chance to rid himself of another assailant and dived for the release lever.

The Warden toppled forward spectacularly as the floor beneath him disappeared. He was swallowed up by the hold and after the initial clunk of his head striking the hold's metal bulkhead, he was heard no more.

The Acoran had extricated himself from the forecabin nets and had circled around the deck to attack Gerriod from behind. Sensing movement to his left, Gerriod turned to face the man. A gruesome snarl spread across the leper's hideous face, but his eyes betrayed the fear within. Gerriod sized him up and, encouraged by the poor physical condition his assailant was in, ran at him with all his might and thrust him against the capstan. The leper was stunned by the viciousness of Gerriod's attack and covered his face as if to protect its fragile state from any ensuing blows. Gerriod pressed his advantage. He took the leper by his ragged clothes and flung him to the deck. The man's body stiffened as a five inch davit hook sliced into his back just beneath his ribs. Gerriod clambered over to the davit's controls and threw his weight on a large lever which set the winch in motion. The impaled leper was slowly lifted high above the deck, swinging with the listing of the ship. He thrashed around, the hook buried deep in his back, a flailing fish whose decomposition was already in advanced stages.

Gerriod spun around, half-expecting the Tethran woman to attack with her knife. But there was no such attack. He searched the deck but she was nowhere to be seen. To his left, the pilothouse was empty except for the chain he had hastily lodged in the steering. To his right, nothing

moved save the figure convulsing in the throes of death at the pointy end of the winch.

Had she fallen overboard?

Unlikely.

The mariner moved slowly towards the bow of the ship, his eyes darting here and there, his body tense as it prepared for an unseen attack. *The Crimson Dawn* raced forward, pummelling the waves as she went, but Gerriod could hardly hear or feel anything but the pounding of his heart.

He made his way slowly around the pilothouse. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something move. He whipped his head around to see a thirty foot pinnacle of ice glide past. Like the pealing of distant thunder, a deep groaning sound filled the air. Seconds later, *The Crimson Dawn* was shoved forward as two colliding icebergs hammered into her stern. Another iceberg shattered across the port bow and nails of ice spilled over the deck. The ship was listing badly to starboard but Gerriod had to ignore it. The Tethran leper was desperate and despite the fact that his boat was being assaulted on all sides by the frozen sentinels at the heart of Lake Erras, Gerriod had to consider the woman to be the more immediate threat. She would stop at nothing to acquire his ship; his bleeding face was testimony to that.

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 midair 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.

And the darkness faded to white. Blinding white light, but the blinding was only temporary.

He was staring up at a dark sky. He could see one of the Myr's moons hanging in the heavens high above. It was Arma. She stared back at him impassively, far removed from the orgiastic writhing of the ice and water surrounding him. He was in a small skiff. On the seat next to him, furiously paddling an oar that was a splinter of its former self, a Sapphyrran stared grimly across the bow of the tiny vessel.

'Are you scared?' he heard himself ask the Sapphyrran who smiled and stated coolly, *'I've fallen three leagues down a waterfall. I think I can handle this.'*

Gerriod heard himself laugh and mutter, 'Yeah, I'm terrified too.'

The scene faded to white and the white to black.

He was lying face down on the deck. A violent throbbing at the base of his skull told him he had hit his head on something and lost consciousness. He had no sense of how much time had passed. His thoughts were all awry, but he knew that he had been looking for someone. He staggered to his feet and walked clumsily across the quarterdeck. As he moved out from the pilothouse, he saw her – the Tethran who had tried to kill him. She was standing by the starboard rail with her back to Gerriod, unaware of his presence. Strangely she seemed to have forgotten about him. The woman was just staring out at the lake, leaning against the rail as if she were on a cruise ship. Gerriod stepped forward apprehensively, suspecting a trap.

The sky above was predictably clear but in the waters beyond the ship no reflection of stars could be seen – just darkness and ice. And then with gut-wrenching clarity, he realized why the Tethran had abandoned her fight – they were dead already. In his battle for survival Gerriod had ignored the Worldpool, but now he could see it, or rather the darkness it created off his starboard bow. His stomach sank, and for the first time in twenty years out on the water, Gerriod felt nauseated as he looked out across the lake.

He made his way over to the rail and stood there next to his adversary, staring out across the black maw that filled their vision. It lay there on the starlit lake like some monstrous predator of the deep. It had wrapped its stygian tentacles around *The Crimson Dawn* and there was nothing the mariner or the leper could do about their fate. There was no escape from the Worldpool's grasp.

Another flash of white.

'Remiel! What's it going to be?'

Gerriod could hear a harsh voice screaming to be heard above the gnashing of frozen waters upon the ship's hull. He was on another boat, a much older boat by the design. The Worldpool poured its malice over the gunnels and he was taking refuge behind a tall man clad in black robes. In the ferocious surge that attacked the starboard of the ship, Gerriod could make out two figures attached to a length of chain that ran out from the ship's steering wheel.

'Forgive me,' said the stranger beside him.

The iron chain cut through the water swamping the deck until it disappeared entirely, taking with it the two men at its far end.

The brilliant white light flared up and Gerriod was back on the deck of *The Crimson Dawn*.

Unexpectedly, under the din of the crushing waters surrounding the ship, he heard a voice. 'I'm sorry Captain. You did not deserve this.' The woman was softly spoken and clearly remorseful for her attack upon the innocent mariner.

'No, I didn't,' Gerriod said without any hint of the enmity that had existed earlier. Now they were about to be taken by the Worldpool, there was no need to fight or even argue.

The leper turned her head from the screaming gulf and looked up at Gerriod. The leprosy was not quite so advanced that it hid her youth. She would have been no older than twenty. The fire in her eyes had died, and Gerriod could see a sadness that had existed long before she and her fellow inmates decided to take *The Crimson Dawn*. 'We were desperate to escape from Sanctuary. We were prepared to do anything.'

'But why now? I thought you were looked after in Sanctuary.'

'We were,' she replied almost too softly to be heard. 'Until the beast came.'

Gerriod was perplexed. 'The beast?'

Suddenly *The Crimson Dawn* dipped sharply as waves bearing massive chunks of ice poured over the ship's bow smashing the pilot house to splinters. The vessel's iron keel creaked and groaned as the vortex tore at the hull. It would not be long now.

'For the last two months we have been persecuted by a huge black creature from the skies. It killed fifty inmates before we devised this plan to escape,' she said painfully.

'I'm sorry it turned out this way,' said Gerriod sincerely.

'It's still an escape,' the Tethran replied.

A wave of prodigious proportions swamped the deck, pushing the two of them away from the rail. A long shard of ice speared deep into the woman's abdomen and she yelped in pain. Gerriod both pulled her up and grasped the metal rail as if their lives actually depended upon it, but it was an act of futility. The Worldpool would soon swallow the ship whole along with anything and anyone on board. The mariner and the leper stood side by side in an unconscious act of defiance. The vortex continued to roar.

Tears welled up in the Tethran's eyes. 'I was a dancer, you know. I once performed at the Scarlet Rock Theatre before the Lord Chamberlain himself.' Her voice was both proud and hopeless, soaked with a tragic awareness of her own evanescence.

Gerriod smiled tenderly. His hand slid down the railing and grasped hers. Although her hand was wrapped in coarse bandages, and the skin underneath insensitive to touch, she was aware of his gesture and she curled her fingers around his in response. The ship's speed increased terribly and the vessel began to list so hard to starboard that the bilge and keel were almost completely exposed. The Tethran gazed up at the swirling waters that would end her life. She vainly clung to the rail but her strength failed her. She let go and was ripped from Gerriod. With a scream that could not be heard, she slid over the rail and vanished into the darkness of the Worldpool.

Gerriod wound one of the ship's lines around his arm, and could do no more than watch his own demise. Up above, the brilliant stars of the Myr's skies whirled around an ever-spinning circle of white streaks. The disk of blurred light spun faster and faster, became smaller and smaller until finally there was only darkness. Cold, swirling darkness.

Chapter Three Bregon Woods, Morae

Motherhood had become a perilous pursuit in Morae. In the space of six months, over half the witches in the Bregon Woods alone had lost their babies to the Ghul. The Moraens did what they could to fortify themselves against the abductors, but the Ghul were so relentless that a night had not passed in months without a child being taken. When baby Birren was born, Lara Brand was both delighted and mortified.

There was a time when the Ghul were just shadowy figures from half-forgotten myths. Myths about a fiery rock that had crashed from the sky unleashing horrid beasts and demons upon the world. However in those myths, the Ghul were sealed under the earth never to return again. Although there was evidence of a great rock crashing into Lake Erras thousands upon thousands of years ago, few people believed the Ghul were anything more than mere fantasy. Last autumn changed all that – the Ghul were real and they had returned.

When they first appeared, many abductions took place. At first it was the women and not the children who were targeted, but after a month that all changed – for the worst. When the children were taken, no demands were made, no explanations given. As soon as the sun went down, the Ghul could be seen roaming the forest floor, looking for an opportunity to steal a child.

They were armoured but not with the metal and mail Lara had seen worn by the knights of neighbouring Scoriath. These pale ‘knights’ wore the skeletal remains of beasts the like of which were never seen in Morae, or indeed on the surface of the Myr. There was no consistency in the design of the armour. Some Ghul wore helmets fashioned from huge horned skulls, others had lashed smaller bones together in an obscene headdress. There were Ghul who had strung together rib cages to form off-white body armour. Some of the more imaginative ones had strapped sharp claws to their arms. There were even those who armed themselves with spears fashioned from the femurs of gigantic monsters from beneath the earth. The Ghul were horrific-looking soldiers – cadaverous bodies dressed in skeletons, armed with weapons of ivory and bone.

Their eyes were fixed in a manic stare, giving little hint of any intelligence behind them. But there was intelligence, and cruelty and savagery and malice.

The Ghul’s activities were not diurnal. It was not known where they went when the sun came up but each new dawn was cherished by the

Moraens, as it meant twelve or so hours without the sickly presence of the Ghul under their trees.

At first these pallid invaders only attacked the foolish and the unwary, those who were caught out with their young after dark. The women of Morae, known collectively as the Pryderi, soon learnt that the only place they could be secure was in their tree-huts high above the ground. Long before the Ghul arrived, the Pryderi set iron pikes into the trunks of their trees to impede the progress of Morae's numerous tree-climbing predators. These pikes were laced with razor-sharp wire. Into each set of pikes a trap door was placed through which the Moraens entered and exited their abodes. Large, enchanted locks secured these grates and for a while this seemed enough to foil the Ghul's attempts at child-stealing.

But they were cunning and any small opportunity was exploited as Lara Brand was to discover.

Although the Ghul were vicious and capable of inflicting serious injury upon the Pryderi, very few Moraen women had actually come to harm since autumn. However, if a mother was willing to fight, she was killed without hesitation. Sadly, if one of the women was put to death, it would inevitably follow that her offspring would be executed too. It seemed the death of the mother removed any need to keep the child alive. In light of this, many women did not raise a hand against the Ghul when they took a child. Although it went against every natural instinct in them to let their young be stolen away, fear of the child being slaughtered tamed all but the most wild of Pryderi. Those that did fight were quickly disposed of by the pale soldiers that made up the Ghul abduction squads.

The sad fact was that the Pryderi were not the race they once were. Centuries ago they had built themselves up to be formidable users of magick, capable of defending themselves against all aggressors. But the tome containing all the collective wisdom of the Moraen witches was stolen long ago and over time many incantations were forgotten. The Pryderi's intricate knowledge of spell-casting waned, and only a few could successfully complete an incantation powerful enough to provide any real contest for the Ghul.

Furthermore, any thought of direct confrontation was quickly quashed by Major Chabriel, the Ghul commander in charge of the abductions, a lean female with long white hair: 'Witches, last night, one of your coven, upset over the relocation of her child, took matters into her own hands and used magick against us. She was disposed of, but know this, as a result of her defiance, her child is now dead. We will not

tolerate such action to be taken against us. Fail to comply and under our blades your wriggly offspring will go. This is the word of Caliban.'

Despite the hold the Ghul had over the Pryderi, they did not demand all the children at once. The Ghul seemed to enjoy protracting the whole affair, their cruel nature delighting in the nervous tension that enveloped the grove like a dense fog. They could taste the rancid fear in the air and did what they could to sustain it. The Ghul were in no hurry and were content to return every night to take another child or two.

There were mothers who tried to escape Morae with their children, but Chabriel soon made it clear this was not a course of action that was in anyone's best interest. Chabriel and her squad added to their armour the bones of any Moraens foolish enough to run their blockade. Even the women who tried to escape during the day were caught by wild beasts the Ghul had trained to monitor the area around the grove. These beasts, the marroks, were indigenous to Morae and had for centuries regarded themselves to be the natural predators of the Pryderi; it spoke volumes of their evil nature that they had allowed themselves to be trained by the Ghul. Evil it seemed could recognize itself in other species and the marroks quickly found that the Ghul could supply them with enough Pryderi meat to satisfy their ravenous appetites. This is not to suggest the animals required the Ghul to assist in the hunt. Stalking Pryderi was what the marroks did best. With their long, lupine snouts and sharp eyes, the marroks slithered their way through the underbrush, constantly sniffing the ground in the hope of picking up the scent of a Moraen foolish enough to venture out on her own.

Recent months had seen them become quite brazen, attacking in groups. They watched the borders of the grove like prison guards, and except for the protected treetops houses of the Pryderi, there was nowhere a Moraen could go that the marrok could not follow. Like the Pryderi, the legless, lower half of the marrok ended in a serpentine coil which was used primarily to assist the beasts' movement through the trees. It also allowed them to hang from the branches of trees and drop on any unsuspecting prey that had the misfortune to wander beneath them. They were hard to spot in the dappled canopy of the Bregon Woods, their dark grey fur providing them with all the shadowy camouflage they needed to stay out of view.

There were members of the coven who argued that the witches should seek out help from people outside Morae. But this was rebuked by many who knew only too well the prejudice in the world outside against their kind.

‘Help? From outsiders?’ Arethusa exclaimed when Lara suggested the idea. ‘You are young and naïve Lara Brand! Where were the outsiders when the Sessymirians invaded Bregon? What help was sent in the entire 300 years they occupied the town? What help was sent five centuries ago when the Morgai stole the *Incanto* and robbed us of so much power? What help has ever been provided to help us keep the vermin marrok away?’

She was right. The Pryderi had been abominably treated by the world outside. Many Myrrans feared the witches and those who did not fear them despised them, hated their insular ways, their pride and arrogance. Then there were those who based their opinions on something less profound and more obvious – the Moraens’ physical appearance. ‘They will not help us,’ Arethusa continued. ‘To them, we are a dangerous species, hideous to behold and impossible to trust. They treat their lepers better than they treat us.’

Although there were lepers in Sanctuary who would disagree, it was true that the Pryderi were pariahs on an international scale. However, many would contest Arethusa’s use of the word *hideous*. In fact, the unique beauty of Moraen women was famed throughout the lands. Fair of face, the Pryderi had ensnared the gaze of many outsiders, but in some men the lingering gaze would harden to an angry stare when they took in the entire form – from the waist up the Pryderi epitomised the beauty of the female form, but below the waist things were very different. The long, prehensile tail that extended from the Pryderi’s abdomen resembled that of a blue serpent. Their bodies were covered in tiny scales ranging in coloration from slate to the deepest of dark purples. The arms of a Moraen woman, usually hidden beneath dark robes, were slightly longer than those hanging from the shoulders of outsiders, and they were arms that culminated in long fingernails capable of skewering a man’s eyeball (or so it was believed).

It was not just Myrran men who struggled with their acceptance of the Pryderi. The women of many nations were critical of the Moraens regarding them as a vain, petty and vindictive breed of people, an opinion probably garnered from their reclusive lifestyle if not their seductive looks. It was true that a number of the Pryderi were insular and small-minded, but there were others who believed the coven had made a mistake when it cut itself off from the world outside.

A lot of the Myrran contempt for the Pryderi was born out of xenophobia. And yet, in a world inhabited by hundreds of species as wondrous and varied as could be imagined, it was strange that one race had been singled out and distrusted more than any other. Academics in the University of Caquix had studied this phenomenon and many deduced

that the distinct prejudice against the Pryderi was sexual in nature. This was partly derived from the fact that there were no male members of the Pryderi. Moraen woman gave birth to Moraen daughters who in turn gave birth to more females. No involvement from a male was required and this, some scholars postulated, effectively neutered the males of the Myr. This emasculation process had given rise to feelings of contempt and this had been at the heart of the gulf existing between Morae and other countries.

Perhaps the most distinguishing aspect of Pryderi physiology was their phosphorescent, blue blood and the stone that lay above their heart. The stone was called the Birthstone and from it emanated a glowing, azure light. The connection between mother and daughter in Morae was so strong that the bond manifested itself biologically – the birthstone glowed steadily when mother and daughter were alive. But when the bond was severed by death, the stone stopped glowing. In a sense, it died. This inexplicable condition was one of the Pryderi's most closely-guarded secrets. It was unlikely that anyone outside of Morae knew anything about it.

The Pryderi were generally self-sufficient. They spent their days tending to arboreal flocks, growing herbs in woodland gardens and making clothes and crafts. However, some of the practitioners of magick sought work beyond Morae's borders, despite the long-standing unease regarding the rest of the Myr. The farmers of Scoriath were always prepared to pay good money to Pryderi who could cast protection spells to safeguard crops and cattle against the vagaries of weather and thieves. However, quite a few Pryderi were also reputed to be involved in less honourable employment whereby their skills with magick were used to, steal the unobtainable, influence the incorruptible or to assassinate the untouchable. Although use of incantations in such ways was officially forbidden by the coven, like any given society, the witches of Morae had members who wouldn't think twice about deviating from the ideals of their peers. Unfortunately it had given them a terrible name across the Myr.

Lara Brand was a novice, with only a few incantations to her name, basic spells such as illuminating the darkness for brief moments, or the superficial healing of small wounds and abrasions. Her problem was confidence – spell-casting did not come easy to her. She had lost her mother when she was young and this had impacted upon her development in the mystical arts. She looked like a witch – as was custom, she had

shaved off her hair above her forehead as a sign of her commitment to the eldritch ways of her people – but she did not feel like a witch.

Lara knew it was not wise to venture out at night, but her child had fallen ill, and as the night drew on little Birren's sweating and convulsions gave her little choice.

Although the Pryderi village lay high in the safety of the trees, there was no way to cross from tree to tree. Each tree was a leafy island, accessible only via the trunk. The Moraens had lopped off all connecting branches as a means of security – if the Ghul or marrok managed to obtain entry into one of the Pryderi huts, they would not be able to move to others from that tree. It was a necessary precaution but that did not help Lara at all. The coven's physician lived on the outskirts of the grove, at least twenty minutes away. Lara thought of calling out to neighbours to help her, but it was very late and they would be wary of opening their doors to any at such an hour of night.

Birren gasped a painful cry and Lara grimaced as she decided to risk the journey to the physician. She lay her little one in a dark blanket and wrapped it tightly around her. All that could be seen of the child was a pale, upset face, and a little tail that had poked through a hole in the blanket.

Lara snuffed out a candle she had burning on the table and her room was smothered in darkness. Despite the cool night-time air, she was sweating. Beads of perspiration were dotted all over her shaven brow. She wiped her head with her long, flowing sleeve, surprised at how damp the cloth became. Her tawny hair was clinging to the moist back of her neck. 'Am I *that* scared?' she murmured to herself. She didn't want to dwell on the answer.

Lara carefully made her way to the trap door in her floor and opened it slowly. The door moved soundlessly on its hinges, and the cool night air washed into the room. Cradling Birren close to her, Lara peered down into the darkness below. Although the Myr's three moons were out, very little light penetrated the thick canopy overhead. She listened and could not hear any indication of anything below. She waited a few minutes and still nothing could be heard but a susurrant breeze running through the flat, broad leaves surrounding her. Birren gave a little cry, disturbed by the darkness that hid her mother from her.

'Hush now little one,' Lara whispered. 'Everything's going to be fine.'

Lara placed her swaddling bundle into a pouch she had strapped to her chest. Birren nuzzled into her mother's breast and listened to her mother's rapid heartbeat with great curiosity.

As Lara made her way down the bole of the tree, her ears strained for any sign that the Ghul or marroks were nearby. All was still and calm. When she slithered onto the dew-covered ground at the base of the tree, Birren gave another whimper, but not of pain. Lara knew her daughter's cries. The infant was disturbed by the darkness surrounding her; Lara could feel her tail flapping about nervously. Patting the baby firmly on the back did nothing to alleviate the child's sense of agitation. The whimpering cry continued and Lara knew that it would not abate until the darkness had been dispelled.

She put a hand up to her daughter's face to comfort her to find that her skin was hot to touch. Lara had already tried a healing spell that had done nothing to rid Birren of the fever that gripped her so avariciously. Underneath the palm of Lara's hand, Birren's eyelids fluttered as the young child struggled to locate the reassuring face of her mother. Her frustrated cry grew in intensity and Lara's concern that it would soon become a howl led to a desperate course of action.

'Shhh, Birren. I'm here darling,' she whispered with great urgency. 'I'll give us a little light.'

Lara knelt down in the damp grass and lay her arms over her legs. With her palms facing the darkened canopy of the trees, she began an incantation. Strange words flowed from her lips, and her baby ceased her crying and craned her head back to listen to the spell. Although the *El Illumina* spell was a rather commonplace piece of magick among the Pryderi, Lara's anxious state made it difficult to execute and she struggled to find the cadence and inflection the spell demanded.

The beads of perspiration that had formed on her brow now glowed with ethereal light. Her scaly skin was briefly illuminated as the beads of light ran down her face. Lara cupped her hands and from the bowl they formed, the same ghostly light shone. A pool of liquid light formed in her hands, a swirling mass of gold and white. Her fingers shaped this light until the liquid mass resembled a luminescent ball. All the while, Lara's voice grew louder and more rhythmic. Shadows danced across the bark of the trees and the foliage above was painted with a gentle lustre. A gurgling laugh escaped Birren's little lips as her mother's face came into view, lit from below by the semi-solid ball of purling light. Lara's incantation stopped and the light flowing from the ball faded until it was nothing more than a soft, persistent glow upon her face.

Lara looked around apprehensively but could see no sign that anyone had been alerted to her presence by the incantation. She gazed down at her chest to see Birren's big blue eyes staring back at her. She still looked deathly ill, but she was much happier seeing her mother so close.

Lara moved off across the clearing, taking care not to drop the orb which wobbled in her hand like a ball of golden jelly. Her heart was pounding so loudly, she was terrified it would give her away.

The pair stole down the path silently, the only sign of their passing a long meandering line in the grass made by Lara's tail. The night hid her tracks, but the Ghul were creatures of darkness and would not find it difficult to find her should they stumble across signs of her passing. She was also nervous the marroks would smell her out. They had incredibly powerful olfactory senses and had been rumoured to be able to pick up a familiar scent from leagues away. In her favour, the marroks had not been seen in the immediate vicinity for weeks. The last reports of marrok activity suggested the pack was patrolling the northern border of the forest which was ten leagues away. If she was lucky, she would be able to get to the physician in one piece, and Birren's pain could be eased.

Lara made her way around a thick copse of trees at the top of a steep gully. The path dipped sharply among the rocks until it spilled out into a broad clearing bounded by steep walls on three sides. The physician's hut lay at the far end of the gully, not more than 500 yards away. Lara dared to hope that everything would be alright and it was at that point that three Ghul stepped out into the gentle light of the orb she carried. Another three came out behind her, and more again on either side of her. Slithering across the verge with rapacious delight, numerous marroks licked their slathering jowls in anticipation of the bloodbath to follow.

The Ghul were a mockery of the living, gaunt figures with skeletal faces and hollow eyes. Their cadaverous visages failed to convey any warmth at all, as if their bodies were bloodless, animated solely by grim determination and a hatred of all other beings. Their smiles were devoid of humour, unless humour was redefined as the delectation derived from routine acts of cruelty and brutality. Although they were neither tall nor physically intimidating, they were multitudinous.

Lara knew that the Ghul were impossible to reason with. She could not entreat them to leave her – and her baby – alone. There would be no way she could talk her way out of the situation.

The marroks moved in, the closest ones snapping their jaws to unnerve their quarry. As they bit the air their huge curved teeth clashed together like iron scimitars on a battlefield. Their tails swished in irrepressible excitement, a twisted mimicry of Lara's own tail which swept back and forth across the damp grass in terror.

‘Wait!’

Lara looked up to see the owner of the voice stride into the small pool of light emanating from the ball of light that was still shining from the Moraen's trembling hands. It was the Ghul commander, the female called Chabriel. In one hand she held a long whip which she cracked over the head of the advancing marroks. The serpentine hounds stopped immediately and silence fell upon the gully. Chabriel's other hand was stroking the white mane of an albino marrok. This one was larger and older than the others. As it slithered into the light, Lara gasped and clutched her baby even closer to her chest. Lara had seen him before and his appearance in the clearing chilled her to the core.

Bith Brand had been picking flowers in the meadow below. Little Lara had been told to stay on the balcony but was bored and looked down upon her mother in the field with great envy.

Bith sang a sad tune and the long plaintive notes floated up through the leaves and hung upon the branches. Lara closed her eyes and listened to her mother's song. It was a ballad about a woman whose love had gone across the sea. The woman was heart-broken and was setting off across the water to find the one she had lost. Lara didn't really understand the song – she had never even seen the sea – but the doleful melody was strangely soothing and the little girl could feel herself getting drowsy as she listened to it. Underneath her lace top, Lara's birthstone glowed, and the intricate white filigree of her shirt was suffused with a gentle, blue light.

Suddenly, an unfamiliar noise sounded, deep and disturbing. It was a bestial growl. Bith stopped singing. Lara poked her little head over the balcony, fearing the worst.

In the meadow below, Bith found herself surrounded by a pack of marroks. A large, white male marrok sniffed menacingly at the air between it and the woman whose scent it had picked up earlier that morning. It grunted ferociously at her, annoyed that it did not taste the fear it expected of prey caught in such a vulnerable position. It slithered forward, its red eyes gleaming in the springtime sun. The rest of the pack circled the pair, breathing heavily in unison, their bared fangs declaring their malicious intent.

Lara hurled herself over the balcony and caught the uppermost rung of the ladder leading down to the ground below. She clambered down the ladder but was stopped by the protective grate that encircled the tree thirty feet from the ground. She pulled at the grate's iron trap door but her mother had locked it to keep out the very creatures that were surrounding her.

'Mama!' Lara screamed as the circle around her mother grew tighter. If she had known how to count, Lara would have counted twelve hounds snapping and hissing with grotesque glee.

Bith did not answer her daughter. As soon as she heard the declaratory growl of the albino leader of the pack, she had commenced an incantation Lara had never heard before. Bith was one of the strongest, most versatile magick-users among the Pryderi. She specialized in temporal spells, incantations that actually changed the way time flowed. She knew there was only one spell that could stop the onslaught and she had to be quick. She would stop time. When the spell was finished, the marrok would be physically frozen in time and she would be released from the spell at which point she planned to steal up into the security of her tree-house.

Gentle ripples flowed out across the grass and as they touched each hound it seemed to slow down. The albino, only a few feet from her, opened its jaws wide and leapt from the grass, its teeth bared. As it leapt, the laws of physics were turned on their heads. The beast hung for an impossibly long time in the air, slowing down in its arc.

But Bith had miscalculated. Although time slowed down as her spell washed over her attackers, it did not stop. It could not stop until the spell was complete.

The hounds still came. The albino continued to move through the air, its glowing eyes fixed on the Moraen. He could now smell the fear he had sought before. Bith could not abandon the spell half-way through and she realized with terrifying clarity that she would not have time to finish it.

Nearer and nearer the albino came, slower and slower. Its hot breath moved viscously over Bith's face.

The spell was almost done but it was futile. The jaws of another marrok clamped down on Bith's arm, another on her thigh. Teeth ripped at her back so slowly Bith could feel the cold touch of each tooth being dragged across her spinal column before the epidermis burst. She could feel her blood slowly exploding from her veins, followed by the dreadful, sickening feeling of muscle and sinew being peeled from her bones. From her vantage point on the grate above, Lara screamed as she watched her mother being eaten in slow motion.

The albino gripped Bith's skull in its huge teeth and closed its jaws. She felt the jagged incisors pressing down on her head, heard her skull cracking under the weight of the beast's jaws, tasted the blood running from her nostrils as the pressure of the marrok's bite grew and grew. Seconds unfolded so slowly that what would have been a relatively quick yet savage demise became an interminable agony. Her vision darkened

imperceptibly, like a winter's twilight. All sounds faded to nothing as Death lethargically descended upon her. In her worst dreams, Bith Brand could not have imagined a more painful end to her life. The huge white hound continued to press down on her skull until it burst open like an egg and a glob of thick, incarnadine yolk slowly spilled out. It dribbled down her neck, a glacier of blood and bone.

Suddenly time around the marrok returned to normal. All that was left when the feeding frenzy had finished were her bones and the flowers she had picked for her daughter.

The albino marrok sniffed the air as if trying to place a familiar scent. Its eyes focused upon Lara and a sinister leer spread itself along his long, thin snout. Somehow, across many years, it recognized her scent. Lara's face went pale as a potent mix of hatred and fear fought each other for supremacy of her emotions. She was only five when she witnessed her mother's bloody murder. She had tried to repress the memory but the slaughter in the meadow was so vivid, it had been burnt into the retina of her mind's eye. Millennia could pass and still Lara would be unable to stop reliving every moment. As she stood before her mother's killer, rage swelled up in her and as it did so, so too did the light in her hands. It burned brighter with each passing moment, so much so that the Ghul backed away to the edges of the gully. The marroks remained close unperturbed by the glowing orb.

An unequivocal growl of contempt spewed out of the albino's mouth; it did not fear Pryderi magick. It did not really fear anything. Other marroks joined in a discordant chorus of snarls and grunts.

A little cry sang out from the bundle attached to Lara's chest and her intensifying anger fell away to be replaced by pure dread. She had brought her child out into the darkness and now stood to pay the price. Birren squirmed in her pouch, unsettled by the strange noises that now surrounded her.

The light in Lara's hands faded, the dim sphere in her palms echoing the hopelessness she felt in her heart. As the golden light fell away, Chabriel stepped forward. 'I believe this hound knows you!' she said plainly.

'It took my mother from me fifteen years ago,' Lara replied, her voice harsh and guttural.

Chabriel showed no surprise. She stared back at Lara with unsympathetic eyes. Her thin lips slowly spread in a smile that lay like a scar across her face. 'How... poetic,' she said mockingly. 'You do know that we will take your child this night, don't you?'

Lara's hands went to her chest and the ball of light spilled onto the ground where it burst into a puddle of liquid gold. 'Oh mercy no!' Lara pleaded desperately as darkness engulfed them all.

Chabriel stepped forward, now just a vague black shape in the deep dark of the gully. 'Mercy?' her voice taunted from the dark. 'Silly witch. Ghul are not capable of mercy. Do not ask of us that which we cannot give.' The sound of her voice was hollow. It was so empty of life, it was not a voice at all. Just words in the dark.

Lara squeezed her child so closely to her chest, Birren gave a little squeal of pain. The witch sank down to knees in a pusillanimous huddle, imploring the darkness to let her child go free. 'Please leave my baby. I'll give myself in her place.'

Chabriel was unmoved and responded coldly. 'You know that is not the way of things. Your supplication is wasted. We will take your child. Or your heart the marroks will devour.'

The beasts surrounding Lara howled in response, encouraged by Chabriel's suggestion. Lara by contrast was enervated by the desperate situation into which she had placed her child. She felt weak and nauseous. Her mind raced but it had nowhere to go. She searched for options that weren't there. In the dark cradle of the gully, there was no one near who could help. She had no time to cast a spell, nor would she try to – her mother's death highlighted the inutility of magick. Images of Bith and Birren belted through Lara's mind. 'No!' she whimpered despairingly.

'Your child is ours,' Chabriel said softly. There was no force behind her voice. The words just existed, like an irrefutable fact that Lara could not accept. The Ghul commander stepped forward, in front of the albino marrok who stood only feet away from the Moraen. Birren, seemingly aware of the danger tried to burrow into the safety of her mother's bosom.

A surge of anger shot through Lara's body and she ripped her baby out of the cloth pouch on her chest. She could feel Birren's feverish body through the blanket in which she had been wrapped. Lara tugged the blanket away and for a brief second clutched her infant daughter's body to her cheek. 'Goodbye!' she whispered and then rose up high upon her tail with such an explosion of movement that both Chabriel and her albino hound jumped back. Lara swung her arms upwards with all her might and hurled her child into the trees high above, hoping beyond all hope that Birren had the strength and instinct to hold onto a branch. The child's prehensile tail thrashed about in the air as it flew upwards and upon finding a slender branch, whipped around it instinctively. Lara could see her baby's silhouette merge with the dark shadows of the

canopy above and when she did not fall, a feeling of intense relief fell upon her like rain.

Chabriel barked an order to the albino marrok at her side. The creature sprang at Lara, its muzzle at her throat. But she did not care. Her child was out of immediate danger.

Lara looked up into the trees and cried, 'Climb!' Her voice was a hoarse invocation to her daughter who just stared down uncomprehendingly into the pool of black below her. Lara had done all she could do. Underneath the heaving torso of the beast that lay on top of her, ready to eviscerate her, Lara reached for the lace thread running through the collar of her tunic. She undid this with a small tug and above her breast the tunic fell away, revealing a ghostly blue light emanating from beneath her skin. 'You want to eat my heart, foul thing, here it is!' she snarled defiantly.

The marrok, unprepared for this, backed up slightly from the Moraen, unsure of the azure light that ebbed from the torso of its prey. In the supernal glow of Lara's birthstone, the beast sniffed suspiciously at the witch's body. A thin, mucilaginous stream of saliva dripped from its mouth onto Lara's bare chest. She did not move. Seeing no sign of danger, the beast nuzzled its snout against Lara's throat, ready to crunch down on it as soon as the order was given. Lara closed her eyes and gave herself up to her fate.

But the order did not come. The fangs remained inches above her skin, rather than under it.

Chabriel knelt down beside Lara and stroked her hair in an intimate gesture, as if oblivious to the innumerable Ghul and marroks that surrounded them in the sable folds of the gully. 'It would take but a moment to kill you, but part of a broader scheme you are,' she said plainly.

Lara opened her eyes and looked towards Chabriel. 'What do you mean?' she said tentatively. Up in the tree above, Birren just hung there, gazing down at the dark shape of her mother pinioned by the white shape of the marrok.

The witch's eyes had grown accustomed to the dark and she could make out her daughter hanging above. She had hoped that fear would drive Birren higher up into the tree, but her bond to her mother tethered the infant to the tree's lower branches. Lara was distraught that Birren had not instinctively sought out the relative security of the canopy but was also relieved that her baby was not bringing attention to herself by crying. In an attempt to keep the Ghul's focus off her baby, Lara hissed at Chabriel, 'What scheme am I a part of?'

‘Not just you, Lara Brand.’ Lara flinched at the Ghul’s use of her name. ‘All Pryderi are involved.’

Lara looked up, past the marrok at her throat, into Chabriel’s gaunt face. Lara could see Chabriel’s eyes now, opaque pools of dead white, staring back emotionlessly. In her mind she screamed, ‘*Climb Birren! Climb!*’ but the child just passively hung over the clearing, innocently watching the shadowy proceedings below. ‘Involved in what?’ Lara sneered. ‘What are you doing with our children? Where are they?’ Her voice grew in volume as the questions left her mouth. Chabriel had stirred the coals of her rage. ‘Tell me!’ Lara screamed, her voice echoing down the gully.

If Chabriel was aware of Lara’s growing fury, she did not show it. ‘That shall you know at another time when invitations are extended!’

‘And what does that mean, you corpse bitch?’ Lara spat, hysteria rising with every syllable.

Her frustration with the Ghul commander’s enigmatic comments went ignored. Chabriel gazed blankly back at Lara and said with cold simplicity, ‘Let it be known, Caliban seeks his brother. Remiel Grayson will be found.’

Chabriel stood and turned to leave Lara, but the Moraen would have nothing to do with it. She pushed the snout of the albino marrok out of her face, her incensed mind totally focused upon the Ghul leader. ‘What are you talking about, you monster? I don’t know anyone called Remiel Grayson.’

Chabriel paused. She stood perfectly still, contemplating Lara’s comment, fingering the whip she held in her hands. She coldly gazed up at the infant hanging from the branch above and then turned back to face Lara. In the faint illumination radiating from the witch’s heart, Chabriel smiled. Again Lara was reminded of a thin scar splitting open across pale skin. ‘No-one knows him. But he can’t stay out of sight forever. Out of hiding, we will draw him,’ she said like a mantra and faded into the darkness. ‘Caliban will not be denied.’

‘And who is Caliban?’ Lara yelled, trying to dominate Chabriel’s attention. But she was failing. Again the Ghul commander looked up into the dark canopy above where Birren just stared back, her curiosity greater than her fear.

Moments later, Chabriel said three words that made Lara feel as though a Sarras thorn had been thrust into her heart: ‘Cut her down!’

What followed next was nightmarish. The albino’s snout shot forward and teeth as long as kitchen knives wrapped themselves around Lara’s throat. She was slammed back against the ground with incredible force. She lifted her hands to pry the beast from her throat but other

marroks had leapt forward and her arms and legs were pinned down by sharp teeth. She could not breathe. The albino's grip on her throat was brutal.

Lara's head started swirling. In the distance, she could hear the sounds of chopping. It seemed far away, muffled, as if heard through a blanket around her head. The albino clamped down harder. Lara was spinning backwards in her skull, hurtling through a monochromatic void, falling away from the distant sound of a small child crying.

It was early morning when Lara was woken. Yellow sunlight tinged the trees above but deep in the gully, all was in shadow. Someone was cradling her, putting strange smelling crystals under her nose. Suddenly all her senses burst into life and she could hear and smell everything around her. Her eyelids shot open to see the concerned face of the very physician she had sought the previous night.

Her gaze shot around the gully floor. All signs of the Ghul and marroks had gone. The only thing left on the grass from the night before was a thin layer of dew. Lara stood up and immediately saw the thing she dreaded most. The tree Birren had clung to had been cut down. The Ghul had abducted her daughter.

Chapter Four Sarras, Camulos

Camulos was something to see. Those few Myrrans who had visited the vast land called it 'God's Amphitheatre'. The entire country, 100 leagues from end to end, was shaped in a most unusual way. The fall of the land resembled the steps of a massive arena on three sides looking out upon the stage of the sea. As one travelled inwards from the northern, eastern and southern borders, each successive crescent moon-shaped plateau fell away to the next. The width of each plateau was only ten or so leagues across, but hundreds of leagues around the circumference. Each of the seven arciform plateaux had its own capital city, dialect and customs. At the heart of the country – topographically its lowest point – was the magnificent Kobold city of Sarras where all the land's rivers gathered together before a final push over the Camul Cliffs into the savage seas to the west.

The Kobolds believed that before time began, the stone gods hewed the massive shelves out of the land so they could sit and watch the beautiful sunsets painted each evening by the sun god Sola. But as the millennia passed, the earth gods grew bored with the sun god's displays and left Camulos believing they had seen everything Sola could possibly do in the sky. Sola vowed to make sunsets so glorious that the stone gods would beg to return to Camulos. At the end of each day he painted masterpieces with such vibrancy and depth that even the clouds paused to view them. But still the other gods did not return. Sola's sunsets took so much effort that he had to lie down to rest, and so he asked his sisters Arma, Aldra and Colla to stay up waiting for the stone gods' return. The mountain gods who viewed the situation from afar felt so sorry for Sola that they cried great tears that poured down from plateau to plateau until they came together at the great junction and this area became known as Sarras, the ancient Kobold word for sorrow. The story, whilst unknown outside of Camulos, did much to explain why its sunsets were always the most striking in the Myr.

At the northern end of Camulos lay the Briar Patch, although 'patch' was something of a misnomer. The Patch covered an area of roughly 250 square leagues. It was landscape of hills and gullies covered thickly with Sarras thorns, a tangled mass of prickly, woody vines embellished with large, leathery green leaves. The Sarras bush grew up to ten yards high and its razor sharp thorns could easily slice the flesh off a man. The savage plant had another unique aspect. Upon it grew boomberrries, or

Sarrasfruit as the prosaic botanists of Caquix preferred to call them. Boomberries were purple berries as large as a man's fist, the juice of which was highly volatile. Long ago, many Myrrans discovered this in the most unfortunate ways, the explosive nature of the fruit being enough to reduce a person to pulp. Any attempt by outsiders to pick the berries would invariably lead to the loss of limb and life. A number of early explorers in the region discovered – the hard way – that even walking too close to the bacciferous plants would be enough to set off an explosion.

The Briar Patch was home to the Mabbits, a floppy-eared, skittish people, who lived in peace within the security of the Patch's prickly walls. Details regarding Mabbit society were mainly speculative. For centuries, the Mabbits were dismissed as dumb beasts but the Kobolds of neighbouring Camulos knew better. Mabbits understood the Myrran common tongue but could not speak it, nor were they inclined to try. Although very few Myrrans had ever met a Mabbit, they were generally regarded as fairly stupid, foolish creatures. This misapprehension, coupled with the Mabbits' isolation, meant they were left alone to enjoy a happy existence untroubled by war, greed or crime.

Interestingly, the Mabbits had no problems with the boomberries. They not only lived in amongst the thorns, but they picked and ate the fruit. Upon consuming the boomberry the only thing they lost was their appetite. In fact, the boomberry was the sole constituent ingredient in the diet of the Mabbits, the potent juice from one berry enough to sustain a Mabbit for a week.

Morning had quietly broken in the sky above but much of the land was still drenched in shadow and would remain so until the sun rose above the formidable Camul Ranges to the east. Nothing moved. No sounds could be heard.

An hour passed and a Mabbit crept from the cover of the thorns to sit upon a rock overlooking Kishe, a small town on the northern border of Camulos. The Mabbit's name was Tagtug and as shy and nervous as he was, he was regarded by most of his clan as being the bold, adventurous type. It had been over a year since he had last visited the border of Camulos from his home deep within the Patch, but he knew he should have been met with more sounds and smells than he experienced that morning. The Kobolds were an industrious lot and this village was usually steeped in the clanging and thumping of weapon smiths creating swords and spears for the armies of distant realms. Alongside the percussive sounds of the Kobolds, Tagtug expected to hear the intricately melodic music of the impish Spriggan traders with whom the Kobolds

shared their country. He should have also heard the lowing of the woolly garumphs, the placid beasts of burden indigenous only to Camulos.

When he sat on the same rock thirteen months before, Tagtug had been delighted by the sight of the airships of the Spriggan traders floating off into the sky in a blaze of garish colours. He had watched the garumphs pull wooden wagons laden with shatterstone ore for the smithies to shape and bend in the metalworks below. He had revelled in the smells of the open kitchens where potent brews bubbled deliciously in capacious pots and mountain shelp were roasted on a spit for the people of the town.

But all was still and quiet. Camulos was veiled in a creamy mist, and the entire country resembled a gigantic bowl of poddoo soup. Tagtug's breath crystallized in the air before him as he exhaled. He shivered slightly, his raggedy, brown clothes doing little to keep out the morning chill.

Tagtug sniffed the cool air and his small snout scrunched up. He sniffed again and then shook his head. 'Greh!' he muttered to himself. There was a complete absence of familiar odours, as if the village had been evacuated long ago. The sweet smells Tagtug associated with his last visit were gone and the blank space made his nose twitch uncontrollably.

The emptiness of noise and activity was enough to encourage him to investigate. He reached behind him and picked some boomberrys which he shoved into a shapeless hempen sack. Slinging the bag over his back, Tagtug leapt from his rock onto the dusty path beneath, a narrow track that led down into the village. The boomberrys shook but did not explode, neutralized by a pheromone the Mabbits exuded which allowed them to eat and digest the fruit. Tagtug took a deep breath and set off down the path.

He had never ventured so close to the dwellings. Whilst he did not fear the Kobolds, their manner did not invite others into their world, nor had the Mabbits had any reason to seek them out. Until now.

Tagtug rounded a bend in the path to see a merchant's wagon sitting in the middle of the way. Kobold wares were sold by the Spriggans, who acted as intermediaries for their reclusive employers. Whereas the Kobolds were dour and brooding, the Spriggans were social and light-hearted. Their flippant ways often disguised a remarkable intellect beneath. The Spriggans were adept in dealing with most races and their travels had made them incredibly knowledgeable of the cultural nuances of most of the Myr's peoples. They were also lovers of language and were articulate to an intimidating degree. Most Spriggans were quickly-spoken and knew how to play a person in order to get a good price for the

Kobold goods they sold. As a race, the Spriggans had an endearing sense of humour and an infectious love of life, which made the scene Tagtug was about to see all the more appalling.

He approached the wagon. The skeletal remains of at least twenty Spriggans lay strewn around the wooden vehicle. The varying size of the bones suggested that this was a family of traders as was common amongst the Spriggans. The attackers clearly had no qualms about slaughtering children. Tagtug felt sick. The horror before him was a jarring contrast to his memories of this irrepressibly lively race of people. Last spring he had watched the Spriggans for hours from his rock, entranced by their animated discussions containing long words he didn't understand. From the cover of darkness, he had been transfixed by the sight of the Spriggans entertaining themselves when the day's work had ended; their comical performances involving masks and puppets delighted the Mabbit so much that he would bite his fingers to stop himself from laughing out loud. He wondered who could possibly hate the Spriggans so much to do such a vile deed.

Tagtug crept across the path. The skeletons of a pair of garumphs lay in a heap, still tethered to the colourful wagon they had once pulled. The wagon itself had been plundered, and Tagtug noticed that the ivory horns of the garumphs had been crudely sawn off. He edged through the dusty remains, carefully avoiding contact with the bones. His curiosity impelled him down the path towards the domiciles below where he quickly realised that the slaughter at the wagon was only a prelude to a much grander overture of death and devastation.

The remains of Spriggans littered Kishe. Many had lost their heads, some had lost limbs and no attempt had been made to hide the crime. Tagtug noticed that some of the skeletons had broken rib cages as if something or someone had torn out their hearts. A smattering of marrok skeletons nearby revealed the perpetrators of the Spriggans' evisceration. The marroks often prowled the northern borders of the Patch and Tagtug had seen what they did to their prey. But he had never known the marroks to venture this far south, nor had he ever heard of them attacking a town. There had to be others involved.

The carnage was overwhelming. Tagtug had never encountered anything remotely associated with death before. Squatting on his haunches, he vomited uncontrollably in a ditch on the side of the road.

A gentle westerly wind blew across the plateau and the mist slowly dissipated to reveal a village battered and brutalised. Walls had been smashed down with such force that rubble lay on the ground like a grey

blanket. Roofs and chimney stacks lay amongst broken floorboards and cellar doors. Intricately carved marble furniture had been shattered into shards of white and black. Statues once adorning the town square were attacked with unbridled ferocity and scorn.

Even the small Spriggan church on the edge of town had been desecrated. A statue in the courtyard of the church had been painted in what must have been Spriggan blood. It had dried to a rusty stain on the white granite. Underneath the statue, the plaque bearing the name 'Cephalus Silenus the Unifier' had a line in blood put through it. Above it the words 'Caliban the Divider' were scrawled in crude, angular lettering. The Mabbit could not read, but the intent was unmistakable. He had stumbled across a brutal incursion that seemed motivated by spite and contempt. He could not guess who or what could be capable of such hatred, but suddenly the world outside the Briar Patch seemed a very frightening place indeed.

It wasn't until he had reached the town's centre that Tagtug realized something – he had not seen any Kobold remains. The Spriggans' clothes were as colourful as their nature, so it wasn't hard to identify their skeletons, draped as they were in torn silks of countless hues. Around the spines and collarbones of the Spriggans, necklaces and golden chains with precious jewels lay caked in dark, dry blood. Tagtug thought it strange that the town had been ransacked but such pretty ornaments had been left behind. Perhaps the attackers were after something else, he mused. And where were all the Kobolds? It was not long before he had a fragment of an answer.

On the far side of the town square, a cobblestone road gently wended its way down to Kishe's main gates. A broken sign creaked on its post, the street's name carved ornately into the wood. It read *The Welcome Way*, ironic considering the private nature of the Kobolds. Tagtug looked upon the road with despair.

This was where the Kobolds had made their stand, for their bodies lay thick across the road. Quite a few Spriggans lay there too, but the throng of squat bodies indicated that it was here – on the road between the gate and the square – that the Kobolds had made an organized attempt to repel the attackers. There was no mistaking the remains. The Kobolds' skin was incredibly thick, and even after many months exposed to the elements and winds of time, it still lay on their bodies, a leathery encasement for broad, proud bones. And although the corpses were little more than desiccated husks, Tagtug could see on the faces of the dead the grim determination that characterized the Kobolds' reaction to whatever had assailed them.

It was on the Welcome Way that Tagtug noted something else. On the ground, on the walls and covering the bodies of many Kobolds, he saw a strange grey mesh of sticky fibres. He picked up one strand and tried to break it but it was as tough as a Sarras root. Picking his way down the street, Tagtug drew nearer to the town gate. Webbing was everywhere, but there was no sign of what had made it.

Something else puzzled the Mabbit. As he made his way across the cobblestones, he realized intuitively that there were far fewer Kobolds lying in the street than one would expect. The town was not expansive, but it was home to a fair number of Kobolds, certainly more than were splayed across the road. Tagtug pondered that matter and decided that they had either deserted their compatriots, or had been taken away. Perhaps the webbing had something to do with it.

And then he saw it. On the dusty plain before the gates, Tagtug came across something extraordinary – the dull blue shell of a beast as large as the town hall in Kishe had been. It was surrounded by the bodies of at least fifty Kobolds, all of whom seemed caught in webbing that lay on the ground in thick sheets. The abdomen of the creature had been slashed open in many places. The innards had long since been devoured by scavengers so all that was left was an empty shell. Tagtug guessed that this behemoth must have been the source of all the webbing that lay across the bodies of the Kobold dead. The creature's ten legs were cast out around its body, each limb as long as an alleyway. Lashed to the top of the creature's back, a carriage made of animal hide and bone hung precariously. From the carriage to the creature's mouth ran what seemed to be reins.

Tagtug also spied something else, something equally unfamiliar – the bones of a race he could not identify. The skeletons were thin and, strangely, seemed to be adorned in other bones. He knew the skeletons weren't Kobolds, and they definitely weren't Spriggans. These must have been the invaders who had so decimated Kishe. Obviously the Kobolds' last stand had defeated the huge beast and those who controlled it, but at a terrible cost, for there was no indication that anyone had survived the onslaught.

Tagtug's curiosity gave way to an unexpected feeling. Obligation. The Mabbit felt compelled to pursue the deathly conundrum he had stumbled across. He did not know why but his heart told him he could not walk away from what he had seen. There were other villages on the plateau and many more on the plateaux between the Patch and Sarras.

Sarras.

Without articulating the thought in his mind, he was bound for Sarras. He did not know the city's name, nor did he know where it was, but he knew there was a centre to Camulos and it was there he would probably find some answers. He looked behind at the soiled remains of Kishe. Now the town had been razed to the ground, he could see the tips of the Sarras thorns of his beloved Patch beyond it. Deep inside those thorns, his brothers and sisters played games and picked berries, oblivious to the darkness that had descended upon the world outside. Tagtug had been irrevocably changed by what he had seen, and because he had changed, the Patch had changed too. His homeland suddenly seemed much smaller than it had the day before and he realized with unerring certainty that he could not return there until he had followed the road now placed before him. And so he set out through the broken gates of Kishe, not knowing that he would never see his home again.

Night was falling tenderly across the land when Tagtug arrived at the tiny village of Koballoh Station. Running and leaping with a speed few Myrrans could match on foot, he had followed the road across the wide, grassless steppe of Upper Camulos. Although he saw the occasional flock of horned cranes circling high above, the plain was lifeless. He had passed a few houses along the way and the horror he had seen that morning had been repeated again and again. The plateau had been ravaged by an enemy lacking in any respect for life and beauty.

Silhouetted against the afterglow of the sunken sun, a huge tower stood defiantly. It was at least 100 yards high and it stood on the lip of a vast cliff. On either side of the tower, the edge of the cliff ran off as far as Tagtug could see in the dim light. Although he did not know it, he had come to the edge of Camulos' outer plateau.

A wind blew in from the emptiness before him and the tower creaked, a low, cranky growl from architecture that had stood for over 1,000 years. Tagtug stepped tentatively towards the construct. A closer look revealed that its outer shell had been stripped from the oakaen beams making up the tower's frame. In a few places, lonely sheets of dark metal remained, peeling away from the tower like diseased skin. It seemed the invaders required this metal for some reason.

Something dawned on Tagtug. Every Kobold he had seen slain was weaponless. It was a strange realization. The Kobolds were the Myr's greatest weapon smiths and here in defence of their homeland, they fought without weapons. Or their weapons had been taken. It seemed the further into the heart of Camulos he travelled, the more confused the Mabbitt became.

The wide horizon of the world could be seen in the fading light from the west. Tagtug stood at the base of the Koballoh Station tower looking out across the shadowy panorama before him. The precipice in front of him sent a vertiginous shiver down his spine. Had he arrived at Koballoh Station minutes later, he could have walked over the edge in the darkness. Tagtug reckoned it would have been minutes before he hit the rocky ground beyond, so dramatic was the drop before him.

He was at an impasse. The road ended at the tower and there was nothing on either side of it that suggested a way down to the sixth plateau. He craned his head back, scanning the monolithic structure for a clue as to where he should go. At the very top of the tower a thick line ran out into the empty sky to the south, sloping downwards to some point so far away it could not be seen. Tagtug knew that this strange metal vine was important and decided to scale the tower.

On the northern face of the construct, steep wooden stairs crisscrossed their way to a platform halfway up the tower. Cautiously making his way up the steps, Tagtug felt his heartbeat increase in volume and tempo. He was unaccustomed to heights and had never climbed stairs before, let alone been more than ten feet above the beloved earth. After what seemed a lifetime of climbing, he made it to the structure's midpoint, a wide, empty platform which the wind buffeted with taunting blows.

Tagtug sank to his knees, exhausted by the day's exertions. His breath was rapid and sweat beaded on his fine grey fur. His eyes closed as he tried to slow his heartbeat. His padded feet throbbed from twelve hours of running across the unforgiving, rocky land. He opened his eyes but the lids slid back down heavily as sleep tried to wrest him away. But a split-second before his eyelids met, through the gaps in the timber planks making up the platform, he thought he saw something move at the base of the tower. His eyes shot open as his fatigue was swept away by panic. He had spent the day running through the gruesome detritus of violent acts and he knew that the perpetrators of such acts would not hesitate to revisit their crimes on the body of a Mabbit.

Tagtug crept stealthily to the top of the stairs by which he had ascended the tower. Despite the steadily blowing westerly wind, he detected the individual scents of three strangers wafting up from the base of the tower. The smells were stale and malodorous, like damp linen. Above the dull moaning of the wind, he could make out voices. Standing on the rocky ground before the tower's steps were three individuals the likes of which Tagtug had never seen. They were adorned in bones and animal hides. Whilst not particularly large, the three had an intimidating appearance. In the dull light, Tagtug could make out white knives and

swords tucked into their belts. Their skin was sallow, as if they had never seen the sun and their voices were similarly sunless. Tagtug knew he was not looking upon a trio who came to Camulos to visit friends. They would waste no time in separating his head from his neck.

Fearful of detection, Tagtug rolled back from the stairs.

The Ghul paused at the base of the tower.

'We have to finish this tonight or Major Chabriel will have our bones,' insisted a thin, mirthless voice.

'Never mind Chabriel, it's Caliban we have to fear,' said a slower, deeper voice which belonged to a Ghul sergeant called Gormgut.

'I have a problem with slaving away for an overworlder,' stated a third, coarse and menacing.

'He is no more a part of the surface world than you are, Craddock. He is one of us,' said the first voice.

'Slither, he is a Myrran. He is not one of us. Just because his skin burns in the sun, it don't mean he's Ghul,' returned Craddock.

'If you're not careful Craddock, he'll hear you,' warned Slither nervously.

'Caliban? I don't think so, Slither. I don't see any of Cribella's spying spawn here. And why would Caliban be watching us anyway? There's nothing left in this land. Just the bones of Spriggans and Kobolds.'

'Enough talk Craddock. Time to get the last few sheets of shatterstone from the top of the tower,' said the dense voice of the sergeant.

Tagtug almost screamed in panic when he heard the clattering footsteps on the wooden stairs below. His head rang with unfamiliar words: *Chabriel, Caliban, Ghul, Cribella, shatterstone*. He understood little of what the three soldiers had said, but one thing was clear – they intended to make their way up to where he was. They were on the first flight of stairs and he had nowhere to go... but up. In the centre of the platform, a vertical ladder led up to a hole in a platform high above. As much as Tagtug hated separating himself further from the ground, he had to climb the ladder – or face these *Ghul*. His heartbeat quickened – it was unlikely he would escape detection.

The ladder was missing a number of rungs and it rattled as he moved up it. He tried to ignore the pounding in his chest. After long minutes, he pulled himself through the hole only to find that the ladder continued up to another platform. He wanted to rest, wanted to get off the wobbly

ladder, but had to keep going. There was nowhere to hide on the second platform.

He scampered up the rungs. He had almost made it to the third landing when something held him back, almost pulling him off the ladder. His hempen bag was caught on a wayward nail. Looking below, through the hole in the second platform, he saw dark shapes gathered around the ladder's base. He stopped, peering down, hoping against all hope that the fearsome individuals below would not look up. But it was not his lucky day and he was discovered.

'Craddock! Slither! There's something up there!' the one called Gormgut exclaimed. The other two looked up and Tagtug saw the same expression on the faces of each Ghul – unabated malice.

A sinister smile smeared itself across Craddock's face. 'Well looky-here boys! I'm gonna skin me a Spriggan!'

'Craddock you fool!' sneered Gormgut. 'That's no Spriggan! That's something else!'

'It's an animal!' suggested Slither.

'It's wearing clothes,' retorted Gormgut. 'What animal wears clothes?'

'I don't care Sarge. I'm gonna skin it anyway,' rasped Craddock. He placed a dirty, stained, white knife between his teeth and clambered up the ladder.

Tagtug squealed and leapt up the remaining rungs to the third platform. Unlike the previous two levels, this area was not empty. Metal sheeting that had been ripped off the outer frame of the tower lay in haphazard piles. Twenty feet above, a gantry of sorts supported a massive, reinforced wooden beam around which was coiled a cable made of a material Tagtug had never seen before. It was finely knotted, like the ropes he had seen attached to Spriggan skyshops, but it shone as if it were made of steel.

The cable was impossibly long, made via a process that the Kobolds had kept secret deep within their foundries. It reached out into the darkening air connecting the Koballoh Station tower to another tower in the township of Kabaht thirteen leagues away on Camulos' sixth plateau. The cable and the towers it connected were just one part of a simple contraption built on a scale so extraordinary, it was difficult to comprehend. The cable was a strand of a network the Spriggans had named *The Giant's Web*, the greatest engineering feat in the Myr.

There were three towers on each of the semi-circular plateaux of Camulos. In the plain-speaking fashion of the Kobolds who had built them, each of the towers had a name based on where the tower was. Tagtug stood at the top of Seven North. Beyond sight, far away to the

southeast stood Seven East, and even further away, on the far side of the great expanse before him, was Seven South. The cable's weight was unfathomable and it was a wonder that the beam around which it was tethered could support it. Scattered about the gantry Tagtug could see golden poles with large hooks at one end and a short horizontal bar at the other. These poles, known as sliders to the Kobolds, could be found on each of twenty-one identical towers spread out throughout Camulos. The sliders were the means by which the Kobolds descended to each successive plateau. Baskets containing everything ranging from farm produce to precious jewels were often attached to the base of the slider and sent to the next town on the line. But that was long ago, before the rapacious Ghul had broken into the country and destroyed it from within.

'I told you it weren't no Spriggan, Craddock!'

Tagtug wheeled around to see the three Ghul emerging from the lower level, eyes filled with murderous intent. The Mabbit leapt over the nearest sheet-metal pile, and stood quivering with terror.

'Come here long-ears. I could use me a fur coat,' snarled Gormgut. He was the largest of the three and his heavy footsteps thudded on the platform as he strode purposefully towards Tagtug.

The one called Slither circled around to the left while the boorish Craddock moved right. They meant to outflank Tagtug, cutting him off from both the ladder and the cable. Instinctively, Tagtug backed away, but tripped on one of the golden sliders, and tumbled into a pile of metal sheeting. Slither sprang at him and the terrified Mabbit thrust out with the only object within his reach – a shard of the metal plating that had once covered a small section of the tower's handrail. Slither had no time to avoid the pointy end of Tagtug's outstretched arm. The shard buried itself under the ribcage of the strange bone armour the attacker wore, a futile defence against the trembling wedge in Tagtug's hand. It was the first violent act the Mabbit had ever taken part in and it had unexpected and devastating consequences. Slither's hands clutched at the shard buried in his chest. His head jerked spasmodically and his eyes clouded over with a milky film. He fell backwards, his whole body convulsing uncontrollably and then in a frenetic paroxysm of blood and bones, he exploded.

Gormgut and Craddock were stopped in their tracks, shocked by the demise of their companion. Gormgut waved his knife at Tagtug. 'I don't know what you are, but you done it now, long-ears.'

Deprived of the shatterstone shard that had disappeared in the visceral kaleidoscope of Slither's gruesome end, Tagtug scanned the area for anything that would help keep the other two Ghul at bay. There was nothing except for the slider he had tripped over. He dropped down and

picked it up, swinging it in a wide arc to ward off his attackers. Craddock laughed. ‘Stupid overworlder. You think you’re going to hurt us with that pretty pole?’ He pointed his grimy blade at the Mabbit and hissed. ‘I’m going to cut your ears off first. Slowly. And then I’m going to carve you right open.’

Tagtug edged away from the blood-spattered area at his feet. His eyes darted about looking for an avenue of escape.

‘Where are you going to run boy? You got nowhere to go but down.’

Craddock was right. The only way to go was down. With the pole in hand, Tagtug ran full pelt across the platform to its southern edge and threw himself off the tower.

As he launched himself out into space, Tagtug swung the metal pole up and managed to catch the hook on the line running out from the gantry. It was a desperate act that he would not have considered had his heart been beating more slowly. Somehow, the terror of evisceration at the hands of the Ghul seemed worse than landing in a bloody mess leagues below. The slider lurched wildly as it connected with the cable and dropped twenty feet before there was any forward movement. Tagtug pulled his feet up onto the small bar at the base of the pole and in a matter of seconds he was racing away from Seven North and the uppermost plateau of Camulos.

The Mabbit was not prepared for the speed at which the sliders travelled and screamed as he tore into the night. The wind rushing past his ears made them stream out horizontally. Above him, the hook made a comforting *zinging* sound as he slid down the gigantic cable. Tagtug wrapped his arms around the golden pole and risked a look below. He was outrageously high up. Although the land beneath him was dark, he could make out a silvery river as Arma, the Myr’s largest moon, moved out from behind a cloud. He could also make out the shapes of villages and settlements, but no lights burned in any windows. Tagtug rightly assumed that the attacks like the one on the seventh plateau had taken place all over Camulos.

Suddenly, he felt a slight change in the tension of the line above. He swivelled his head around. Behind him Seven North was shrinking away in the distance. For a second, he breathed a sigh of relief; he had effected his escape from the Ghul without losing his ears. But his feeling of security was short-lived – there on the line, a little over 100 yards behind him, he could make out a shape. One of the Ghul had taken a slider and followed him. Tagtug squinted and a groan of despair crept out his lips –

another shape could be seen behind the first. Gormgut and Craddock had wasted little time in pursuing him.

After a minute or so, it became clear to Tagtug that the Ghul were not noticeably gaining on him, nor did it seem he was getting any further away. For the time being, he was relatively safe. That knowledge did little to put his mind at ease. Tagtug had no idea how far away the far end of the cable was, but he had to come up with a plan of escape before he reached it.

Far below him, the land drifted by. The silvery river brightened as Arma's sister Aldra broke free from the clouds in the east. The land seemed to be slowly rising. The gentle rate at which it rose suggested to Tagtug that he still had a long way to go before the receiving tower would come into view. His arms ached and a cramp in his left foot threatened to dislodge him from the slider. He had never felt so exhausted. He wished with all his might that his pursuers would fall from their perches but it was a futile hope. Tagtug turned his head to look back at the Ghul. He could make out the nearer of the two. It was Gormgut. His pale eyes flared menacingly when he saw the Mabbit facing him and he held up his serrated blade in a gesture that filled Tagtug with despair. Gormgut bared his teeth with glee when he saw the pure terror on his quarry's face.

Tagtug looked ahead at the approaching horizon. A thin shape had appeared in the centre of his vision – it was Six North, the receiving tower at Kabaht. As the line began to flatten out, Tagtug could feel his speed decline. Fortunately, so did that of his pursuers; they had only gained on him marginally. But it would be close. He would have no time to escape the tower, by stairs or by cable. And he had to rest. The Ghul had not run from Kishe to Koballoh Station as he had done. Tagtug knew he had to end the pursuit at the tower that reared up before him. He had an idea; a sliver of a chance to stop the chase without losing his life in the process, but he had to time it perfectly.

As the slider whizzed in over the landing platform, Tagtug sprung from the pole, rolling to his left, pulling his sack around his body so that he did not land on it. His hand darted inside the sack and pulled out a single boomberry. It would be enough. As his more immediate adversary, the one called Gormgut, slid towards the tower's landing platform, Tagtug threw the berry directly at him. It arced through the night air. His aim and timing were impeccable. Gormgut did not see the purple missile until it was too late. A breath of a moment before the boomberry hit him on the chest, Gormgut saw Tagtug duck behind one of the tower's thick pylons and then it was over. An explosion of bone and flesh rocked the gantry, and apart from the bloody stain on the tower's upper platform, there was nothing left of the vicious Ghul sergeant who

had so wanted to flay the Mabbit alive. The ancient metal threads of the cable connecting the Six North station to Seven North split apart with great ferocity and the entire line snapped away from the tower like an angry serpent. It vanished into the night, the release of tension creating a strangely haunting sound. The metallic scream of the cable drowned out the sharp, piercing cry of Craddock, as the line that held him up rippled, bent and vanished before he had reached the tower.

Tagtug scampered to the tower's edge and watched the remaining Ghul's ignominious fall to the hard rock of the sixth plateau. He could not help feeling a small sense of satisfaction as the cry ended with a dull thud over 100 yards below.

Tagtug's heart was still racing. In the space of twelve hours he had experienced more than any Mabbit had ever experienced in a lifetime. He realized he was famished and he sat down cross-legged on the top of the Kabaht tower and pulled another boomberry out of his bag. The sweet juice burst from the fruit as he took a voracious bite. His eyes closed momentarily as he savoured the taste and for an instant, all the troubles into which he had unwittingly stumbled, vanished. He let the moment hang and when he opened his eyes again, an hour had passed. He had dozed off. The Myr's third moon, Colla, had risen and the night did not seem so terrifying.

Far, far off into the distance, Tagtug thought he could see a shimmering ribbon on the horizon. It was the ocean. He had been told wondrous things about the ocean by his cousin who lived close to the coast in the western provinces of the Briar Patch. Tagtug had often imagined what it would be like to see such a thing. Perhaps his journey would take him there, he mused. If he lived that long.

Wiping the dried boomberry juice from his face, Tagtug stood up, slung his bag over his shoulder and picked up his slider. Fortunately, the oakaen beam to which the transit line was suspended had not been damaged in the explosion that had splattered Gormgut over the gantry. He took a deep breath, hooked the slider over the line running down to the fifth plateau and stepped off the platform.

Morning was minutes away when Tagtug sped into the city of Sarras. In the pre-dawn light he could see the shapes of buildings of all sizes. Cobblestone roads wound their way around unkempt parks and open spaces. Tagtug could make out sprawling market places and empty tavern beer gardens, broken-steepled churches and wide, squat halls.

Metal foundries and quarries also dotted the landscape of architecture and construction that assaulted and delighted his vision. Anything he had seen in Kishe, he could find here on a much larger scale. Sadly, that included the seemingly infinite destruction that had taken place.

Everything was in a state of ruin. It was a spectacularly poignant sight. Sarras had been the hub of life in Camulos, a thriving metropolis. It was not hard for Tagtug to imagine throngs of Spriggans sitting in the city squares listening to the colourful orations of troupes of entertainers. In his mind's eye, he could see the Kobolds setting about their business, their hammers ringing to mark the start of a new day. He could see a wagon of ore being pulled by garumphs along the broad streets as Spriggan children danced along in pursuit. A mental image of a sky filled with multi-coloured skysshops heading off to far-away lands momentarily replaced the dismal sight of rubble and decay that was becoming clearer as the sun climbed over the far slopes of the Camul Ranges over 100 leagues to the east. The city had died a violent death and was now just a grey corpse lying flat on the dusty slab of Camulos' lowest plateau.

In all his wildest dreams, Tagtug had never imaged a city so large. It spread out in every direction. A wide, dark river carved its way through the metropolis and as he raced above it, the Mabbit could make out the remnants of magnificently adorned bridges crossing the waters. He could see the city had a circular design, radiating from a point a little further east of a tower that quickly dominated his vision. This tower, simply called Central, was much taller than all the towers through which he had passed on his high-speed journey to Sarras. His line was one of three adjoining the tower. His slider slowed down as the line levelled off. Tagtug could see a similar cable coming in from the east. His view of the southern line was obstructed by the colossal tower which, like every other transit tower, had its metal outer shell removed. Tagtug slid to a halt and gingerly stepped off the slider, his muscles taut and aching from hours and hours of concentrated effort.

He stood on the gantry of the tower, stretching. His stomach growled. Reaching around to take another boomberry from his bag, he saw something so wondrous that his hand forgot what it was doing and hung in the air above his shoulder. The sun had completely escaped the clutches of the mountains and its liberated rays illuminated the sea. Tagtug sighed. He had never imagined anything so incredible. The white caps of waves ornamented sweeping patches of cobalt blue water. In the clear skies above the water, he recognized the flocks of gillygulls his cousin had told him about. They hovered in the air, floating this way and that like an indecisive cloud. Far, far beyond he could make out strange vessels plying the distant waters and beyond their white sails, Tagtug

could see the gentle blue curvature of the world. A calming breeze exquisitely perfumed with a sharp smell Tagtug had never experienced before swept in from the ocean. Between the city and the sea, the wide dark river he had noticed before, cascaded its way down a ravine before disappearing over the sharp edge of the land.

The river and the sea supplied a beautiful contrast to the dishevelled city which was now coming into brutal focus as the sunlight painted the rubble. The countless remains of Kobolds and Spriggans repeated the pattern of atrocities he had seen in the other towns. From high up in the tower, he could see that the attackers had moved across the city sparing nothing.

Tagtug had never felt so alone. He was hundreds of leagues from home in a country awash in death and for the first time since leaving the security of the Briar Patch, he questioned his actions.

His stomach growled again. Tagtug pulled out a boomberry from the bag on his shoulder and was just about to take a bite when a long, agonized groan floated up through the beams at his feet. The noise so startled Tagtug that he dropped his bag. Before he could do anything, all but one of the remaining boomberries, six in total, spilled out onto the gantry and started rolling towards the edge. Tagtug's mind froze as he watched his meal disappear over the edge of the tower.

The berries plummeted through the air and Tagtug's brain suddenly realized the possible ramifications of dropping the fruit. He scrambled to the lip of the gantry to see six successive explosions at the base of the tower's northern-western pylon. Each violent detonation sent reverberations up the spine of the tower and suddenly the entire structure started listing to one side. The boomberries had completely removed the support of one of the tower's four vertical columns. Tagtug turned and ran to the centre of the gantry, but the entire floor pitched forward, throwing him off his feet.

Tagtug floundered about looking for something to hold on to. His legs kicked furiously at the gantry floor, futilely trying to grip the timber enough to thrust his body back to the centre of the platform. He was sliding off the edge and his blood boiled with the knowledge that his hazardous journey into the heart of Camulos would be for naught. He would die of clumsiness and this thought burned in his brain as his fingernails dug deep into the timber beams. His feet lost contact with the platform as his lower body spilled over the tower's edge. Tagtug closed his eyes as his waist and torso hurtled over the side of the platform.

Miraculously, his downward movement halted, and he opened his eyes to find himself swinging out in space, his body tethered to the tower by his long arms. His fingernails had carved deep channels into the

wooden beams and fortunately these grooves ended a couple of inches from the platform's edge.

Tagtug swung his head around to take in his situation. It was desperate. He was hanging from a tower on the verge of collapse with only his fingernails separating him from certain death. A tremendous sense of space assailed his eyes and he wished forlornly that he were back in the safety of the brambles of the Briar Patch.

Below him, to his left, he spied something quite unexpected. He could not miss it because it possessed more colours than Tagtug had seen before – a Spriggan skyshop. The balloon was deflated and hung from the tower, ensnared by a beam which jutted out from a platform below. Fifty feet below the ragged balloon, a large wooden carriage swung like a pendulum. The carriage contained none of the wares one would expect to find in a skyshop. It was empty except for a shivering shape of a Spriggan huddled in the corner.

The tower lurched and Tagtug's body swung out into the air surrounding him. His fingernails held him in place, but it would be seconds before either they or the wooden beams broke and sent him to his death. He could not climb back up onto the platform – it was pitched too steeply. It seemed the only way available to him was down and therein lay a problem. Down was a long way to go.

Tagtug noticed one of the balloon's lines whipping about in the breeze. He chewed his lip as he stared at it. He had no choice – he released himself from the edge of the tower and fell spiralling into the air below.

The dark shape of the tower was replaced by the light blue of the sky, the dark blue of the sea, the grey stone of the ground, the coloured mass of the balloon, the light blue of the sky, the deep brown of skyshop carriage's underside and for a fleeting second, the dirty yellow of the flapping rope. Tagtug shot out an arm and caught hold of the line. His body jolted and his arm felt as if it had been wrenched from its socket but his grip held.

He was alive and if every decision he made didn't change that status, he was making the right decisions.

A brief glance downward indicated that whilst he was a lot closer to the ground, he would still not survive the fall. He looked up and saw the flat bottom of the skyshop thirty feet above. Beyond that hung the balloon, long and lean without hot air to fill it, and higher still, the top of the tower which leant out over the city at a sickening angle.

Tagtug lifted one hand above the other, slowly, steadily making the precarious climb up to the carriage. Fortunately, the tower did not succumb to any more convulsions and it was not long before he was

hauling himself over the side rail of the skyshop. Gravity had rolled the Spriggan down to the nearest side and as Tagtug collapsed inside the carriage, he almost fell upon its occupant.

The Spriggan looked as close to death as a living creature could be. His skin had lost the rich, red pigment common among his race. Dried mucous was caked around his mouth and his eyes had lolled back so that only the whites were visible. But the most alarming aspect of the Spriggan's state was the strange two foot long spike that was wedged in his stomach – it seemed to be the gigantic horn of a monstrous animal, a beast Tagtug had never seen nor wanted to see.

The Spriggan gave a groan. Alarmed by his state, Tagtug slid alongside him and cradled his head in his arms.

Suddenly, the balloon above gave a thin, whining sound. Tagtug looked up to find the situation was getting worse again. The balloon had been ripped where it had slammed into the tower and that rent in the fabric was quickly widening. The carriage dropped ten feet. It ceased momentarily but Tagtug's added weight in the carriage was taking its toll. There was nothing for it. They would be dead if they stayed in the skyshop. The Spriggan rolled in and out of consciousness and could not be any help, but Tagtug would not leave him where he was.

The Mabbit quickly pulled up the rope he had just climbed and once the full length of it was in the carriage, he used it to lash the near-dead Spriggan to his waist. Tagtug and the Spriggan were about the same height, but the latter was so malnourished that his emaciated body weighed almost nothing.

Once he was satisfied that the knot would hold, Tagtug checked the other end around the skyshop railing was still secure. He then lifted the Spriggan to the edge of the skyshop, taking great care not to touch the strange spike that was buried in his stomach. As tenderly as the situation allowed, he rolled out of the carriage, holding the rope in one hand and the Spriggan in the other.

A low, creaking sound was all the warning Tagtug had before the tower shifted again, like an ungainly, drunken giant. He lost his grip of the rope and with the Spriggan lashed to his side fell thirty feet before the rope went taut. The Spriggan screamed in sheer agony as the sudden jolt sent indescribable pain through his nervous system. The spike lodged in his belly twisted and the trauma to his body was such that he lost all consciousness. Tagtug was also in pain but faring considerably better. He had braced his body in preparation for the sudden snapping of the lifeline. He was not prepared for the sharp cracking of two of his ribs at the moment the rope went taut and he grunted as all the oxygen was expelled from his lungs.

The tower had given another twenty feet. Tagtug guessed that its next movement would be its last. It was at the point of collapse; he had to act quickly. They could not return the way they came and the drop below was only conducive to death. The situation was dire. The Spriggan hung lifelessly at Tagtug's side and the Mabbit knew that he was not long for this world.

Tagtug's eyes darted around furiously looking for some way to escape what seemed inevitable. Hundreds of feet below the pavement was a jagged mess of rubble but off to the right a pile of desiccated Kobold bodies hinted at the battle that must have taken place at the base of Central Tower. He could make out the skeletal remains of Ghul and a few Spriggan bones as well. He also spied the web netting of the creature whose husk of a body he had seen outside the walls of Kishe.

The netting.

It gave him hope. Under the arches at the bottom of the tower, where the fighting must have been at its thickest, the creature had thrown out many webs. One was spread on the side of the tower, underneath the first platform. The webbing was not horizontal, so it was unlikely to hold the pair if they hit it, but Tagtug reckoned that it would be enough to slow their descent. But it was a long way away. Unfortunately, it was not beneath them, so he would have to swing dramatically to have enough momentum to reach it. Then there was the problem of aiming – the web was no more than ten foot across, so it would be a miracle to get close, let alone hit it.

Again, in the absence of alternatives, Tagtug worked quickly to achieve the outcome for which he was hoping. His hands fumbled about at his waist, trying to loosen the knot, but the jarring impact of their fall had tightened it and there was nothing his shaking hands could do to change that. Instead, he lifted their weight off the rope, and started chewing. The fibres were incredibly tough even for the Mabbit's sharp teeth and the strands he did bite through sat uncomfortably on his tongue and between his teeth. Despite this, he gnawed at the rope as if it were his last meal and just when he thought his arms were about to give way under the weight of their bodies, his teeth sliced through the last remaining strands.

Clinging desperately to the severed rope, Tagtug set about swinging the pair closer to the tower. He kicked out with his legs and they started spinning around wildly. He kicked again and the spinning increased yet they were no closer to their target. He kicked a third time and grunted in frustration as the spinning increased to comic proportions. Had his life not been on the line – literally – he would have laughed.

Tagtug's frantic movement at the end of the rope was all the encouragement the balloon needed to begin tearing again. Tagtug used the sudden shift to swing towards the tower. He felt the last shreds of the balloon give way and they were falling. He arched his back in the direction he thought the webbing lay and for what seemed an eternity, he fell through space with the limp body of the wounded Spriggan tied to his waist. Tagtug grimaced preparing for the rocky impact that would end his life.

But it never came. Instead, he felt the sticky embrace of the webbing and it was enough to hold them both. He closed his eyes, and exhaled. It felt as if he had held his breath from the moment he first let go of the gantry platform almost 1,000 feet above. His eyes shot open when he heard another groan, but it was not the Spriggan this time. It was the steel and wooden structure above them – the entire tower was about to give way. Fortunately the webbing was over a year old and whilst still sticky, it was not enough to hold them captive. The beam above them buckled and the webbing and its new occupants were quickly swinging to the ground below. Tagtug hung on and the Spriggan dangled uselessly at his side. The platform above was folding in half as the tower started to fall in on itself. The few strands that held the net stretched and broke. Tagtug and the Spriggan fell, unable to do anything.

Fortunately by the time the webbing had torn completely free of the tower, they were only three feet from the ground. Tagtug, incredulous over their survival kissed the ground he thought he may never walk upon again. All around him timbers fell whilst iron rivets popped. The sky rained wood and metal for a minute as Camulos' greatest tower came down. Clouds of dust, dirt and bone filled the air in the wake of the structure's dismemberment. The ground shook and cracked as the other pylons were uprooted. The skyshop crashed nearby and the rags of the balloon floated gently to the rubble-strewn earth, falling like a shroud over the destruction. Despite being in the midst of such chaos, Tagtug did not care. He was exhausted beyond caring. If he should die at the end of such a hazardous journey then who was he to deny that fate?

Yet he did not die. His luck held as debris rained down upon the ground around him. Tagtug sliced the rope joining them and rested the Spriggan's head on a block of stone. He put his ear to the broken figure's chest and detected a heartbeat. It was faint but it was there. He then lifted the Spriggan up into his arms and walked off into the ruin of the city.

The Spriggan's name was Mulupo and Tagtug spent the next two months caring for him. The day following their dramatic escape from Central Tower, Tagtug set about removing the huge spike in Mulupo's stomach. It was not as difficult a procedure as it could have been. Incredibly, the spike had not damaged any vital organs and once it was removed, the hole in the Spriggan's stomach healed remarkably quickly. There was no bleeding, nor was there any infection. However, the mind of the Spriggan was not so fortunate. He had been in a toxin-riddled state of hibernation for much of the nine months he had spent in the balloon hanging from the tower. He had not eaten in all that time and although his metabolism had virtually slowed to a halt, his mind remained active within the prison of his body. He had fallen into a crazed consciousness where every thought was devoted to the madness he had witnessed last summer. The day had replayed itself again and again within the confines of his mind...

Mulupo had just put the finishing touches on his balloon. His last journey abroad had taken him over the plains of northern Tamu where his mobile shop had been attacked by the fierce Sedomo tribe. He was saved by a pair of travelling priests who chanced upon his unfortunate situation. The priests helped repair his balloon which managed to limp across the skies all the way back to Sarras. Fortunately, his adventures in the east had brought in enough money to pay Sarras' best seamstress to put together a new balloon made from the finest Corran silk. She was under strict instructions to include every coloured dye she possessed. The result was a superbly crafted, unquestionably ugly balloon. Mulupo revelled in the fact that it was the talk of Sarras. He did not care whether anyone liked it.

A cool late afternoon breeze was fading as he started loading his skyshop with Ablo Bogle's merchandise. Mulupo's partnership with the Kobold Ablo had lasted some twenty years. Both had benefitted greatly from the arrangement. Mulupo sold some of the most beautifully fashioned jewellery to be found in all Camulos, and Ablo had made much money from Mulupo's wealthy contacts in countries as far away as Tuirren and Arnaksak. One of the few Spriggans willing to cross the Oshalla Ocean by balloon, Mulupo had virtually cornered the market in the northern regions of the Myr.

He was planning a relatively short journey to test out the new balloon – south, over the Camul Ranges to the fair cities of Acoran. He started a slow burn on the Cold engines, inflating the balloon carefully, checking its seams as it slowly billowed and puffed with the hot air being

pushed into it. He cast a casual gaze over to Ablo, who in his typically taciturn Kobold manner was methodically finishing loading the last of the stores, unwilling to stop for conversation. Mulupo often had great fun trying to engage Ablo in small talk. He knew such trivialities bothered the Kobold no end and his grunting would become increasingly more demonstrative every time Mulupo toyed with him in this way. This did not reflect a poor relationship between the two. Although the Kobold would never admit it, he loved Mulupo like a son, albeit a mischievous son who needed a good kick in the pants from time to time.

Mulupo was similarly fond of the old artisan. He could not imagine having another business partner. Ablo's focus upon jewellery suited Mulupo beautifully. It was better to export expensive jewels, necklaces, bangles and ornament than swords and armour. Mulupo's friends in the weapons trade were always complaining about having sore backs and cut fingers. Besides, he could get a better price for the jewels. The Acora and Arnakki were canny buyers, but were also extremely wealthy compared to other peoples, so he was guaranteed to get a decent price for the merchandise by specializing in trade with these two races at either end of the known world.

'I think she's ready Ablo, my fine capitalistic compatriot,' exclaimed the Spriggan tapping the side of his skyshop with his ornamental walking stick. 'What think you, or is deliberating upon the airworthiness of my tropospheric vessel too diminutive a concern to enter into your ruminations?'

'As usual, Mulupo,' grunted the Kobold without lifting his head, 'I have no idea what you're talking about.'

Mulupo paraded around the skyshop twirling his cane as he walked. 'Extract yourself from your quotidian concerns and take time to note the form of the panels, the clean lines of the gores, the spherical purity exhibited by the envelope and the exquisite crafting of the skirt. This is no mere vehicle; it is aerial art. A docile wind is blowing and in the conciliate arms of that entropic zephyr, I will bestride the heavens aboard my dirigible. This is a moliminous occasion.'

'Moliminus?'

'Significant. Momentous.' Mulupo paused, noting the vacant expression on his partner's leathery face. 'Big,' he said slowly in the most condescending voice he could muster.

Ablo stopped inspecting the small case of silver brooches he had prepared for the Acoran court and held the Spriggan in his gaze. 'Now there's no need to patronize me Mulupo. I'm just not sure whether anyone cares about your new balloon.'

Mulupo, a little surprised by the bluntness of this last comment, smoothed his silken waistcoat with formal fastidiousness and stood leaning with both hands on his walking stick, his thin legs spread wide apart. 'Well you should care, my antithalian associate, as it will bring you more fiscal joy than your coriaceous body will be able to contain.'

Ablo ignored the comment. 'I think it's too colourful. It gives me a headache just looking at it,' he said giving the balloon a quick glance.

'Ablo, this skyshop is a declaration of taste, a statement –'

The merchant just grunted. 'Taste! Huh! No wonder those Sedomo threw spears at your last balloon.'

'Sir, if today is the day that you deem to be loquacious, perhaps you could adopt a less fractious tone. The Sedomo are a race of savages bereft of any appreciation of tone and hue. Their attack upon me was typical of their barbarous, recusant ways. If this trip to Acoran works out well, Ablo, I believe we are ready for another foray into the far east where customers eagerly await the product of your lapidarian labours.'

Ablo got the gist of Mulupo's diatribe. 'You're going to Susano?' he asked rhetorically.

Mulupo nodded. 'I think it is time we relieved the Susanese of their gold. In addition, I have not seen my brother Kappo for two years and as far as I know, he still resides in Emperor Kimura's court in Kumoku. You'd like him Ablo – he's almost as perversely irritable as you are!'

Ablo put the last of the stock into the carriage and walked off into his workshop mumbling to himself. Mulupo was sure he heard the phrase 'damned Spriggan' in amongst the Kobold's mutterings.

'Nettlesome philistine! How dare he mock the chatoyant silks of my vessel,' Mulupo said aloud, hoping Ablo would overhear him, but the Kobold had slammed shut the door to his workshop.

Mulupo set about releasing the lines that tethered the skyshop to thick wooden bollards set into the cobblestone yard before Ablo's workshop. He paused on the last line and gazed upon the balloon, a kaleidoscopic ball of warm air, and stood entranced by shimmering variations of colour as the morning light tried to hold the bobbing sphere in its grip. He climbed the rope ladder hanging from the side of the carriage, closed the vents and began floating up into the Sarras sky.

Below him, Ablo came rushing out of the workshop. He craned his head back and shouted anxiously, 'Are you going already?'

'I will not stay to bear witness to any more of your indurate remarks about my balloon,' Mulupo replied sulkily.

'But Mulupo, what about the opening ceremony at Mine One? Today is a' – he paused – 'moloominus event.'

Despite his annoyance with Ablo, the Spriggan could not help but smile. He found it hard to hold a grudge. Mulupo knew it was the Kobold way to be rude and offhand. They were a gruff people, disinterested in anything beyond their country's borders which made them unusual bedfellows for the garrulous, mercurial Spriggans.

Physically, they were leagues apart too. Although both races stood no higher than five foot from the ground, this was as far as physical similarities went. The Kobolds had flat, tanned craggy faces, with eyes as sad as winter and broad floppy ears. Their hands were gnarled like tree roots, and their legs resembled stumps. Their fashion sense was completely utilitarian. Even when they weren't working, the male Kobolds wore monochromatic overalls and the women – who were not allowed in the mines or the workshops – wore simple aprons and plain dresses. The Spriggans more than made up for this lack of colour by wearing lavish clothes, made of boldly coloured silks emblazoned with gold. Intricately embroidered waistcoats and velvet cloaks lined with fur covered their thin, lithe bodies like the plume of an exotic bird.

Although not as worldly-wise as the Spriggans, what the Kobolds did know, they knew with flawless cognition. They knew how to dig, they understood the structure of the earth intuitively and could craft its minerals into objects as beautiful as the golden sunsets that coloured the city's walls each twilight. It was said that the Kobolds possessed an uncanny sixth sense for finding precious minerals. It was also rumoured that they could tell by sound and touch whether a cavern lay beyond a rock wall. It was incorrectly believed that they could smell where the purest gold lay.

But whilst gold was prized, it was nothing compared to the glory of shatterstone. This strange ore was rare to find and difficult to work with, but the Kobolds had found a way to shape it into the strongest metal in the Myr. Swords and shields made from shatterstone were unbreakable and they shone with a dark brilliance rivalled only by a moonless sky. Shatterstone was generally not found anywhere else in the Myr. Scholars in the famed universities of Caquix postulated a theory regarding this fact – millennia ago, when a huge rock falling from the sky created the Worldpool in Lake Erras, a shard of that fiery object broke off and slammed into Camulos, showering the land with the unique mineral. It was a good theory, but the Kobolds did not care for theories. They cared about the shatterstone and that posed a problem. Their mines had run dry. The reserves of shatterstone had been exhausted and there was no hole in all Camulos that still yielded the ore. The Kobolds had been too liberal in their application of the metal. They had crafted everything from bangles to battering rams from it. They had even encased the

twenty-one towers of the Giant's Web in the metal, and incredibly, many centuries before, they had covered the great tower of Cessair in pure shatterstone as a tribute to the unity of the Myr.

A bell started chiming in the distance. It was the signal bell from Mine One. The city hall bell above the Sarras city square picked up its tintinnabulation and amplified it. Within seconds, plangent relay bells were chiming all across the city.

'Mulupo!' cried Ablo. 'The ceremony! It's started! Come down, or you'll miss it. They're about to break through.'

Mulupo had been so preoccupied with the new silks for his balloon he had forgotten all about the important event taking place at the bottom of Sarras' oldest and most productive mine. The Kobolds were digging deeper than ever before and the new excavation was to commence at day's end. The Spriggan stuck his head over the sill of the skyshop and said ominously, "'About to break through," you say, Mr Ablo, which raises the question – about to break through to what?'

Ablo just shook his head and started walking to his front gate. 'Gah! I have no time to waste on you Mulupo!'

As he strode down his garden path, Ablo could hear something slithering across the stones behind him. He wheeled around to see the end of one of the skyshop's mooring lines dancing about his brown boots. Above his head, the Spriggan was laughing.

'Sir, a gentle wind sits on our hind quarter and our destination lies to our fore. Deepening blue skies await. You have permission to come aboard.'

Ablo gave the faintest hint of a smile and wrapped the rope around his stocky forearms. Overhead, a mechanical winch started whining and Ablo's feet left his front yard behind.

A sharp, juddering motion marked the Kobold's arrival. Mulupo's impish face peered over the side of the skyshop. His thin, ring-adorned hand reached out to take Ablo's thick, calloused hand and heaving with all his might, he pulled the Kobold aboard.

'Thank-you Mulupo. We will have the best seat in the house.'

'Sir, I could not let you walk to Mine One! With limbs as compendious as yours, the ceremony would be long over by the time your expedition to the eponymous mine had concluded.'

Ablo had no idea what Mulupo had said, but was happy he would not miss a moment of the ceremony which would herald a new era for Camulos.

Mine One was old – thousands of years old. It was a crater, and many generations ago the Kobolds had carved into it a wide road which curled slowly down around its perimeter from the broad city street above to the flat base 300 feet below. The area was once a miner's treasure trove. Running away horizontally from the open crater, branching tunnels and passageways led to a labyrinth of torch-lit rooms where half of Sarras laboured into the night extracting the Myr's riches.

The tunnel entrances were adorned with beautifully wrought iron gates and intricately frescoed archways. From the outside, it was hard to believe that Mine One was a mine. The wealthiest Kobolds had apartments built into the walls of the pit and the most prestigious shops and offices were found on the cobblestone avenue that wound its way around the inside of the crater. The facades of these dwellings glimpsed at the prosperity of their inhabitants. Brass doorknobs and gilded window frames were complemented by marble friezes above the unnecessarily large doorways. Even the numbers on the letterboxes outside these dwellings were crafted by Sarras' finest artisans.

The luxuriant architecture of Mine One was rivalled by the greenery hanging over the walls of the townhouses and shops. Wide, oily leaves of creeping ivy waved in the breeze, every movement as tender as the dark purple flowers that were sprinkled across the green, like the violet dew on a Nessian meadow. Wherever the sun shone, there the ivy lay; where there was shadow, only stone. The creeping ivy snuck around the circumference of Mine One as the day passed by. It seemed to possess sentience, for it never covered windows, doorways or tunnel entrances. It had no roots and seemed to survive entirely by photosynthesis. Of all the wonders and riches of Mine One, this was one of the most famous. Creeping ivy could be found in other remote places in the Myr, but Mine One was the only place where it cohabitated a populated area. The creeping ivy was Camulos' national symbol and it could be often found in Kobold work, hidden in the delicate filigree of a ring crafted for a royal wedding, or embossed proudly on a six foot long Acoran shield. Ironically, this plant with no roots, this natural wonder that was never actually found in the earth, had been adopted by the miners as a symbol of their earth-bound work.

The expansive complexity of the mine was staggering. It was believed that there were more rooms and passages under Sarras than in the houses and halls of the city itself. When shatterstone became harder to find, all tunnels and rooms of Mine One were extended. Shafts were deepened and new rooms were delved but still the precious ore eluded the

Kobolds. This was considered disastrous by many as shatterstone had made Camulos a prosperous nation.

There were over 100 individually owned mines branching off the winding boulevard that made its way towards the bottom of Mine One. Above the archways that led off to separate rooms where precious metals and jewels were mined, ornately engraved plaques proudly bore the names of each section's owners. One name appeared regularly above the arches – Corbo Industries. Kalen Corbo was the brother of Gargo Corbo, the Mayor of Sarras, and there was not a wealthier man in all Camulos. He owned almost half the deposits in Sarras and when the mines began to run dry of shatterstone, he started putting pressure on his brother to permit extension of Mine One in the only direction it had left to go – down.

This was not as simple as it sounded as the base of Mine One was the site of one of the Myr's greatest wonders: a majestic botanical garden containing almost every aspect of flora that could be found under the sun. Sarras Park was a beautifully landscaped garden that had existed on the flat base of the crater for over 1,000 years.

This botanical zoo contained the Myr's most exotic plants and trees including the cherry trees of Morae, the glass poplars of Nessa and a hedge of Sarras Thorns. It even accommodated the remarkable veganistone. This peculiar item was not entirely animal, vegetable or mineral. The veganistone started its cycle as nothing more than a dark green weed, but in late summer a brilliant yellow flower would burst from its stalk. At the centre of this flower a small grey stone would develop. As autumn approached the stone would fall from the centre of the flower, landing on the ground with a gentle thud. Once the veganistone stalk had lost its rocky centre it would wither and die but that death heralded the next stage of its incredible life cycle. The pebble would crack open and a tiny thorny creature would leave the stony cocoon. It would find a soft patch of dirt and burrow under the surface where it would stay in a form of stasis like a bulb until the end of winter when a small shoot would break from its spine, force its way to the air above and the cycle would begin again. It was believed that the pebble at the heart of the veganistone had wondrous medicinal qualities, but the flower was extremely difficult to find and almost impossible to transplant. It was testimony to the Kobolds' horticultural skill that they had been able to grow a bed of veganistone at the bottom of Mine One, so far from its native soil of Upper Scoriath.

It was a wonder anything had grown in the botanical garden. Lying at the bottom of a steep crater, there were parts that did not see the sun. During late spring when it rained every day in Camulos, water

would cascade down the faces of the domiciles lining the mine, and yet not a plant drowned. Sarras Park broke every gardener's rule and yet it flourished. Or rather, had flourished, for the botanical park no longer lay at the bottom of Mine One. It had been relocated to a site on the far side of the city after the Mayor decided that what was under the garden was more important than what lay in it and that the mining of Mine One's floor would be 'good for the economy'. The economic reality was that when tenders for the land were invited, no-one could match the one put forward by Kalen Corbo.

After the botanical park had been removed, the Kobolds encountered a layer of stone that mystified them. The grain and form of the rock was unlike anything found elsewhere in the mine. It was dense, smooth and flat, as if someone had laid a stone floor under the soil at the base of Mine One. Strangely, it had seams and cuts as if ancient masons had fashioned the stone into close-fitting blocks. Kobold geologists were brought in to examine the rock and after weeks of testing, deduced that stone was not indigenous to the area. It resembled the type of sturdy granite that was common to southern Tethra. They had no explanation as to how it got there. The geologists also announced one other interesting piece of news – a cavern lay beneath the slab. The Kobolds had an uncanny ear for the properties of the earth and the geologists unanimously agreed that a short distance beyond the slab lay empty space. This news sent Sarras into a frenzy. Imaginings of vast caverns rich in jewels and minerals floated through the heads of the Sarran miners, and there was none more excited than Kalen Corbo who, after the news had been announced, was often seen walking the Mine One promenade with a satisfied grin upon his face.

The marble balustrade that had surrounded the botanical park was retained when all the flora was removed and this walkway became a popular spot for the people of Sarras to meet, enticed by the nearness of the city's most likely source of revenue in the years to come.

At regular intervals along this promenade were situated pedestals upon which stood statues of some of the Myr's greatest figures – musicians and poets stood alongside inventors and scientists. More statues could be found along the circular road that threaded the inside of the mine. From the lip of the mine to the balustrade around the large patch of dirt where the garden once lay, the statues numbered in the hundreds. They were made of all sorts of materials: granite, stone, iron, even shatterstone. What was notable about these statues was that they weren't solely comprised of chiselled dedications to significant Kobolds. The statue collection included almost every known race living in the Myr and many of the beasts as well. There were sculptures of Tuirrenians

clad in light armour standing alongside the hulking forms of Sessymirians. Lithe figures of famous Kompilerans could be found next to the ophidian forms of the few Pryderi who had established themselves beyond the borders of Morae. Many of the statues were figures from history and some of the greatest took pride of place on the marble ring encircling the base of Mine One.

A collection of stirring-looking pieces lined the broad area where the road from the top of the mine flowed into the wide flat area of the promenade. Life-sized representations of significant individuals from the island of Caquix stood majestically upon large pedestals. Some of these statues were over ten feet tall, but in contrast to the warlike Helyans and Sessymirians, the Caquikki held books instead of weapons. The Caquikki were a physically intimidating people whose lower half consisted of a long-legged hexapedal body but whose muscular torso and head resembled that of a human. Their heads were shaven except for a long thin mane of fine, dark hair which ran from the top of the head to the base of their torso. The Caquikki fancied themselves as the intellectual guardians of the Myr so it was not surprising to find engraved into the stone pages of the books their statues held, moments of historical, social and political importance. It was quite common to find people climbing up onto the Caquikki statues to read the text indelibly carved into the rocky tomes they carried.

Although the Kobolds rarely travelled abroad, they had recreated much of the world in the statues lining Mine One. On one level it was strange that a people so reclusive could create such an inclusive statuary, but the Kobolds were as complex as their mines, and they considered the Mine One statues to be among their proudest achievements. The mine was a very special place. Indeed, if Sarras was the heart of Camulos, then Mine One was its soul.

'Can't this thing go any faster?' complained Ablo as he looked over the edge of the skyshop. In the streets below he could see crowds of Kobolds and Spriggans surging towards Mine One. The skyshop by contrast just seemed to be motionless, hanging in a fixed position as if tied to an invisible point in the sky.

'Mr Ablo, my abdominous friend, I would not expect you to have even a rudimentary understanding of avionics, but let me say that should I make a mistake, our aery platform in the sky will not stay long betwixt the benefic canopy of the heavens and the pertinacious stone below, and your squat body would be little more than a cardinal stain upon our fair city. Worry not, we will be there before gloaming.'

Dusk – or gloaming as the Kobolds called it – was still an hour away. The sun was low in the western sky. The sunward side of every building and tree below was bathed in the florid afternoon light and even the most ordinary object had a lustrous sheen. ‘Look at the lucent sphere,’ Mulupo said to Ablo as he gazed westward. ‘It is a golden doorway from which an aureate path meanders across the deep blue meadow of the sea.’

Ablo grunted pretending to be unimpressed.

Putting his bloviated description of the sunset aside, Mulupo turned his focus to the large dish that was suspended above the Cold-powered burner. Although the Spriggan balloons were powered by Cold, the process was not as simple as just heating up a lump of the fuel and sitting back to enjoy the view. Suspended above the burner a large dish contained an acidic liquid obtained from the swamps of Mag Mel in distant Tuirren. Into this were mixed highly volatile iron filings Mulupo had bought from an iron mine outside Kabaht. The gas that arose when these two elements were mixed was what lifted the balloon into the sky, but if the amounts were incorrect, the result was usually a flaming ball of silk and a rapidly descending skyshop. Once Mulupo had gained enough elevation to sail over Sarras’ tallest steeples, he adjusted the burners so that they would remain at that height. Ablo, frustrated by the delay, just huffed and grumbled on the deck of the skyshop, wishing he knew how to pilot the craft himself.

There were three reasons why air travel had not become the dominant form of transportation across the Myr. The first was that very few races understood the complex procedure of heating the iron filings. Secondly, even if they mastered the procedure, the iron filings required to produce the lighter-than-air gas could only be found in northern Camulos and the eremitic nature of the Kobolds did not encourage strangers to their land. The Kobolds had thought long and hard about exporting the iron filings, but it was decided that it would make Camulos a much more accessible country and the last thing they wanted was a land overflowing with visitors. The third reason for the empty skies over the Myr was that the airships were very hard to control and only an elaborate understanding of the air currents would permit safe passage through the atmosphere. Over the years the Spriggans had developed comprehensive air maps, but these they kept to themselves. They had heard the rumours that scientists on the island of Caquix had been developing their own form of air transportation. By keeping their air maps secret, the Spriggans hoped to delay the day when they would have to share the skies with other races.

Mulupo pulled some steel cords to adjust the balloon's heat-resistant skirts and they were under way. 'You should be content now Ablo,' he said. 'Our state of desuetude has dissolved and we are now en route to Mine One.'

'About time!' the Kobold muttered.

For all his skill with language, Mulupo found that he lacked the words to describe the wondrous site that greeted the pair as his skyshop sailed over the huge pit at the centre of Sarras. Thousands of Spriggans and Kobolds had turned out for the occasion. Numerous other skyshops floated in and over the mine, but Mulupo noted that none were as colourful as his. Below, the cobblestone road was abrim with people. It seemed that everyone in Camulos had turned out for the event. Although many locals opposed the relocation of the botanical park, there was not a Kobold or Spriggan in all Sarras who was not curious about what lay beneath the floor of Mine One. Through the minds of many of the onlookers floated images of the 'new era of prosperity' as the Mayor Gargo Korbo had described it. Fluttering in the mischievous breeze that danced around the pit were flags and banners proudly identifying Corbo Industries as the heralds of this new era.

On a platform erected at the very base of the mine, on the flat brown earth that was left when the garden was ripped up, the Mayor and his brother enjoyed the anticipative energy the ceremony had given rise to. They were seated with dignitaries from many of Camulos' cities, all of whom had an interest in the further development of Mine One. Some wealthy merchants also had seats upon the platform; these Spriggans had outdone themselves in dressing for the occasion, their gaudy clothes rivalling Mulupo's balloon in terms of audacious colour and design.

Lanterns had been lit throughout the pit in readiness for the darkness to come. Dusk had already fallen in the crater. The last rays of sun climbed up ornate facades of the mansions lining the upper eastern side of the mine. Creeping ivy scaled the marble walls, soaking in the last few minutes of rich, golden sunlight.

Mulupo could hear the familiar percussive sounds of Spriggan minstrels playing drums over which were arrayed the intricate, melodic patterns of the kora, an instrument few could play well – in the hands of the Spriggans, it was like the insouciance of sunset being reproduced in musical form. Underscoring this complex arrangement, Mulupo could make out an even more familiar sound – the distinctive note of bottles of

ale striking the edges of glasses as the Spriggans celebrated the occasion with customary vim, vigour and alcohol.

'Quite a sight, Mr Ablo,' remarked Mulupo, turning his head to look at his business partner who was clearly overwhelmed by the occasion. The Kobold was gazing proudly upon the mine, which was glowing in the tender light of countless lanterns. Reflecting the concordance of the music, Kobolds and Spriggans had come together in a complex, harmonious gathering and everything seemed right in the world, even in the eyes of a grouchy, old Kobold like Ablo. The air was gravid with expectation and any animosity about the loss of the botanical gardens was forgotten as the people of Sarras looked to the future at the bottom of the mine. Mulupo noticed a small tear sitting on the edge of one of Ablo's leathery eyelids, but decided not to comment on it.

The Spriggan swung a large chrome lever around until the sound of the burners faded to a gentle hum. He then pulled on a line connected to the release valve at the top of the balloon. This allowed for controlled venting of the hot air that had kept them afloat above the mine. The skyshop descended into the pit until it was only twenty feet above the crowd that lined the promenade. Mulupo locked off the burners and shut the release valve and the balloon hovered in the air with such stillness, Ablo momentarily thought they had landed at the base of the mine. The Spriggan grinned at his companion. 'Here we are, sir – the best seat in the house!'

Ablo looked down at the ceremonial platform and realised that he had a better view than Camulos' most influential and important individuals. The Spriggan had done well. They had arrived in time for the grand opening and they had a vantage point that quickly became the envy of all.

Mulupo was taking in all the statues lining the promenade. It had been years since he last frequented Mine One and he had forgotten what a magnificent place it was. 'Ablo, it staggers me that a race so utilitarian in dress and manner can turn a declivity in the earth into something so beautiful. I think this calls for a drink.'

Ablo smiled, an action the muscles in his face were not well practised in. He was amused by Mulupo's proclivity for using the smallest occasion as a justification for having a drink. 'Mulupo, in your mind, the act of breathing is something to celebrate with a drink!'

'Ablo, if the ability to breathe is not cause for celebration, I do not know what is!' Mulupo ducked into the small cabin at the rear of the skyshop and emerged holding a dark brown bottle in triumph. 'It was a

fortuitous decision to stop in Garlot on my last trip abroad. I managed to acquire a crate of Nessian aleberry at a remarkably good price.'

Although Ablo did not understand what the word 'fortuitous' meant, he knew that it was no happy coincidence that Mulupo had dropped anchor in Garlot, the home of the Myr's finest wines and ales. No matter where Mulupo went on his long voyages across Myrran skies, he always managed to bring home a crate or two of aleberry from Garlot.

The Spriggan dragged two stools out from the cabin and motioned to Ablo to take a seat on one of them. As Ablo sat down on the little round stool Mulupo stepped forward to pass him a glass of the thick umber-coloured liquid. Unfortunately for the Kobold, Mulupo tripped on an old tarpaulin he had left lying on the deck and the precious aleberry wine sailed through the air, eventually falling like an unexpected summer shower across Ablo's best grey shirt.

After a stream of apologies interspersed with raucous laughter, Mulupo poured Ablo another drink and managed to hand it over without further incident. The Spriggan raised his glass. Ablo joined him, holding his glass as high as his stumpy arm would permit. 'To a long and prosperous tomorrow,' Mulupo toasted, gently hitting his glass against Ablo's. He then leaned back against one of the crates that filled much of the deck. The Spriggan put his hooved feet up on the railing on the skyshop and took a deep sip from his glass. 'Now this is living,' he said contentedly, closing his eyes to savour the flavours of the wine.

When he opened his eyes, Ablo was peering over the side of the skyshop. His empty glass lay on the deck by his feet. 'Mulupo, when is it going to start?' the Kobold moaned impatiently. 'Everyone's here.'

Mulupo lazily moved across to the railing. Directly beneath them, the Mayor was hovering around the ornate gold lectern that had been placed at the front of the stage upon which Sarran dignitaries were seated.

In front of them, on the darkening flat expanse of dirt that had once been Sarras' verdant botanical garden, large creatures shuffled about, being led by Kobolds wielding long, thin reeds that they snapped across the beasts' snouts from time to time. The animals were simply known as grouts and they were a crucial part of the Kobolds' mining operation. An adult grout was the size of a small house. Its body was a spherical mass of fat and muscle which was dragged about by two incredibly powerful yet relatively small arms. The grout had no hind legs. Its ball of a body tapered away to a wide flat tail which seemingly had little use. By contrast, the other end of the grout made it one of the most wonderful beasts to have at the bottom of a mine – its head was wedge-shaped and there was nothing the grout enjoyed doing more than ramming this head

into the earth. The grout had a seemingly limitless threshold of pain and would drive its snout into the densest rock it could find. The reasons for this behaviour were not known. The creature wasn't in search of food nor was it digging a burrow. It just seemed to enjoy breaking apart the dirt and rock with its head and this suited the Kobolds perfectly. In the hands of a master trainer, a team of grouts faced with solid rock could dig 100 feet in a day.

It was the grouts that had stripped away the top soil at the bottom of Mine One and had exposed the crust of difficult Tethran rock that lay beneath. Months ago, they had also dug up an ancient plaque fashioned in brass. Inscribed into the plaque were the words 'Magicka fed a tempa'. No-one in Sarras, not even the Spriggans, knew what it meant, and it had been sent off to Caquix for scholars to examine, but no translation had yet come back from the Caquikki linguists.

'Look!' exclaimed Ablo more excitably than Mulupo thought possible. 'They're bringing in the bloaters!'

Mulupo cast his eyes over to where Ablo was pointing, grimacing at the use of the word 'bloater'. 'Ablo, I don't know who was foolish enough to bless Kobolds with the gift of speech. Your crude nomenclature of the Myr's most unique fauna gives me heartburn. The species' correct name is immortellis protea. Furthermore, the Kobold's involvement of the creature in mining is barbaric.'

Ablo said nothing in reply. He was well-acquainted with Mulupo's thoughts on the subject. Whilst the grouts were clearly doing something they loved – digging – the same could not be said of the bloaters. These odd creatures were actually a strange cnidarian that could only be found in the Myr's deserts. Only the size of a small rock, the bloater lived a small and happy life on its own, siphoning water from even the driest air in order to survive. The bloater lived its entire existence rarely seeing another of its kind, except in times of rain. When water fell upon the adult bloater, it started a physiological reaction of an extraordinary kind. Its body would immediately go into the throes of labour doubling in size every few seconds as thousands of offspring popped into existence within its belly. The bloater's outer epidermal layer was cartilaginous and incredibly tough; most bloaters grew to extraordinary proportions before the skin would burst, spilling countless offspring across the land. Fortunately, it would be years before these offspring had the ability to likewise spawn, giving them enough time to find a patch of sand to call their own.

If there was one thing more incredible than the existence of such a peculiar creature, it was the Kobolds' ability to find a use for it.

On the flat expanse of rock directly below the skyshop, three huge mobile frames were being pulled into place by teams of garumphs. 'Is there any animal you are not using for this grand operation?' Mulupo said sarcastically. Ablo didn't respond; he was too enthralled by the sight of the majestic structures being pulled towards the centre of Mine One's base. The frames were made from oakaen timber and shatterstone plating. In the centre of each frame a long thick post was mounted. The huge lengths of wood had been imported from neighbouring Acoran where trees known as spear-pines grew impossibly tall and perfect. Capped in black iron, the posts were pile-drivers and would be the tool by which the miners would break through to the cavern below the floor of Mine One.

The frames were pulled into position. The garumphs were released from the harnesses that connected them to the frames and led away.

Mulupo turned his back on the spectacle below him and poured himself another glass of aleberry which he drank in one gulp. He then leapt up onto the rail of the skyshop. Holding one of the mooring lines, he jumped over the edge and slid down the rope.

'Where are you going?' cried Ablo, taken by surprise.

Mulupo stopped his rapid descent. He looked up and said, 'Mr Ablo, whilst I delight in the occasion before us, the Kobolds' treatment of the immortellis is unconscionable. I have said it before and will reiterate myself whilst I hang here betwixt shop and mine – the Kobolds' use of these poor denizens of the desert is exploitation of a most disappointing pedigree.'

Ablo gazed over to where a Kobold carrying a wooden box walked from frame to frame depositing a single bloater in a tray underneath each suspended pile-driver. He turned back to the Spriggan. 'Mulupo, they don't feel any pain,' he said unconvincingly.

'Childbirth is always painful, Ablo. You don't need to be a Caquikki scholar to know that!' Mulupo shouted back in plain terms.

'But aren't you going to watch the ceremony?'

'Yes, I'll be back when this offensive part has played itself out.'

'But what are you going to do?' cried Ablo, shouting louder as Mulupo recommenced his slide down the rope.

'I'm going to read a book or two,' the Spriggan replied impishly.

From the deck to the skyshop, Ablo caught a glimpse of the brown bottle of aleberry Mulupo had secreted into his coat pocket. He smiled and returned to gazing across the pit from his vantage point in the air.

Mulupo landed clumsily in the middle of a picnic rug a family of Kobolds had laid out on the cobblestone promenade. He accidentally placed one of his hooves into the middle of a shelp pie that was just about to be served for dinner. Apologising for the mistake, he awkwardly backed off the rug, knocking over a carafe of wine as he did so. 'My deepest apologies, madam' he said to the awestruck Kobold woman who had been kneeling over the pie. He quickly picked up the almost empty carafe and – without thinking – he thrust his nose into the neck of the decanter and sniffed. His face then contorted into a theatrical show of displeasure. 'Perhaps it was good fortune that my haphazard arrival from above led to the spillage of this carafe's contents. The bouquet of this wine could only be likened to the fragrance one associates with the excretory product of a diseased bovine.'

The Kobold woman, infuriated by the incomprehensible and unsolicited review of her selection of beverage picked up one of the few remaining slices of pie and hurled it at the Mulupo. He ducked and the pie flew over the promenade balcony to land twenty feet below at the feet of one of the garumphs that had brought in the mining frames. The creature sniffed at the pie, licked it tentatively, and then grunted in displeasure at the taste. It seemed Mulupo wasn't the only critic at the ceremony.

Having extricated himself from his predicament, Mulupo made his way through the throngs of Kobolds and Spriggans lining every spare inch of Mine One. He made his way up the wide steps that led to the broad, bold statues of the Caquikki. These were his favourite statues in Mine One. When Mulupo was much younger, his mother would often find him curled up in the huge arms of a Caquikki scholar, reading the engraved text of the books the statue invariably held.

Gargo Corbo, the Mayor of Sarra, finished his opening speech to thunderous applause. The speech was everything the Kobolds wanted in a public address – it was simple and it was brief. By contrast, the ensuing speech made by the Head of the Guild of Merchants, a Spriggan by the name of Muppo, was interminably long. There were very few Kobolds who had the slightest idea what he was talking about, but the Spriggans gathered throughout Mine One burst into cacophonous bouts of laughter at various points in his bombastic oratory.

The preliminary speeches were followed by an extraordinarily beautiful performance of a piece of music that had been written for the occasion. The Spriggan musicians stood on a small stage that had been erected on the flat ground of Mine One, surrounded by grouts and

garumphs. Behind the band, numerous Kobolds made the final preparations on the frames bearing the huge posts that would be used to break through the rocky base of the mine.

With all heads turned to the platform for the opening speeches, Mulupo used the distraction to acquire a lantern that a family of Kobolds did not seem to need. He wound his way through a group of Caquikki statues he had not visited since his youth. Incredibly, some of these pieces were over 1,000 years old but gleamed as if they had just been carved, largely due to the devoted care the mine's curators had lavished upon them.

Mulupo climbed upon the broad back of a white marble statue and swung himself over its shoulders into its thick arms. He looked up at the statue's powerful face. It was a man who had a stern, provident countenance. The eyes of the Caquikki were cast upward, out of the mine, looking to the horizon. His mouth was open, and it seemed that the sculptor had captured a moment in time when the man had been reading aloud from the book he held in his hands.

Mulupo placed the lantern's handle in the statue's mouth, uncorked his bottle of aleberry wine and settled down to read.

On the floor on Mine One, the music and speeches had ended. Kobolds wound massive cranks at the sides of the pile-driver frames and the huge iron-clad poles in the centre of the frames were lifted a few feet into the air. At the top of the frames, where the far end of the poles faced the sky, a rubbery belt ran across the opening, fixed to either side of the frame. The belt was actually made from the sinew of a garumph and was impossible to tear or break. The top of the poles pushed against this thick strip of sinew, and it stretched as it was prodded by the thick finger of wood beneath it. Under the lower end of the poles, in a small tray the base of each frame, a small, hapless bloater mewed happily, unaware of what the Kobolds had in store for it.

A number of Kobolds bearing jugs approached the frames and poured a few drops of water into the trays beneath the posts. The bloaters were thrust into violent childbirth. Within seconds they were ten times their original size and growing. The poles above them pushed up against the sinewy belt at the top of the frames. The belt stretched but showed no signs of breaking. The bloaters continued to grow at a phenomenal rate, as their bellies filled with hundreds of offspring. Upwards and outwards the bodies of the bloaters expanded, and the frames creaked in unison as the iron-clad poles were forced higher. The

crowd held its breath as three-quarters of the poles were seen above the tops of the frames, the belts stretched to an impossible degree. The three frames resembled the bows of Tuirrenian archers – the garumph sinews were the bowstrings and the poles were the arrows nocked in position, ready to fire into the flesh of the earth. The tension upon the belts was only rivalled by the tension in the crowd awaiting the moment when the huge, pregnant bodies of the bloaters would explode, bringing thousands of baby bloaters into the world.

Mulupo was intrigued at what he was reading. According to the footnote inscribed at the bottom of the stone page, the carved text was taken from parchments that were many centuries old. The Spriggan leant forward and craned his head over the top of the book to read its cover. The title engraved upon the spine read: ‘A Short History of the Breaches’ by Professor Shawnessy Fall. Mulupo sat back, took another swig of aleberry wine and returned to his reading:

‘At the turn of the twelfth century, the Assembly of Nations put in place a mechanism that would keep at bay the growing evil below the Myr. The Pryderi from Morae were brought in to supply illumination. Their white light stopped the approach of the Ghul so the Kobold and Sessymirian teams could seal the breaches while battalions of the Myr’s finest soldiers drove back the Cabal. The work continued through the night, with rotating shifts of miners carrying out the masonry just as covens of Pryderi relieved one another to keep the mine bathed in light.

The sealing of the breaches was a national event. Helyan, Tuathan and Arnakki soldiers brought in granite from Tethra; Sessymirians and Kobolds laid the stone as Tuirrenian and Acoran archers stood guard; and the Caquikki and Morgai managed the entire project from start to finish. Spriggans roamed the mining camp selling wares and Nessian chefs prepared meals all day and night for the thousands of workers involved.

The entire project took over seven years. These workers moved across the Myr, wherever a breach was found. When the seal was physically finished, the Morgai descended onto the stone barrier and cast a sealing spell. A brass plaque was placed in the centre of every seal bearing a warning written in the old Morgai tongue: *Magicka fed a tempa* – magick fades in time. And lastly, over the Tethran stonework the Morgai poured enough rubble and rock to bury a Colossi.’

Mulupo sat up and pondered the Morgai phrase. He had heard it before. Two months ago, Ablo had told him of the plaque a grout had unearthed at the bottom of Mine One. This had to be the very plaque the book made mention of. His heart-rate quickened when he thought of the

coincidence. He decided a drink was in order as his mind tried to digest what he had just read.

When the bloaters exploded, they exploded violently. The mother's enceinte body was scattered in a thousand blue pieces as countless offspring broke free from their short-lived prison. The huge poles that had been pushed upward by the pregnant bloater's expanding body shot downwards at a phenomenal speed, and the impact as it slammed into the ground sent reverberations throughout the entire pit. The stone beneath all three towers cracked and splintered. It would not be long before the Kobolds broke through to the cavern underneath.

Having finished off the last drops of aleberry wine, Mulupo hunched back over the marble book. There was no more text but there was a rather ornate relief on the facing page. It was a picture of seven cloaked individuals standing with their arms outstretched, their hands touching, in some arcane ritual. 'Morgai,' Mulupo mused. Then he noticed something startling. Although the immediate landscape surrounding the circle of Morgai was unrecognizable, in the background he could make out three distinct mountain peaks. He lifted his eyes from the stone page and looked out across the empty space before him. Beyond the far side of Mine One, distant but recognizable, were the same mountains. They were the three tallest peaks of the Camul Ranges to the east. It was as if the artist who had etched the picture was standing exactly where the statue had been placed. A small caption underneath the picture read: 'The Morgai seal the Sarras Breach'.

Mulupo's head swirled with the potent effects of the Nessian wine. He tried to make sense of what he had read. The text made mention of creatures called the Ghul and the Cabal. From what his addled mind could deduce, these creatures were races from a realm beneath the rock under his hooves and they were evil. So evil in fact, they had been sealed beneath the Myr, thousands of years ago by the combined efforts of many nations. The Morgai – who Mulupo had thought were the stuff of poorly written bedtime stories – had placed a mystical barrier over the physical barrier the Kobolds of old had placed to stop up the breaches. Lastly, a warning was left in the form of a strange phrase – 'Magick fades in time'.

It was enough to catapult Mulupo into sobriety. The breaches had been sealed to rid the Myr of some terrifying enemy and the Kobolds were attempting to open the seal. Suddenly, it seemed like a distinctly bad idea to break through the base of Mine One.

Mulupo leapt down from the Caquikki statue and shot through the crowds who had begun cheering manically each time the pile-drivers pounded into Mine One's floor. The Spriggan was shouting for the mining to stop, but he could hardly hear his own voice above the din.

Whoomp! Whoomp! Whoomp!

The pile-drivers slammed into the cracked stone and large chunks of it broke away. The crowds jostled to catch a glimpse of the historic moment when the miners broke through to the cavern beneath. Mulupo tried to push his way through, but the throng had surged forward and in doing so had become an impenetrable mass. He screamed out his warnings but even if they could hear him, no-one was listening. He found he could not go forward – the way was blocked by excited Kobolds and Spriggans standing shoulder to shoulder. He was stuck.

Whoomp! Whoomp! Whoomp!

Again the pile-drivers pounded the rock and thousands of shards and splinters shot out across the floor of Mine One. Dust from the concussive force of the pile-drivers hung momentarily in the air before descending upon the people like light rain. No-one seemed to mind. They all knew that the miners were close to breaking through and a little dust was a small price to pay for a share in the riches that awaited Sarras.

Something lightly touched Mulupo's shoulder. It was the rope from his skyshop, still hanging where he left it.

'Ablo!'

Mulupo had completely forgotten about the Kobold up in his skyshop. He had to warn Ablo. With admirable agility and speed, Mulupo hauled himself hand over hand up the rope to his skyshop.

As soon as Mulupo's hooves hit the deck of the skyshop, he darted past Ablo and scrambled up the guy ropes to open the burners that would take them out of the pit and away from the danger that lurked beneath.

'What are you doing?' Ablo barked in a gruff voice, realizing that the Spriggan was preparing to ascend.

'We must away, Mr Ablo. I fear we have stumbled into a most dire predicament.'

Ablo frowned. 'Not for the first time today, I find myself unable to understand you Mulupo. The miners are almost through. It is the worst time to leave.'

Mulupo jumped down from the burners and started unfastening the cords that controlled the balloon's skirts. 'Oh, I must take a contrary view, Mr Ablo. Now would be a most prudent time to depart! Now do be a good fellow and bring me some Cold. I'll need it to sustain a maximum rate of ascendancy.'

'Why do you want to leave the mine?' Ablo grunted infuriated by the Spriggan's erratic behaviour.

'No, no, no! Not just the mine, Mr Ablo,' Mulupo replied. 'I think it would a very good idea to leave Sarras now. In fact, perhaps we should leave Camulos altogether.'

Ablo had reached his limit. Minutes ago he was enjoying the best view in Mine One, sipping the finest Nessian wine and smiling down at the Kobolds who looked up at his vantage point with undisguised envy. Now, he was being told he had to leave not just the event, but his country too. 'Mulupo, unless you tell me what is going on, I promise you, I will tie you down –'

Whoomp! Whoomp! Whoomp!

A great cracking noise filled the air, drowning out all other sound. The cracking was swiftly replaced by a deafening cheer which rose up into the air accompanied by a billowing cloud of dust that swallowed up the light of the lanterns like an esurient beast. The miners had broken through and the floor beneath the towers fell away. Large cracks shot out across the ground. The holes beneath the pile-drivers grew. The bloaters that had spawned all over the ground were now rapidly disappearing as was the floor of Mine One.

'Oh dear!' muttered Mulupo as he gazed gingerly over the railing.

Ablo looked over at the Spriggan and wagged a stumpy finger at him. 'Don't you do anything! We're staying put.'

Whether it was curiosity or loyalty to his business partner, Mulupo did not know, but he decided to abandon his attempts to leave. He watched as the three pile-driver towers toppled into the gaping hole below. The floor of the mine had been replaced by a vast, empty, black space. At the base of the promenade wall encircling the chasm, hundreds upon thousands of bloaters huddled around the feet of the garumphs, grouts and Kobolds that had retreated from the growing breach. Luckily the hole had not enveloped the platform upon which were seated the Mayor, his brother and other VIPs. They all stared out across the chasm before them in stunned silence, not knowing whether to be terrified or elated over what had just transpired. As the dust settled on the ground, the new mine's owner, Kalen Corbo, stood up and proudly proclaimed, 'We have done it! A new era has arrived!'

Without warning, a long thin arrow sailed out of the blackness before the platform and embedded itself in Corbo's throat. He fell backwards, clutching at his neck, his thick hands fumbling around as his mind tried to comprehend what had just happened to him. He flopped to the wooden floor of the platform. The Mayor dropped down to cradle his

brother in his arms. A long, gargling sound lurched out of Kalen's mouth and he died.

The crowd held its breath. Most could not see what had happened on the platform but a feeling of dread swept around the pit like a cold wind. Then in the gloom, figures could be seen emerging from the hole. They were bipedal but looked like no race that walked upon the Myr. Their skin was grey, like ashes on the hearth, and each figure was adorned in the unfamiliar bones of monstrous creatures. They carried long spears, bows, knives and maces, all fashioned from bone.

Up in the skyshop, Ablo looked incredulously at the scene before him. 'What are these creatures Mulupo?' he asked the Spriggan desperately.

'At a guess, I would postulate that they are the Ghul.'

Ablo wasn't interested in their name. 'But what are they?'

Mulupo's brow furrowed as he watched a seemingly endless procession of figures exiting the breach. 'They are evil Mr Ablo and we have just opened the door and let them in.'

Within minutes, the pallid, cadaverous bodies of the Ghul spilled from the womb of the earth. Most of the miners who had operated the pile-drivers had scampered up the promenade wall and were cowering behind the broad statues which stared impassively at the terrifying army before them. On the platform by the breach, dignitaries were being held to their seats by the obscene creatures that soon filled the base of Mine One. Gargo Corbo hovered over the body of his dead brother like an animal protecting its young. The Ghul said nothing, but gazed back at the black opening, waiting for their lord and master to arrive.

Suddenly, the hordes of Ghul before the platform parted and at the far end of the empty avenue leading from the hole hobbled a tall, thin man. He looked old, as if life had finished with him but he had kept on living anyway. His skin was pocked and cratered, a dirty and ugly landscape devoid of life. Leprosy had made its mark upon his face but the man's eyes burned with iridescent intensity. His hair was a tousled, monochromatic mess just like his garb, a gown of black furs ripped off the back of some misbegotten subterranean beast. Despite his ragged appearance and spasmodic motion, the man held himself with an imperious air, a notion reinforced by the subservient behaviour of his underlings.

Whispers flew around Mine One. The arrival of the Ghul had shocked the Spriggans and Kobolds but the sight of a man limping out of the hole in the ground was impossible to fathom.

The man paused and looked up at the sky, drinking in the night air like a deep draught of ale. He gazed at the stars which shone more radiantly than any jewel he had ever seen in the bowels of the earth. And when a gentle wind caressed his face, he sighed mournfully, and tears welled up in his bloodshot eyes. One hand held a bone staff, and when the other arm came up to wipe away the tears with the folds of his cloak, it became apparent to the crowd that this diseased old man was without his left hand.

The man slowly made his way up the space his soldiers had created for him, his crippled gait a violent, disturbing thing to see. He paused at the foot of the dignitaries' platform and his lieutenant held out a hand to assist him up the stairs. He smiled at the Ghul commander but did not take his hand. 'Thank-you Lucetious but I will take the stage when I am invited.' His voice was course but his diction was refined. Each syllable was well-rounded and spoken with such precision that it seemed at odds with his roughshod appearance.

The man looked up at the vast crowd just staring blankly down at him and his strange army. He smiled, relishing their incredulity. His teeth looked like loose rubble lying across the floor of a dank quarry.

'My fellow Myrrans!' he cried, his voice echoing off the walls of the pit. As he spoke, he turned to gaze upon the entire populace gathered in Mine One. 'It is with a wonderful sense of joy that I stand before you tonight. My name is Caliban Grayson and my companions are the Ghul.'

Up in the skyshop, Mulupo and Ablo could see and hear everything transpiring beneath them. At the mention of the Ghul, Mulupo blanched. He did not know what atrocities they were capable of inflicting upon the people of Camulos, but if the book in the hands of the marble Caquikki was any indication, they were to be feared absolutely. The only person who had nothing to fear was Kalen Corbo, lying dead in his brother's arms.

'That man – who is he?' whispered Ablo to Mulupo so quietly that the Spriggan barely heard him.

'That is not knowledge I can lay claim to, but I know where he's from,' Mulupo replied. 'He's Pelinese.'

Ablo said nothing, but a slight furrowing of the brows suggested that he did not understand so Mulupo spelt it out for him.

'Ablo, I recognize the accent. That man, Caliban, is from Pelinore.'

'Where's Pelinore?'

'It is a large city to the north-east, in Scoriath.'

'What's wrong with his skin?'

'A rudimentary prognosis based on the visible evidence – the chronic loss of skin pigmentation, the many lesions on the face and hand, and the inflamed nodules beneath the skin – would suggest our uninvited guest's epidermal layer is severely compromised by a granulomatous disease, specifically erythema nodosum leprosum.'

Ablo simply stared at Mulupo, waiting for the inevitable simplification to follow.

'He has leprosy, Mr Ablo. Caliban Grayson is a leper.'

'And what is he saying?'

'I'm not sure. My aural abilities are currently divided in their attention.'

Ablo concentrated hard upon Mulupo's last comment. After a pause, he said, 'You want me to be quiet?'

Mulupo smiled. 'Yes,' he said with uncharacteristic linguistic directness.

Caliban was enjoying himself. It had been thirty years since he had stood in the open air, and his senses were intoxicated with long-forgotten sensations.

The Ghul stood to attention, watching him silently. Their senses were also assaulted with a vast array of stimuli. Strange smells were borne on the air, odours free of the dirt and clamminess of the subterranean realm they called home. Rich, thick scents wafted up their nostrils and lay like a carpet across their throats. Even in the dim grey light of the pit, the Ghul soldiers could perceive colours they had never experienced before. Sounds from innumerable sources cut into their ears with a clarity that was almost painful to experience. In the Endless, the name given to their realm millennia ago, most noises were muted and dulled by the rock, but here in the open air everything was sharp and unequivocal. The intricate ornamentation of stars above the pit captivated the Ghul, shining with a radiance that struck out like shiny pins drawing silver threads across an ebony cloak.

Despite the beauty of the new experience, or perhaps because of it, the overwhelming sensory stimulation nauseated many of the Ghul, who found neither wonder nor tranquility in the elicitations of this new world. Some of the soldiers, disturbed by the exotic environment surrounding them, shifted uneasily on their feet and looked about malevolently at the strange people who just stared blankly back.

'Can you feel it, my friends?' Caliban shouted up into the crowds surrounding him. All eyes fell upon the old man, even those of the Ghul. 'Can you feel it?'

The stunned, silent masses of stupefied Spriggans and Kobolds continued to gape at the scene before them, unable to comprehend the arrival of the swarm of strange, skeletal beings and their Myrran leader.

'The world has changed this night. It has changed irrevocably, for now we share it. Now, after thirty years I can breathe the air again and for the first time in many millennia, the Ghul can witness the majesty of unconfined skies and live as free people. You have emancipated us, broken the bars of our imprisonment and for that we are truly grateful.' Caliban Grayson smiled as he bowed generously before his audience.

Unexpectedly, a Kobold voice rang out shrilly in the thin twilight air. 'Is this how you repay us, then?' It was Gargo Corbo standing on the platform above Caliban, his dead brother lying across his arms, the bone arrow still sticking out his throat. Gargo stepped down the wooden stairs and slowly walked up to Caliban. He lay his brother at Caliban's feet. Blood seeped out around the shaft of the arrow and ran down across Kalen Corbo's neck until it dripped off to create a grumose, crimson pool around Caliban's feet. 'This does not look like gratitude to me.'

Suddenly a heavy thud echoed across the pit as Lieutenant Lucetious brought the knotted head of a thick bone club down upon Gargo Corbo's skull. The club, the femur of some strange subterranean beast, split open the Kobold's dense cranial skin, and the Mayor of Sarras dropped heavily to the dirt where his blood mingled with that of his brother's.

'Silence!' Lucetious commanded. 'No-one has given you permission to speak.' He spoke without colour, with little inflection and even less passion – the soulless voice of a soulless race. Lucetious was taller than the other Ghul. His macerated skin was characterized by the same deathly pallor as that exhibited by others of his race, but there was something about him that set him apart.

At his feet, Gargo curled up into a foetal position, groaning with pain, oblivious to the Ghul commander's demand for silence.

Caliban looked dispassionately at the two Kobold brothers before him. He then glanced up at the horrified crowd. The violence that had just taken place was completely alien to them and it seemed they did not know how to respond to it.

Caliban turned earnestly to his lieutenant and said, 'Lucetious, we have much to do before the sun stains the sky. Are Cribella's children ready?'

Lucetious nodded deferentially. 'They are indeed, my lord.' He then cried shrilly across the pit, 'Bring forth the arachna!' Within seconds, four mammoth quadrupedal creatures with magnificent thick white horns emerged from the gaping maw. The beasts pulled equally large leather sacks behind them. From the skyshop overhead, Mulupo could see that

there was something in each of the sacks, writhing furiously in an attempt to free itself from its leathery cell.

Ablo pointed at the huge beasts of burden that had drawn alongside Lucetious and Caliban. 'Are they arachna?' he whispered to Mulupo, pointing to the horned beasts.

The Spriggan shook his head. 'Mr Ablo, I am afraid I must confess that my knowledge of the fauna of this secret world beneath our feet is as limited as your own. However, I would deduce via a crude path of etymology that those bovid animals are hollow-horned ruminants. I imagine the arachna are in the bags.'

Directly below them the Ghul had stripped off the ropes that had tethered the sacks to the beasts.

'Release them!' shouted Lucetious, his thin, ashen arms held aloft in a stirring gesture.

The ropes around the necks of the bags were uncoiled. In an explosion of gossamer and crystal, thousands upon thousands of tiny bugs filled the air, their crystalline abdomens emanating a soft, warm light that split into countless shards as it shone through their multifaceted, translucent bodies. The arachna swirled around the pit and then shot out into sky above, fluttering stars breaking free from the darkness surrounding them. Mulupo and Ablo ducked as a cluster of the bugs flew past the skyshop en route to the wide expanses above.

In the pit below, Caliban was rapturous, wringing his robes with his right hand as he watched the arachna disappear into the darkening sky. 'Fly to faraway lands my pretty things,' he cried elatedly, 'so that I may see again.'

Sprawled out on the deck of the skyshop Ablo frowned. 'What does that mean, Mulupo? What does he mean by being able to see again? Is he blind?'

'I do not think so Mr Ablo. I think it is time we expedited our departure post haste.'

'You think we should leave?'

'Oh, most certainly Mr Ablo. It would be a most judicious course of action,' the Spriggan nodded as he made his way over to the centre of the skyshop and surreptitiously climbed up to the burners.

Mulupo's sense of trepidation was echoed and magnified in the crowd below. Their incredulity had withered. Fear now grew in its place and it had sprouted roots and vines that spread quickly. Kobolds and Spriggans edged back, many of them suggesting similar courses of action to that proposed by Mulupo in the skyshop above.

Caliban could sense the change in mood and realized it was time to move proceedings along. 'Is there one among you that can be called

leader?' He spoke with absolute confidence and precision. 'Who speaks for you?'

At his feet, Gargo Corbo lifted his head and stated with as much defiance as his groggy state would allow, 'I do.'

Lucetious' hands shot out and grabbed the Kobold by the scruff of the neck. With surprising ease, he lifted Gargo onto his feet, leaving the Mayor's dead brother sprawled in the dust. The Kobold stood a little over half Caliban's height. Caliban's eyes focused upon the Mayor who stared back with a recalcitrant gaze.

'You rule these people?' Caliban asked casually.

Gargo sneered. 'I am their elected representative. Kobolds and Spriggans have no ruler. I am the Mayor of Sarras. My name is Gargo Corbo.'

Caliban nodded, his face a mask to any emotions he was experiencing. 'And this?' he said, prodding the dead body at his feet with the toe of an old leather boot.

'That was my brother, the owner of this mine,' Gargo stated coldly.

'Was it his idea to dig so deeply?'

Gargo looked over at the dark opening that had vomited up the Ghul. He lifted his eyes and for the first time noticed the terrified faces of the Sarrans who had gathered to celebrate the event. He looked down at the leper's dirty boot resting upon his brother's still body. 'These excavations were my idea,' he said flatly.

Caliban took his foot of the corpse and glanced skyward, noticing for the first time the airships hanging above him. One of them, the closest, was edging skyward ever so slowly, as if to leave the scene without being noticed. Caliban noted it and returned to the conversation with the Mayor. 'Why may I ask? Why did you unearth us?'

'We had no idea that anyone dwelt beneath the stone. We are miners. We unearth precious gems and minerals, not... monsters.' It was a provocative comment. Gargo's mind was reeling. He was experiencing emotions he had never encountered before. He wanted to flee; he wanted to kill the hideous old man standing over him; he wanted the people of Sarras to be somewhere else, somewhere safe.

Gargo looked down upon his brother and felt as if his heart had been pierced by the same arrow that had slain Kalen. Grief swelled up in him and he knelt down to hold his brother once more.

He was cold. Gargo was stunned at how quickly a body could lose its warmth. He glared up at Caliban's face, a face riddled by with sores and welts, its flesh a horrid salmagundi of pink and white.

Caliban bent down and lifted Kalen Corbo's head from the crook of Gargo's arm. 'This is a sorry sight. This is what becomes of greed.' Gargo reeled back and snarled, 'Get your filthy hand off him!'

Lucetious stepped forward and drew his blade. Caliban smiled paternally at his lieutenant who was always so quick to show his loyalty. 'It would seem, Lucetious, that diplomatic relations have broken down. You may deploy your units.'

Gargo looked around frantically as Lucetious strode to the podium and lifted a twisted ivory horn. A single deep, lowing note reverberated across the pit. The soldiers on the floor of Mine One quickly joined their compatriots on the promenade, making space for whatever lay in the darkness at the centre of the pit.

'We don't want trouble!' implored Gargo Corbo to the one-handed figure standing before him.

'Perhaps you should have thought of that before you disinterred us,' retorted Caliban, his body turned, his eyes focused on the gaping hole from which he had come.

'It... it is our way to mine,' said Corbo desperately.

'Well that is most fortuitous,' smiled Caliban, momentarily turning back to face the forlorn Kobold still clutching his brother to his chest, 'for I have a lot of digging for you to do.'

It was at this point that Corbo realized that the old man was not someone who would consider any point of view other than his own. He clearly had absolute control over these frightening beings he called the Ghul. Whatever the madman intended, it was not something the Kobolds could accept. 'We will not do anything for you,' the Mayor said defiantly.

Caliban looked curiously at the obstinate Kobold. The one called Lucetious had returned to stand by his master's side. 'Lieutenant, I do believe we need to make an example of our new friend the Mayor. If I may have your blade, please.'

Without hesitation, the Ghul lieutenant handed his sword to Caliban who wasted no time in using it. The blade cut through the air. A second later, the Mayor's decapitated body to the ground. His head rolled across the rubble to rest against Caliban's ankles.

Caliban bent down and picked up the bloody head, holding it high for all to see. His voice rang out across the pit. 'People of Camulos. You will quickly learn that compliance is a virtue and obstinacy a crime.'

Suddenly new horrors exploded from the dark cavity in the middle of Mine One. Countless Ghul riding six-legged, horned arthropods burst across the rock and leapt up into the stands. The creatures, skitteriks the Ghul called them, moved in pairs and dragged thick grey nets between

them. Screams broke out across the pit as hundreds of Kobolds and Spriggans tried to escape but were no match for the fleet-footed skitteriks. A few Kobolds stood their ground but were cut down without any hesitation. Nothing could stem the terrible tide sweeping up over the pit and into the streets of Sarras.

Caliban smiled at how easy it all was. Lucetious stood to attention by his side, waiting for additional orders, but his master seemed too absorbed in the moment to be giving thought to his next move. However, there was never a second where Caliban's mind was not considering the grander scheme. He turned to his lieutenant and said, 'The city of Sarras must be taken by morning. The Ghul will take shelter where they can during the day. Tomorrow evening they will spread throughout Camulos. This land must be emptied before any word gets out of our arrival. As discussed, every living Kobold is to be taken to Succellos. She is quite beside herself in anticipation.'

The lieutenant nodded. 'My lord, we do not have enough nets or skitteriks to catch all the Kobolds. Should we kill those who are not caught?' He gestured towards a small band of Kobolds cowering in the shadows where the road that wound around the mine met the promenade.

Caliban made a clicking sound deep in his throat which indicated his disapproval of Lucetious' suggestion. 'Lieutenant, I do love you like a brother, but your distinct lack of subtlety is sometimes hard to wear.'

Lucetious hung his head low as if struck a blow.

'There are always other ways,' Caliban continued. 'It is strategically foolish to rely upon one course of action. It is time to place some new pieces on the board.' Caliban turned to a rather plump, decidedly ugly Ghul soldier to his left. *'Sergeant Gormgut, please bring her ladyship out.'*

'Her... ladyship?' questioned Lucetious, surprised by this unexpected interaction with the Gormgut, a grunt who had done little in Lucetious' eyes to merit any attention. The lieutenant's eyes glowered as the corpulent sergeant hurried away to the centre of the pit and disappeared into the darkness below.

Caliban just stood quietly, occasionally glancing up into the upper reaches of Mine One where the Ghul footsoldiers were making their way into the city above. The cobblestone road was bloodstained. The Kobolds were a hardy people but they were not warriors. Many had been caught in nets which were now being dragged down into the depths of the earth. Most of the Ghul cavalry had disappeared over the uppermost lip of the pit, but soon reappeared with twenty to thirty Kobolds caught between each pair of skitteriks.

The Spriggans were initially a bit luckier than the Kobolds. They were a lot more sprightly than their stocky countrymen which helped effect their escape from Mine One. Strangely, the Ghul seemed almost oblivious to their presence. Only the Spriggans who actively sought out conflict were touched, and dealt with so punitively that others quickly realized that the only way to stay alive was to keep out of the path of the Ghul.

Up in the skyshop, Mulupo had thrown all caution to the wind. He had closed all the vents and had turned the burners on full blast. As the Ghul hordes made their way into the streets of Sarras, Mulupo's balloon cleared the rim of the mine and was entering the safety of the sky.

'My lord, what of the Spriggans?' asked Lucetious softly as he awaited Sergeant Gormgut's return.

Caliban shot a glance up at the balloons above and frowned. 'Try as I might,' he mused, 'I can't think of a single use for them. We'll kill them all.'

He clicked his hand and two female soldiers to his left stepped forward, one holding a wide bow in her left hand, the other bearing a small drum which hung from her waist. Both women also wore a long, coiled whip which hung in readiness above their thighs. They were sisters, both taller than most Ghul, with long white hair which fell from the crown of their heads to the smalls of their backs. They were members of Caliban's military elite and held themselves with the pride the Ghul had attached to such a position.

'Major Chabriel,' said Caliban, 'you may fire when ready.'

Chabriel slung her drum around so that it sat on her belly. She took two long, thin bones from her belt and struck the instrument. 'Grenadiers at the ready!' she sang out as she rapped on the drum's leather skin.

A line of ten Ghul soldiers stepped forward, each holding a large, sharp spike in their hands. The spikes had been torn from the spine of a subterranean beast known to the Ghul as a needleback. Chabriel struck her drum again. In unison, the grenadiers bent their bodies back, right back so that the spikes rested on the ground behind them. It seemed impossible that a spine could bend so far backwards without snapping, but the line of Ghul soldiers did not seem to be suffering any significant discomfort. Chabriel commenced a drum roll that seemed to last an eternity. The bodies of the grenadiers shook with increasing tension, their sinews quivering beneath their thin, wan skin. Suddenly the drum roll ceased and Chabriel cried out, 'Fire!'

The bodies of the grenadiers shot up into an upright position releasing the spikes the way Mulupo had once seen the Arnakki of the north fire catapults at Sessymirian ships that strayed too close to their icy

shoreline. The spikes were flung high and wide covering an incredible distance. Even more amazing was the unerring marksmanship of the grenadiers. All ten spikes hit a target. Once the hideous volley was over, ten Spriggans lay writhing on the cobblestones of the Mine One road, each victim with a two foot spike buried in his or her stomach. The writhing quickly stopped as the paralysing properties of the missiles spread through each Spriggan's body, putting an end to all movement. Not long after, Ghul footsoldiers put an end to their frozen pain by lopping off their heads.

'Reload!' Chabriel barked out and her squadron of grenadiers picked up another round of spikes to fling at the retreating Spriggans.

Caliban's eyes squinted with satisfaction. The grenadiers had been everything Chabriel had promised they would be. He glanced over at Drabella who had stood quietly to attention while her sister performed her duties. 'Drabella,' he said softly.

'My lord?'

Caliban pointed to the skyshops exiting Mine One hundreds of feet above. 'Drabella, I don't want a single Spriggan to leave the city.'

She gave the balloons a haughty gaze and then in a blur nocked three long arrows at once in her long bow. In the space of a few seconds she had loosed nine arrows into the dark sky.

Up in his skyshop, Mulupo saw the three balloons around him being hit by the volley of arrows. The holes in the balloons quickly enlarged as hot air pushed through the perforations into the cool night air and within moments the dirigibles were sinking back into the pit. Ablo looked over the rails of the skyshop to see, far below, a Ghul soldier pulling back the drawstring of her bow, her eyes fixed on Mulupo's vessel. Without thinking he shot himself up onto the rail just as the arrows left the bow, throwing his body into the path of the missiles. The arrows' shafts speared into his chest, and his body toppled over the edge of the skyshop.

Caliban saw the figure plummeting from the skyshop directly above and stepped to one side. But the falling body never actually hit the ground. Ablo was only feet above the dirt when a mass of grey webbing shot across the pit and caught him in its sticky grasp. The webbing attached itself to the walls of the pit just below the promenade, pinning the hapless Kobold to the stone. A cry of pain exploded from Ablo's bloody lips.

The Kobold's scream was drowned out by a deep bellowing sound which filled the pit. Lucetious, Drabella and all the remaining Ghul swung about to see a monstrous, blue beast squatting on its haunches at the edge of the breach. In a carriage strapped to its thorax, the Ghul sergeant Gormgut stood with a smug grin on his bloated face.

'My lord!' exclaimed Lucetious, clearly surprised at the appearance of the strange animal. 'What is that?'

The creature rose on its multitudinous legs and swung its abdomen around. The entire body shook and another sticky net shot out across the pit. The Kobolds cowering under the promenade were pinioned to the wall just as Ablo had been, alive but dazed by the impact of the sticky mass.

'That, Lucetious, is Fulgora.'

Lucetious was stunned by the revelation. 'You have found the remaining Cabal?'

'She is but one of many. The Kobolds will help us release the others. They lie deep in the earth, but they are there, and ours to claim if we be so bold.'

Caliban slowly made his way to the wall under the promenade where Ablo hung like a gruesome ornament with arrows of bone protruding from his chest. Sticking his hand through the mucilaginous webbing, Caliban lifted the Kobold's head. A faint groan sounded. 'Witness this Lucetious. He's alive!'

'Barely, my lord,' Lucetious observed wryly.

Caliban ignored the comment. 'They are remarkable creatures these Kobolds. Tough as shatterstone. Resourceful. Dependable. They will serve us well.'

Up in the skyshop things weren't much better for Mulupo. The Spriggan had dived for Ablo when he fell from the skyshop rail and in the attempt careered into one of the bronze bollards lining the aft of the vessel. He dropped heavily to the floor of the skyshop as it drifted out over the rim of Mine One. As the first of the Myr's moons rose over the horizon, the last thing he saw that night was the silhouette of Central Tower looming ominously in the distance. Unfortunately, he never saw the needleback spike lobbed over the rail of his skyshop which came to rest in the soft tissue of his stomach.

At the newly-made entrance to the Endless, Caliban gave his final orders to his commanding officers. 'Major Drabella, you and I will return to Succellos and prepare her for the arrival of the Kobolds. When our first team of Kobolds has been prepared, you will take them north to Morae. It is vital to our plans that the Morae breach be opened as soon as possible. Major Chabriel, you will stay above ground. Take as many units as you need. Scour the country and round up any pockets of

resistance. Take Sergeant Gormgut and his new pet with you. Make sure Gormgut understands that not a single sliver of shatterstone is to be left in the land. Camulos must be stripped bare. This is crucial to my designs. When this is done, fill this hole we have made then make for Morae. I have work for you there.'

'You want to block this breach, my lord?'

'I am not ready to entertain visitors just yet, Major. Fill the breach, then head for Morae. Do you understand your orders?'

'Yes, my lord.'

Caliban surveyed his officers proudly. If he had two hands, he would have rubbed them with glee. Everything was unfolding as he purposed. He had positioned his pieces on the board against opponents who were as yet unaware of the game. 'Away you go,' he said, dismissing them with a grin. 'Change the world.'

The soldiers nodded, bowed in unison and left to perform their respective duties. Caliban stretched out a mottled arm and placed it on Lucetious' shoulder, indicating to the lieutenant that he had more to say to him. It was the sort of indulgence Lucetious prized. Caliban was not one to make grand overtures regarding his plans. He revealed pieces of the great puzzle when and where it suited him. No-one but Caliban knew how all the pieces fitted together, but that did not bother the lieutenant. He was content to serve his lord.

'I have a small errand for you, Lucetious,' Caliban whispered. Lucetious realized instantly that the errand was of great import. After thirty years of serving Caliban he was well accustomed to the Myrran's fondness for understatement. 'To the east lies the city-state of Cessair. There is one there who will help us. He can bring us information and resources that will be of tremendous benefit to us all. He will understand what we are trying to achieve here.'

The lieutenant nodded, taking in all the information with a conspiratorial ear. 'Yes, my lord,' he said with quiet confidence.

'Finding him will not be easy,' Caliban warned. 'One day, we will open a breach to Cessair, but I cannot wait for that. You will have to travel far, over difficult terrain, before you find yourself in sight of Cessair's great tower. It will be a journey of many days, and I cannot guarantee that you will find shelter from the sun.'

'I will find shelter and I will complete the mission,' Lucetious replied steadfastly.

Caliban smiled. He noted how the lieutenant had replaced the word 'errand' with 'mission' and that pleased him. Lucetious would not fail him. 'Make your way into the city. It is my hope that you will find my

associate there – an Acoran by the name of Maeldune Canna. You must bring him to me.'

'Maeldune Canna,' Lucetious repeated to himself.

'No-one else must see you. The Myrrans must not be alerted to our presence.'

'I will not be seen,' Lucetious said. Without a moment's hesitation, the lieutenant bowed and made his way across the dirt to the stairs leading up to the promenade above.

Caliban stood looking over the pit surrounding him with supercilious delight. What was once a uniquely beautiful place had been cast into ruin. Many of the statues had been broken in the Ghul attack. Nets containing the writhing bodies of terrified Kobolds lay all around. Countless bodies of slaughtered Spriggans cluttered the cobblestone road winding around Mine One. It had taken less than an hour. Caliban's face beamed with satisfaction. Long ago he had promised the Ghul much and he had delivered all he had promised and more.

Suddenly, his eyes narrowed as they fell upon an object he had not expected to see. It was a statue. It took pride of place on the promenade and fortunately had been untouched by the Ghul rampage. Caliban made his way slowly up the steps and spent a long minute staring at the marble figure. It was the representation of a man, tall, handsome yet sombre. A bronze plaque at its base read, 'Gideon Grayson, Bringer of Peace'.

Caliban called out to his lieutenant striding his way up the road leading to the city. 'Lucetious,' he called. 'I rather like this statue here. Please bring it back with you when you return.'

'It will be done, my lord,' the lieutenant responded obediently.

Caliban hobbled his way back down the steps and soon disappeared in the darkness at the bottom of Mine One.

Nine months had passed since that fateful day in Mine One. The Ghul overran Camulos with negligible opposition. The Kobolds were quickly corralled as was much of the land's shatterstone. To add insult to injury, the Ghul made the Kobolds carry the shatterstone into the Endless in chain-gangs that were whipped and beaten at every opportunity. This done, the opening at the base of Mine One was sealed shut. Although some troops were left in Camulos to seek out and kill any survivors who had escaped the Ghul's dragnets, most had returned to the Endless to be redeployed on other assignments.

As for Mulupo, on the night of the Ghul invasion his skyshop had drifted into one of the beams sticking out of the massive Central Tower. The searing pain of the needleback spike in his stomach was so intense that his eyes were tightly shut as the paralysing toxins crept through his body. He was vaguely aware that he was losing all movement in his body but it gave no relief from the pain. All he wanted to do was end the pain. He had enough presence of mind to pull an old tarpaulin over his body before his arm fell lifelessly to his side. There in his skyshop, hanging precariously above the carnage taking place in the city below, with a two foot spike wedged in his abdomen, the Spriggan lay in a paralysed state. As the metal plating was torn from the tower from which his vessel hung like a discarded toy, Mulupo lay unmoving and unseen. The skeletal soldiers that ripped the metal skin off the magnificent structure's bones ignored the balloon – they had orders to follow.

Nine months of paralysis had taken its toll upon Mulupo but Tagtug committed himself to the Spriggan's care and within days witnessed vast improvements in his patient's state. It was not long before Mulupo was able to talk but Tagtug found it difficult to understand the Spriggan and for a while believed him to be suffering a form of madness brought on from months of isolation. That may have been true but as the weeks went by, Mulupo's speech did not become any more accessible.

Although they had both survived their first contact with the Ghul, they were not in the clear. A week after Tagtug had slid into Sarras, destroying Central Tower and saving Mulupo from probable death, a new form of danger appeared in the city.

Marroks.

Mulupo had seen them before on his rare trips to Bregon to the north. He knew what they were capable of and knew to avoid them. He and Tagtug had taken refuge in Ablo's workshop, but he knew they could not stay in Camulos for much longer. Roving bands of Ghul and increasing numbers of sniffing, skulking marroks were all the encouragement they needed to leave.

'There is a certain preponderance of concern in my mind regarding the appearance of these serpentine beasts so far south,' said Mulupo to an uncomprehending Tagtug one day as they silently watched the movements of a pack of marroks that had gathered in the street outside. 'They're searching for someone –'

Suddenly, the air outside became thick with long white arrows. The pack of marroks dropped in a bloody mass, each body peppered with many shafts. The sight of the volley sent chills through Mulupo's spine.

In his mind's eye, he could still see the Ghul arrows shooting into the skysshops surrounding him in Mine One the night the Kobolds opened the door to the Endless. He could still see the arrows burying themselves into Ablo's chest before he fell to an inevitable death.

Mulupo dropped to the floor of the workshop, pulling Tagtug down with him. The thought of Ghul outside the window sent a sickening feeling into the pit of his stomach. But something was wrong. Two things, in fact. Mulupo had only seen the Ghul twice since he had come out his hibernation and on both occasions, it was at night. It was also nightfall when the Ghul had invaded Sarras. He had come to the conclusion that the Ghul were nocturnal, and yet it was midday now. Also, the Ghul did not hunt marroks. Mulupo had seen the marroks leading the Ghul through the rubble of Sarras, like hounds before their masters. They seemed to have created an alliance of sorts, so this sudden slaughter of the pack outside did not seem to make any sense.

Outside he could hear footsteps but didn't dare to look out the window. 'Arm yourself,' Mulupo hissed to Tagtug. 'We can avoid ocular detection by hiding in the loft.'

Tagtug just blinked at the Spriggan.

'We need to act expeditiously – follow me.'

The Mabbit followed Mulupo up to the loft and the two hid among the few wooden crates the raptorial Ghul had not smashed when they sacked the house almost a year before.

The voices outside were replaced by the sound of the door below bursting open in a thousand splinters, followed by the pounding of feet on the wooden steps below. Mulupo risked a quick look over the crate to find himself staring into the faces of a squad of armed soldiers.

'At last,' said a voice. 'We've found them.'

Chapter Five Jurojin Straits, Susanese Archipelago

For a while, Trojanu actually thought he had a chance of winning, but his demise was preordained. His wife was the better player. Sumi moved her knight to the top of the seven-tier board and elegantly bumped Trojanu's king from its position. She clapped her victory and lent forward to receive a kiss from her defeated opponent.

'I cannot kiss you, Sumi,' he joked. 'You're the enemy.'

'To the victor go the spoils. Come on,' she urged.

Trojanu playfully shook his head, refusing to acquiesce to his wife's demands. 'You have won the battle but you will never win my obedience!' he said dramatically as he picked up the ornate poniard he had been using to peel pokpok fruit and held it to his breast. 'I would rather die than give myself to you!'

'Alright! Alright!' Sumi protested, unsuccessfully trying to hide a grin. 'I'm not the enemy anymore. The battle is over and now we're at peace. So, kiss me!' She stood up petulantly and kicked a gold-laced velvet pillow at him. He ducked swiftly and it went flying over the port railing of the wedding barge.

Trojanu looked over the side of the boat to see the square pillow land in the gentle waters lapping the sides of their boat as it carved its way through the Jurojin Straits. He then lay back on the ornate Ankaran rug and smiled up at his wife. 'Kiss you? No. I do not recognize your authority,' he said assuming an obstinate air as he took a gorseberry out of the bowl at his side and defiantly placed it in his mouth.

Sumi stood above him and snarled. 'If you will not submit willingly, you will pay the price with your life,' she said trying to sound intimidating.

Trojanu laughed. 'You're running out of pillows, miss. What will you use now?'

She reached behind her and pulled out her dagger. 'I thought I'd use this.'

Trojanu grinned. 'Now this sort of game I like!' he said rising, wiping the pokpok juice from the poniard he was holding. As he rose, Sumi swung her left leg around, sweeping her husband clear off his feet. His face would have hit the wooden floor hard if it were not for the plate of gorseberries between it and the deck. When he regained his feet, Sumi was delighted by the purple juice that stained his face.

The crew of the royal sail barge barely gave them a second look. These antics were typical of the newly-married pair. Trojanu rose slowly, staring coolly at Sumi. Although he stood a full foot taller than his wife, it was clear she was neither intimidated by his size nor concerned about his apparent anger. 'That was uncalled for,' he growled through gritted teeth.

'You should wipe your mouth before you speak,' she instructed and lent down to pick up a napkin from the deck. As she did so, Trojanu's foot came down heavily on the edge of the bowl of pokpok fruit, sending the soft, yellow fruit hurtling through the air to land on the bodice of the expensive dress that had been a wedding present from the Queen of Acoran. 'My dress! This is Acoran samite!' she screamed, her entire body frozen with horror.

Trojanu sprang between her legs and swivelled, drawing up the flat of his blade and slapping it on her rear.

'Ow! That really hurt!' she cried as she wheeled around to see her husband grinning like a marrok.

And then the real fight began. Sumi sent a flurry of kicks at her lover. He defended himself adequately but was forced backwards against the beautifully carved door to their cabin. The tapestried, clinquant wedding barge was quite a radical shift away from the military vessels a shogun like Trojanu was accustomed to fighting on, but he took it in his stride, accepting it as one of the many changes that took place when one married a daughter of the Emperor of Susano. The magnificent ship had been one of the many gifts Sumi's father had bestowed upon the newly-married pair. *The Princess Orani*, was the Emperor's way of displaying his approval of the partnership, his contentment seeing his daughter married to one of Kompira's finest soldiers. What better way to recognize the steadfast bond between the two island nations of Susano and Kompira than with a boat worth more money than most Myrrans could dream of?

Sumi smiled. 'You're trapped, cur. Submit!' She dropped to her haunches and in a blink of an eye pulled out two sai from her ornate cloak. The next thing Trojanu saw was the quivering hilts of the sai on either side of his head as they thudded into the wooden door behind him.

'Hey, you could put out an eye with those things!' he remonstrated, but it was obvious he was delighted by her determination to teach him a lesson. He grabbed hold of the sai and pulled them out of the timber. In the same movement he released them, targeting his wife's flowing gown. The sai thudded into the deck, pinning the dress to the glossy wooden beams of the quarterdeck. Sumi, not realizing she had been fixed so, sprang forward only to find her forward motion halted. Caught off

balance in this way, her forehead slammed into the deck with such a heavy sound, even the battle-hardened sailors lining the deck winced in sympathetic mortification.

By contrast, Trojanu was ecstatic about his Sumi's fall and clapped his hands feverishly, appreciating the complete lack of grace exhibited by his wife. He looked across at some of his friends who had moved to the taffrail encircling the stern when they saw the approaching melee. 'What say you, ensigns? Have you ever seen such a sight!' he called, pointing to Sumi who was glowering as she rubbed her bruised forehead.

Ensigns Hegira, Ikiryo and Jikoku did not like the thought of saying anything against Emperor Kimura's daughter, and as one they slunk off to the relative safety of midships.

Meanwhile Sumi tugged at the sai pinning her robe to the deck but could not pull them free. 'Ah, Trojanu, you'll use any excuse to get my clothes off!'

She shed the dress and stood before him in her bridal undergarments, unabashed and defiant. At that very moment, the door to *The Princess Orani's* opulent dining room opened and one of the ship's elderly passengers – the retired Rear Admiral Kenji Kishimojin – walked out onto the deck to take in the sights. The royal bare skin of the Emperor's youngest daughter was more than his vision could cope with. He made his apologies and returned the way he came.

The Rear Admiral's hasty retreat was worth more to Trojanu than the entire ship and he reeled over laughing as his wife strode over to him, half-naked and angry. Trojanu lifted one hand to wipe away tears of laughter that had gathered in his eyes.

Sumi's kick sent him halfway across the deck. The crew in the rigging above roared in delight and using their approval as momentum, Sumi launched herself after her husband.

He blocked her roundhouse kick to the head and struck her with an open palm to the chest. He then vaulted over her head in a display of incredible gymnastic ability. She pirouetted to follow his move but was too slow. Before she had a chance to block, he had grabbed her in a headlock and lifted her smaller frame off the deck. She kicked and twisted but her legs just futilely cut the air. His arms were locked around her neck, but she kept struggling.

'Kiss me!' she hoarsely demanded.

'Never!' he whispered proudly into her ear.

She let go of his forearms and momentarily stopped resisting.

Suddenly, Trojanu's vision went black as her knuckles slammed into his temples. Letting go of his wife, Trojanu dropped to his knees trying to clear his head. Sumi clenched her hands together and struck the

shogun with such force that her uppercut lifted him off his feet and over the railing that ran between the quarterdeck and midships.

Trojanu landed with a thud ten feet below. Above him on the ship's railing, his bold wife stood in her undergarments. He looked up at her in awe. Her lissome body was lit with the dappled, early morning light reflecting off the docile waters of the Jurojin Straits.

'Look at you standing there naked and proud. You know, you're not the diffident, humble girl my mother thinks you are, Sumi.'

'I'm sure your mother isn't aware of your prurient mind either, Trojanu,' she retorted. Her leg muscles tensed – she was going to jump. 'You should have kissed me!'

She leapt off the railing, arms outstretched, like a predator about to deliver the killing blow. Trojanu took the wingless flight of his attacker and used it against her. As she swooped down on him, he grabbed her wrists and drew his feet up so they took her weight. He curled backwards and thrust out with his legs. Sumi flipped over and was sent sailing towards the fishing nets that had just been hauled in for the wedding guests' breakfast. She wasn't hurt when she landed but to her utter dismay, she found herself entangled in a wet and smelly mesh of jute ropes replete with marine specimens that wriggled feverishly as oxygen filled their burning lungs.

There she sat, the Emperor's daughter, in a net. Her undergarments were spattered with the scales and entrails of the morning's catch, her hair tangled with seaweed and her nose was bleeding from one of Trojanu's earlier blows. Her glowering eyes fired a look of contempt towards her husband who had made his way over to help her out. 'Kiss me,' she sneered.

Trojanu's face beamed. 'How could I resist – you're beautiful!' He knelt beside her in the muck and they embraced with the passion and vitality of newly-weds, their aches and bruises momentarily forgotten.

'Excuse me Shogun, Princess Sumi.'

They both looked up from their bedraggled situation. Before them stood Kappo, a rather sombre-looking Spriggan who had completely failed to disguise how unimpressed he was with their blithesome behaviour. He was dressed rather plainly for a Spriggan, his clothes possessing a harmony of colour usually absent in the apparel of that race. He held on to an exquisitely wrought golden cane, which did little to assist his clumsy passage across the decks of the wedding ship. Cloven-footed races rarely coped well with the undulating movement of boats, and like many of his race, Kappo felt more secure adrift in a skyshop than floating on the sea.

He bowed reverently before Trojanu and Sumi. 'I do not wish to interrupt this subderisorous exchange, but Master Chief Petty Officer Sanaka has instructed me to tell you that we are about to clear the heads and enter the open ocean. He suggested that you prepare yourselves for slightly less serene conditions and that you consider concluding your matutinal activities in the comfort of the grand cabin.'

Sumi smiled broadly at the Spriggan and said with abundant affection, 'Thank-you Kappo, but I think Trojanu and I will stay on deck. This morning sunshine is too good to waste.' She stretched her arms and turned to the east to expose herself to the sun's lambent embrace. As she did this, she added, 'You can tell Mr Sanaka that Trojanu and I are big enough to cope with a few waves.'

Trojanu's eyes lingered on his wife's lithe form as she soaked in the sunlight. He smirked when he noticed the Spriggan's gaze similarly tarrying upon Sumi's sylphlike body. 'Excuse me Kappo, did he actually use the word *matutinal*?'

The Spriggan, fearful that he had been caught staring at Sumi, looked about at the sky, the sails and the deck before responding. 'I am sorry Shogun. What did you ask of me?' he said awkwardly, pretending he had not heard the question.

'Kappo, I was wondering whether Petty Officer Sanaka said the word *matutinal*. Or *subderisorous*. They do not sound like words the Petty Officer would use.'

Kappo frowned, annoyed with the glib tone Trojanu was taking. 'Perhaps he did not use those exact words, Shogun, but certainly words to that effect,' he said sharply. He had been travelling on the *Orani* for a week, selling his wares to the wedding guests on board the boat, and was growing tired of having to constantly explain his meaning.

'Kappo, excuse my husband – he is teasing. But I am curious. What does subderisorous mean?' asked Sumi. Her voice was soft and Kappo could see that there was nothing mocking in her inquiry. He started to blush as he did whenever he was around her. She was beautiful in the ocular language of any race and he found himself occasionally tripping over his own words whenever they spoke.

'Consul,' he began, concentrating hard not to stammer, 'the word subderisorous is Helyan in origin, though now rarely found outside the ancient texts that lie in the vaults under Sulis. It means mocking, but affectionately so, as between friends or lovers. It seemed an appropriate choice for the interplay between yourself and your newly married shogun.'

‘Kappo!’ Sumi squealed with delight. ‘That’s the sweetest thing I’ve heard since Trojanu spoke his vows seven days ago.’ She leant down and placed a thick, wet kiss upon the Spriggan’s cheek.

Kappo’s mouth dropped but nothing came out. He could feel his already red face take on a brighter hue. If he had mind to speak, he would claim his radiant colouration as being the result of too many hours spent under the argent rays of the southern sun; certainly he would rebuke any claim that Sumi’s pulchritudinous beauty had anything to do with it. But speech was suddenly something of which he was incapable, so he just bowed deferentially to the pair and walked up the companionway to the bow of the ship.

‘Trojanu, you should have a word to Sanaka,’ Sumi said sternly. ‘He shouldn’t be sending Kappo on silly errands like that. My father has given us enough seamen here to send messages to every guest on board.’

‘Oh, I don’t think it’s the Petty Officer’s fault Sumi. That Spriggan could talk the ears off a Mabbit. I imagine Sanaka was just using the errand as an excuse to end a conversation he didn’t want to continue. He can’t stand on the bridge listening to Kappo drone on about everything under the sun.’

Sumi scowled at her husband. ‘That’s a bit harsh, isn’t it?’

‘You know he talks too much! In fact, I think Kappo even has a word for it.’

‘A word for what?’

‘His excessive flow of words. All Spriggans suffer from it. What was it?’ He bit his bottom lip as his mind rummaged through drawers containing words he had heard but never intended to use. Suddenly his eyes twinkled as he remembered the word he was searching for. ‘Logorrhoea! Kappo suffers from logorrhoea!’ Trojanu slapped his own knee in triumph.

‘You know Trojanu, this is not you at your best.’ Sumi said quietly. ‘I don’t think my father would like to hear you besmirch his –’

‘Besmirch! Sumi, you’re beginning to talk like a Spriggan.’

He could see she was upset by this and for all his kicks, throws and punches, he was saddened to think he may have actually hurt her feelings. ‘I’m joking Sumi. I’m joking. You’re right. I’m sorry.’

‘Kappo is a guest and he’s a long way from home,’ said Sumi, slowly and unequivocally. ‘He holds a favoured place in my father’s court and what’s more, he did give us our golden armbands.’

Trojanu looked down at his left forearm. It was a Susanese custom to celebrate the union of two young lovers by presenting each with a

golden armband encrusted with precious jewels that would remain upon their person for the rest of their days. Respecting this tradition, Kappo had given the bridal couple matching armbands that were so richly adorned it would be impossible to put a price on them. Spriggans were usually frugal in most transactions, but Kappo was unlike most Spriggans.

He had given up a life of travelling the world selling Kobold goods, preferring instead the quiet life he had discovered in Susano. He was made an honorary member of Emperor Kimura's household and had lived contentedly despite not acquiring the wealth most Spriggans associated with true happiness. It was enough to live surrounded by wealth albeit someone else's. But of late Kappo had been unsettled, largely due to the complete lack of news coming out of Camulos. He had expected to see his younger brother Mulupo who often came to Susano in the early months of summer, but summer had faded into autumn which had in turn given itself to winter and Mulupo had not showed. It was now spring. Kappo decided to use the wedding boat voyage to the Isle of Antaeus as the first leg in the long journey home to Camulos.

Suddenly an awful screeching sound filled the sky as a vast flock of quad-winged quawks flew overhead. Instinctively, the passengers and crew above deck ran for cover, taking shelter under sails, yard arms and parasols provided for this very contingency. The quad-winged quawk was one of the most spiteful, useless birds that ever took flight. They were ugly to look at and even less blessed in their ability to catch food. As a result, they often followed ships, vainly hoping to gather scraps to eat. When none were given, the birds would indicate their disappointment by defecating all over the decks of the vessels they tracked. Fortunately, due to some biological quirk, they could not do this without releasing an ear-shattering, discordant squawk which alerted those below to the birds' malefic intentions.

Sumi just made the cabin doorway in time. As she shut the heavy wooden door, she could hear the dull sounds of the birds' retribution raining down on the quarterdeck outside.

She made her way down the lamp-lit passageway to the large royal cabin at the very rear of the boat. It was luxurious to say the least. If not for the huge stern windows overlooking the ship's churning wake, the room could have been easily mistaken for a king's bedchamber in some golden palace. Ornate tapestries adorning the walls were complemented by thick, decadent Ankaran rugs. Elegant furniture was carefully placed upon the floor where fulgent patterns of sunlight advanced and retreated

across the room as the ship gently rocked from stern to bow and bow to stern. One side of the room was dominated by a magnificent portrait of the Emperor painted by one of the great blind painters of Copacati. Sumi stopped before the painting and sighed. It had been only a week and she missed her father terribly. She was accustomed to being away from him but his generosity and interest leading up to the wedding had brought father and daughter closer than ever before. He had not been able to leave his court unattended for the slow cruise to the Isle of Antaeus but he had made sure that his daughter was surrounded by constant reminders of him: painting, statuettes and letters inked by the finest calligraphers his money could find.

The wedding ship and its voyage to Isle of Antaeus had been her father's idea. Since she was a little girl, Sumi had long desired to see the sea snorses of Arion and the remaining blue leviatha inhabiting the southern seas.

Sumi's love for such wonders was a family trait. Her brother Matsuo had travelled north many years ago to study the beautiful white leviatha of the Oshalla Ocean. In many ways her new husband reminded her of Matsuo. Both men were confident and clear-headed but equally capable of saying precisely the wrong thing at the wrong time. Although Sumi and Matsuo were hemispheres apart, just being on the sea made her feel closer to him. It was comforting to know that all that separated them was water. Unable to make it to the wedding, he had sent her a present she would treasure forever – a silken white gown with a filigree of sea snorses woven into the lace hem.

Sumi's sister Mai had also not attended the wedding and this had been occupying Sumi's headspace for weeks. She had not heard from her older sister since she had ventured north to climb the great Skyfall. Months had passed and no sign of Mai was forthcoming. The Skyfall was not so far away that Mai could not return by the wedding day. She was normally a most reliable sibling, dependable to the last. The Emperor had set off his finest soldiers to find her, but none had returned by the time of the wedding. Sumi and her father would not say it, but both were gravely concerned for Mai.

Sumi took a towel and dipped it in the silver basin of perfumed water awaiting her on an elaborately crafted sideboard. In the sybaritic privacy of the royal cabin, she wiped the fishy smell from her skin. Once this was done, she made her way to the magnificent aft windows that ran from port to starboard. The waters beyond were playfully rolling back and forth, gently lifting and lowering a small flock of bellycans that bobbed contentedly in the ship's wake. They were strange birds, with tiny beaks and a fat spherical body. They sat there on the ocean's

surface, like small, fat clouds on a shifting sky. The largest of the family, the matriarch of the group, swam forward a few feet, its eyes having spotted movement in the blue waters beneath.

Suddenly, an Arion arrowfish shot high into the air. The mother bellycan opened her wings to steady herself as she leaned back slightly, and positioned herself directly under the arrowfish as it reached the apogee of its brief flight into the air. The fish plummeted back down and the bellycan extended a large pouch that had been hidden under the feathers covering the bird's stomach. The arrowfish plopped straight into the pouch which then closed instantly, storing the catch for the family meal that evening. Although books had been written on the subject, no-one truly understood the reasons for the arrowfish's perplexing suicidal flight. 'How lucky for the bellycan!' Sumi mused when considering the arrowfish's dramatic exit from the world and the thought led her to consider her own luck. She had everything a girl could desire, and whilst it pleased her so much her skin tingled, it also filled her with tremendous dread. She had far too much to lose.

To the north she could make out the island nation of Kompira where she had lived for two years whilst training in virtually every martial art known in the Myr. Kompira was also where she had been educated in philosophy, science and the arts. But most importantly, it was where she had met Trojanu. He was a shogun in the Sato clan of eastern Kompira. Ten years older than she, he had fought in numerous clan wars long before she first held a sai. His abilities on the field were the stuff of legend and for many years he had been a member of the Myr's well-respected peace-keeping force, the Cessair Guard. Trojanu had fought alongside the Arnakki when the Sessymirians defied the ill-fated embargo on exporting Keelii pelts. He had turned the battle against the savage Sedomo when they attempted to expand their lands at the expense of the peaceful Tamuans. He had also held the diplomatic position of Consul for ten years, deftly representing Susano and Kompira in the Assembly of Nations, held annually in distant Cessair.

And Sumi had caught him with no greater effort than the bellycan had used to obtain its meal. Wrapping Matsuo's white silken gown around her body and fixing it in place with a blue obi, Sumi made her way to the full length mirror at one end of the expansive cabin and said quietly, 'You are the luckiest person alive.'

'This doesn't look good, Shogun!'

Trojanu's hands tapped the aft rail apprehensively as he looked out across the waters. 'Sanaka, what... what is that thing?' he asked, trying to make sense of what he saw.

'I'm not sure,' replied the Petty Officer. 'It's been following us for half a league.'

Kappo, curiosity piqued by the urgent hushed discussion transpiring before him, trotted across the otherwise empty quarterdeck to join the conversation. The two men fell silent as he approached but it only took him a second to realise where their focus lay. 'Oh by the three moons! My eyes deceive me!' he exclaimed with such horror that passengers strolling midships looked up at the quarterdeck to see what the source of such anxiety was.

Trojanu, keen to keep the situation contained, knelt down beside the Spriggan, placed a calming hand upon his shoulders and whispered, 'Kappo, do you know what that thing is?'

Kappo nodded, but everything in his demeanour suggested he was unsure of himself. The Spriggan stood as high as his hooved legs would allow him, his gaze westward, behind the boat, where swam a dark red creature so large and so frightening in aspect, his pulse doubled at the sight of it. No-one else on board had noticed it but it would not be long before the marine beast had the undivided attention of everyone on the ship. Its head resembled the scaly lizards of Tethra, only a thousand times larger. A long blue tongue flickered in and out of a broad mouth lined with teeth as long as harpoons. The reptilian head was crowned with a massive scabrous frill that was comprised of a crimson ruff of thick skin that hung between long spines of cartilage that were at least fifty feet long. The frill lay half-closed like a parasol.

Although much of it was submerged, Kappo reckoned that the beast's entire body, from snout to fluke was almost 200 feet in length. Upon the creature's back a monolithic dorsal fin split the sky like a knife. The bloody colour of the brute contrasted harshly with the vibrant blue waters through which it ploughed. 'I once read about an aquatic behemoth of similarly prodigious proportions in my studies on Caquix. The frilled neck, the colossal size, the haematic and incarnadine colourings, and the pronounced dorsal fin running down the beast's back – if I am not mistaken, we are looking upon the Ryugin.'

'The what?'

'The Ryugin. It was dismissed by many as being a creature of fancy, dreamt up by sailors whose senses had been befuddled by inebriation, but there are tomes in the archives of the Caquikki libraries that describe in exact detail the cold-blooded vertebrate that now bears down upon us.'

Trojanu was stunned. He thought he was aware of most of the dangers the world held, but he knew nothing of the Ryugin. 'Kappo, I have never heard of this Ryugin before. How can something be so large and go unseen for so long? I have sailed these seas countless times –'

The Spriggan gave a sardonic smile. 'Shogun, the reason this monstrosity has not figured in your consciousness is simple. It's not supposed to exist. The Ryugin of which I speak roamed the Myr's watery tracts thousands of years ago.'

Sanaka scowled at the idea. 'Well this has to be something else. Perhaps it is descendent of the creature you describe.'

Kappo shook his head. 'That is unlikely if the ancient texts are to be believed. The Ryugin is a member of an anthropomorphic collective called the Cabal. The Cabal have no offspring. Time has no effect upon them.'

Trojanu looked up from the Spriggan and out across the water to find the creature had significantly closed the gap between it and *The Princess Orani*. Kappo followed his gaze and although the Ryugin's presence had clearly unnerved him, he was seduced by the opportunity to show off his intimate knowledge of all things obscure and forgotten. 'The origin of the Cabal is quite an interesting tale to tell. Millennia ago, it has been postulated, a massive aerolith fell from the heavens and –'

'Never mind the history lesson, Professor. What's it likely to do to us?'

'It will seek to dispose of us in ways so unsavoury, it would be wise not to dwell upon them.'

Trojanu threw himself into action. They had discussed the creature in enough detail. It posed a threat and it was his job to deal with the situation. 'Sanaka, clear the decks of all civilians! And raise the entire crew. We need all men on deck. You will probably find Commander Natane by the bar in the ship's lounge.'

The Petty Officer darted off, brusquely shoving civilians towards the doors leading down to the passengers' cabins. At first, many of the guests protested, but Sanaka had no qualms about manhandling civilians when he had a job to do.

Kappo also stayed above deck, keen to observe and advise where possible. He did not consider himself a brave Spriggan. It just seemed clear to him that it really was no safer below deck than it was above. The Ryugin was so immense that if it wanted to slaughter everyone on board the boat, it could do so irrespective of where they hid.

Trojanu quickly cast his eyes across the unfamiliar ship, trying to ascertain its defensive and offensive capabilities. The wedding barge was not really a barge at all – she was actually a flat bottomed carrack that had

been ripped apart and rebuilt with only one thing in mind – comfort. Although she had three masts, each equipped with three sails, she was not designed for speed. Furthermore, although no expense had been spared on the refitting of the boat, the decorators did not think to furnish the vessel with armaments that would repel a sea monster out of the pages of long-forgotten history.

The ship had a harpoon gun set at the front of the boat just behind the bowsprit. This gun – powered by highly combustible Cold – no longer fired the long steel harpoons the Susanese of old had used until they had almost hunted the Myr's blue leviatha to extinction. The gun had been adapted for fishing and was used to shoot weighted nets out into the ocean. Trojanu had watched the crew fire the small square nets out above the bow and was amazed how far the gun could fling the jute mesh. The gun would fire anything shoved down its smooth, iron throat. Unfortunately for Trojanu, there was a dearth of harpoons on board. The gun would be of little use to him.

His mood brightened when he gazed down the port and starboard rails. On either side of the deck were pairs of sponsons, small wooden platforms that hung out six feet from the hull of the boat and upon these were mounted brass carronades that had been transplanted from a decommissioned warship. Trojanu eyed these weapons with a defiant glint in his eyes. 'Mr Sanaka, place two men on each sponson. I want those carronades ready to fire just in case that thing is thinking of having an early lunch.'

'Shogun, I'm afraid that won't do any good. The carronades, they're not armed.' He gave a meek shrug. 'I'm afraid the only things they fire are –'

'Fishing nets!' Trojanu said irritably. His hands went to his head and for a second it appeared he was about to rip his hair from his skull. He looked back to the spar above the mizzenmast where one of the crew stood staring aft. 'Seaman Kumari, where's the beast now?'

'Still one point to larboard, sir!'

'How far away is it, Mr Kumari?' Trojanu bellowed, exasperated by the seaman's lack of detail.

'About fifty yards now!'

Trojanu strode up to the bridge which was situated on a small platform between the quarterdeck and the maindeck. 'Helm, steady as you go there,' he said.

The helmsman, Able Seaman Miakoda, could hardly hold the wheel his hands were shaking so much.

Behind the boat, the monstrous Ryugin had pushed through the *Orani's* wake and the huge swell that ran before the creature thrust the entire ship to starboard.

'It's coming up the larboard side!' yelled Trojanu in a flat, clear voice. 'To bracing stations. I want to be able to turn this floating log at a moment's notice.'

Sumi burst out onto the quarterdeck and seeing Trojanu by the helmsman, danced over the quarterdeck rail and onto the bridge. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw something vast approaching from the rear. The enormous shape was obscured by the aft sails and for a fraction of a moment, she thought it to be a great vessel, like a Helyan dreadnaught. The next seconds revealed something a lot more frightening than a battleship.

'Sumi!' Trojanu exclaimed, noticing her next to him, her mouth hanging wide.

She was only momentarily dazed. She did not understand what the behemoth was and why it was approaching the ship, but with danger so close she was right where she was meant to be – at her husband's side.

As the Ryugin came closer, Trojanu looked down at his wife and said, 'You look nice.'

For the second time in the space of ten seconds, Sumi was completely dumbfounded. She eyed her husband with an expression that perfectly balanced stupefaction and suspicion. 'You're not going to tell me to go below?'

He quickly shrugged his shoulders and said plainly, 'You're my equal, not my concubine.' His hand reached out for hers, and they stood hip to hip facing the very thing that would tear them apart.

The Ryugin swam by slowly, dwarfing *The Princess Orani*. Eyes as large as topsails scanned every foot of the open deck. As it swam past the ship's southern flank, the cool breeze blowing across the ocean picked up the smell of the creature and spread it over the deck. The crew felt a wave of nausea wash over them. The thing smelt so old and fetid that some sailors had to place their hands over their mouths to stop themselves from vomiting. The Ryugin continued to rake the boat with its immense right eye. It gazed at Sumi for a brief second and she knew that it was not some dumb creature of the deep staring stupidly at things it did not understand. It was intelligent and it was looking for something – or

someone. Clearly, it had no interest in her, nor did it seem overly interested in any of the others who were on deck at the time.

When the huge sea beast had completed its reconnaissance of the larboard side of the *Orani*, it continued travelling west, its interest in the boat seemingly forgotten.

But neither the boat nor her passengers were forgotten in the ancient brain of the behemoth. About 100 yards off the bow of the *Orani*, the Ryugin turned, its fluke churning aside the gentle waters of the Arion Ocean. It paused a moment and then swam back towards the ship, effortlessly cutting its way through its own spumy wake.

A number of seamen on the bow had raised weapons – bows and spears – and were edging closer to the rail, preparing to attack.

Trojanu held his nervous seamen back. He eyed the crew's commanding officer Hiro Natane, buttoning his uniform as he raced up companionway towards the bow of the vessel. 'Commander Natane, do not give the command to shoot just yet,' he said calmly.

Natane nodded and quickly turned to one of his men and barked, 'Able Seaman Tagaro, relax your arm. Do not shoot until you hear the command.' His voice was slurred from much drinking down below.

Sixty yards ahead of the ship the Ryugin dived, leaving nothing but a swirling convolution of water and foam to mark its presence.

'Aloft there, do you see it?' cried Natane to Kumari who had scaled the mizzenmast to the topsail. Kumari responded in the negative.

'It's toying with us, Sanaka,' Trojanu said to the Petty Officer. 'Diving deep just to unnerve us.'

'Well, it's working Shogun. I consider myself well and truly unnerved.'

'So am I,' added Miakoda trying to hold the ship on a straight line.

'You just concentrate on steering the boat, helmsman,' chided Trojanu with a wry smile on his face.

Suddenly, an explosion of water off the bow erupted as the Ryugin breached the surface. The creature's massive body arched into the air and then crashed down upon the waves sending a wall of water tumbling over the forecastle. The bow of the *Orani* lifted dramatically, raised by the incredible volume of water displaced by the Ryugin and all hands instinctively reached out for the manropes lining the rails and masts of the vessel.

The Ryugin then continued its leisurely perusal of the deck as it slowly passed the ship on the starboard side. To Sumi's left a door which led to the wedding guests' cabins below the quarterdeck opened and out strolled an elderly couple – an uncle and aunt whose curiosity seemed to have gotten the best of them. Sumi was horrified. The open deck of the ship was the worst place for these people to be, not just for their own safety but for the wellbeing of the crew. The wedding guests would just get in the way. She jumped over the bridge's small wooden railing and grabbed her relatives by their collars. 'Get below! Get below!' she yelled as she unceremoniously shoved the pair back through the door through which they had come.

Her uncle protested saying, 'Sumi, we thought we'd take a look!'

Her aunt added, 'It's very exciting isn't it!'

Sumi pushed them back. 'Get down below – if you want to look at the beast, look out the windows of your cabins. You're not safe up here.' She slammed the door and slid its thick wooden batten into place to keep it shut.

Meanwhile, the great creature off the starboard bow had paused. Although it had ceased any forward movement its massive right eye was busy looking through the portholes lining the hull above the waterline.

'Commander Natane, what's it doing?' Trojanu called to the ship's commanding officer who seemed so bewildered by the occasion, he just stared blankly back at him.

Leaning over the starboard rail, Seaman Tagaro yelled, 'It's staring through the scuttles sir.'

'*Staring through the scuttles,*' Kappo repeated as he mused the significance of such an action. He turned to Trojanu. 'The Cabal are said to be intelligent lifeforms, Shogun. This is no insipient brute we are dealing with here. It's noticed the wedding guests looking out the starboard portholes.'

Returning to her husband's side, Sumi exclaimed, 'It's looking for someone!'

Without warning, the aquatic beast slid beneath the surface, giving no indication of its direction or intent. Trojanu swivelled around and lifted his head to the mizzenmast. 'Where has it gone Mr Kumari?'

'I've lost it sir. It's gone deep. I think it went under the keel, but I can't be sure.'

Trojanu stepped forward and gripped the railing that ran around the deck upon which he, Sumi, Sanaka, Kappo and Miakoda stood. His demeanour was calm but his gaze was intense as he scanned the waters to

the right and left of the ship. 'Damn! I'd have a better view from the top,' he said to himself, looking at the mainmast.

Trojanu hurtled the railing. Landing on the maindeck a few feet below, he passed two seamen who were busy lashing down some barrels that had rolled across the deck when the Ryugin had passed on the starboard side. 'Get me aloft!' he instructed them plainly as he advanced towards the mainmast. 'Commander Natane,' he cried to his commanding officer who was still trying to complete the simple act of buttoning his shirt. 'Take the conn.'

Natane stumbled across the main deck. He was perhaps the worst person to take control of the ship. But Trojanu was a stickler for the chain of command and he had no time for the dramas that would ensue should he relieve his inebriated chief officer of his duties. As Natane staggered up the steps to the bridge, Trojanu gestured to Sanaka and mouthed, 'Keep an eye on him.' The Petty Officer nodded and Trojanu was swung on high to get a clearer view of the situation.

The world was peaceful up in the main top. Trojanu could not see any sign of the Ryugin. A pleasant breeze blew and all he could hear was the crack and flap of the topsails and the creaking of the mast as the sheets and shrouds wrestled the wind for possession of the boat. He always enjoyed the solitude of the main top and could stand on the small platform for hours, admiring the humbling, dispassionate majesty of the surrounding sea.

But today was not a day for contemplation. They were in the thrall of some ancient beast that – according to Kappo – would think nothing of sending their bones and the ship's timbers to the bottom of the sea. He could see its submerged bulk carving through the waters behind the *Orani*. It had not left them. It would return. Trojanu was not one to allow an enemy to dictate terms. It was time to take control of the situation. And in that instant he made his decision and slid back down to the deck to announce it to the crew.

'All hands to the boats. We're taking this fight to the beast.'

There was not a face on deck that did not betray its surprise, but only one person spoke in response to this alarming announcement.

'Trojanu – you can't be serious,' Sumi protested as she made her way to the base of the mainmast. 'There is no quarrel with this creature. And we have wedding guests aboard.'

Trojanu gave a nod of the head. 'That is why I will take to the boats. We cannot put civilians in danger.'

‘There is no need to do this at all!’ Sumi resisted. ‘This thing – this Ryugin – it’s gone now!’

Trojanu looked over Sumi’s head and his face went pale. ‘Would you like to have a wager on that?’

Sumi spun around to see the red-skinned leviathan breach the surface about 100 yards off port. With a flick of its monstrous tail, the Ryugin surged forward. Suddenly it expanded its frill to its full circumference. This minatory display had the desired effect: Sumi gasped; some men fell back from the port rail; on the bridge Commander Natane vomited and Miakoda screamed.

The Ryugin slammed against the aft bulwark, shifting the entire ship thirty feet across the waves. The hull splintered and cracked. The crew members who had enough presence of mind to grab hold of a manrope were the only ones on board who were not thrown by the impact. Three men on the starboard rail toppled overboard and were swamped by the surge of water created as the Ryugin pummelled the vessel. They were Hegira, Ikiryō and Jikoku, the three ensigns Trojanu had bated during his play-fight with his wife only an hour earlier. Unfortunately, that was the last time Trojanu could hope to engage them in such frivolity. Their bodies were swept under the *Orani*’s broad keel and vanished in the deep.

The Ryugin dived.

Commander Natane and Petty Officer Sanaka raced across the quarterdeck to the aft rail to track the beast, impelled by their desperate hope that the monster was now leaving them behind. As it submerged itself, the Ryugin brought its fluke high up into the air, sending a spray of seawater across the ship’s deck. Sanaka realised the threat and stepped back from the rail, but Natane whose senses were either dulled by alcohol or shock just stared stupidly at the massive crimson tail that rose high above. The fluke hovered malevolently in the air for a few seconds before it came crashing down upon the deck.

A fraction of a second before the tail struck the ship’s stern, Natane felt himself being lifted up and thrown across the deck. Sanaka had taken hold of Natane’s collar and swung him with all his might out of harm’s way. It was a heroically tragic act of selflessness for it left the Petty Officer no chance to avoid the Ryugin’s tail. It hit him with such deadly force that it broke almost every bone in his body in an instant. Such was the beast’s almighty strength that parts of the deck just disintegrated. The entire ship was pushed downwards and water swamped the deck.

Commander Natane scrambled away. Upon reaching midships, he hurled himself through a hatch to what he considered to be the relative safety of the decks below.

Trojanu had witnessed Sanaka's death, but he had no time to dwell upon the loss. Ensign Miakoda had been struck with one of the shards of timber that had exploded across the decks when the Ryugin first struck. A three inch long sliver of the quarterdeck had embedded itself in the helmsman's eye and his screams sang out across the sea. Trojanu wrestled with the crewman, trying unsuccessfully to calm him. It was a futile act of compassion. Trojanu had seen this sort of injury on the battlefield and knew that Miakoda would be dead within ten minutes. He held the helmsman tightly against his chest and stroked his head. But the screaming did not stop.

On his left Trojanu could see Kappo lying in the centre of the deck. The Spriggan's body had been thrown hard against the ship's windlass. The impact had been terrible, the sound of Kappo's spine hitting the brass post making Trojanu wince. But he could not help him, could not leave Miakoda.

Sumi had also noticed Kappo. When the Ryugin's fluke struck, the force had propelled the princess ten feet into the air over the bridge. She would have been thrown clear across the ship if it were not for her quick reflexes. Her arm had shot out, snared the buntline, a rope attached to the middle of the *Orani's* square sail, and swung herself up onto the yardarm above the canvas.

Below her, Kappo was sprawled awkwardly on the deck. She gracefully jumped down to the fallen Spriggan. 'Are you alright Kappo?' she asked tenderly, her hand shaking his shoulder ever so slightly.

He opened his eyes slowly and smiled. 'I am alright but the beast's dithyrambic assault has left me breathless. I'm afraid your connubial celebrations have been brought to a premature end.'

She laughed, more from relief than amusement. 'Come on, Mr Kappo. Let's get you somewhere safe.'

The Ryugin breached the surface directly behind the *Orani*. It had turned and was staring down the ship.

Trojanu gently placed the dead body of his helmsman at the foot of the steering post and took the helm. He turned his head aft to see the

Ryugin open its broad jaw in a show of hostility. It was taunting them, arrogantly waiting for their anxiety to build before it commenced another assault. It worked. Some of the seamen had left their posts and dived overboard, considering their chances at sea to be better than on the deck of the battered barge.

Trojanu felt limited behind the steering wheel. 'Ensign Kumari, take the helm,' he shouted to the nearest seaman. Without a moment's hesitation Kumari sprinted up the steps to the bridge and took the wheel, ignoring the dead body of the previous helmsman at his feet.

'Turn her about, Mr Kumari,' instructed Trojanu. 'I'd rather look at what I'm fighting.'

'Sir, we can't turn,' Kumari protested. 'The whipstaff is completely shattered. We've lost all control over the ship's rudder.'

'I don't care if you have to place the hawser in your mouth and pull her around with your teeth, Mr Kumari. Just get it done.'

Fortunately the Ryugin's delight in seeing the tiny Myrrans running around the decks in a panic-stricken frenzy gave Kumari enough time to rig the sails so the barge was swung to leeward. She drifted around in an ungainly circle and five minutes later Trojanu got his wish. They were facing the monster head-on.

Suddenly the Ryugin released an ear-shattering cry and the frill encircling its skull spread out like the mainsail of an Acoran clipper. If the Ryugin had intended to instil fear in the hearts of the people on board, it had succeeded. Even Trojanu gulped as the beast, now seemingly twice its original size, began bearing down upon the *Orani*.

'Keep her steady,' Trojanu said to his new helmsman. 'I have an idea.'

Within seconds, he had disappeared from the bridge. He was running at breakneck speed towards the ship's bow, jumping over the crates and debris that were now strewn across the decks. Upon reaching the foredeck, he clambered up the foremast, displaying uncanny agility for one who had not grown up on boats.

Standing on the thin spar, Trojanu wrapped his left hand in a length of cord that was tied to the mast. With his right hand, he drew out his short sword and raised it high. 'So you want to butt heads with me do you?' he yelled out across the ship's prow at the swiftly approaching Ryugin.

Sumi placed Kappo against the port rail, under the eaves of the raised foredeck. 'I'm sorry Kappo. I'll have to leave you here,' she said as she lay the Spriggan down on the deck. 'I'm afraid my husband is planning to do something stupidly brave.'

Kappo grimaced as she let him go, but forced a smile upon his face, saying, 'Princess, he is both brave and stupid.'

She stood to see her husband standing defiantly on the spar to which the top of the foresail was tied. He was silhouetted heroically against the bright sun, framed by the vertical mast, the horizontal spar and the diagonal jibboom, a hinged length of iron-clad timber which ran from the ship's bowsprit back to the foremast when raised. The jibboom was little more than an extension of the bowsprit, and as it was more decorative than it was practical, most ships sailed with it drawn up, its sharp end lashed to a fixture high up on the foremast. Sumi saw the sword drawn in Trojanu's hand and realised what he was planning to do. Although desperately fearful for her husband, she could not help but be impressed with his resourcefulness. 'Why you wily marrok!' she said to herself as she watched him crouch slightly, preparing for the Ryugin's attack.

The waters before the beast bulged and parted as it carved its way through the sea. It could see the small man standing audaciously above the sail, it could see his stern face staring boldly back, declaring proudly his unwillingness to submit to the fear it had elicited from all the others on the boat. The unmitigated effrontery of his stance upon the beam angered the creature and it opened its mouth to swallow him whole.

But Trojanu was too canny to become the Ryugin's lunch so easily. As it spread its jaws wide, it lost sight of Trojanu for an instant and he used this opportunity to great advantage. Trojanu slammed his blade into the fixture that held the tip of the jibboom in place. Holding on tightly to the length of cord in his left hand, he swung his legs up high to kick the jibboom into its horizontal position. The beam swung through the air in a sweeping arc and clicked into place below, extending the bowsprit by a good twenty feet. Trojanu had effectively turned the bowsprit into a lance.

The Ryugin didn't know what hit it. The iron-clad jibboom speared into the back of the beast's throat as it attempted to bite down on the *Orani's* bow.

It was a daring gambit and it had paid off. The immense sea creature shrieked in pain as the jibboom shot out the other side of its neck just below its massive frill. The entire bowsprit broke off, firmly wedged in the monster's throat. For a short, violent period, the Ryugin thrashed about in the waters off the bow, sending a massive volume of water

cascading over the boat. Then there was silence and Sumi guessed that the beast had dived to somehow extricate the jibboom from its throat.

Trojanu jumped down next to his wife, a smug look of triumph on his face. 'Do I impress you as much as I impress myself?' he said playfully as he wiped his hands on one another as if he had finished the job.

Sumi nervously bit her lip, ignoring her husband's jocularly. 'I doubt that,' she sighed. 'I don't think it's just going to slink away. If anything, the only thing you've done is make it madder.'

Trojanu frowned, pretending he was hurt by her unwillingness to congratulate him on his ingenuity in repelling the creature. 'There's just no pleasing some people!' he grumbled.

Sumi was right. The next half an hour was the most harrowing thirty minutes of her life. The Ryugin returned and recommenced its attacks with a frenzy she could hardly believe. The monster buffeted the ship relentlessly. Its massive fluke hammered down upon the deck. Its savage teeth tore the timbers to shreds.

Trojanu's cocky spirit quickly disappeared as the ship around him was ripped apart. Every minute that passed placed his wife in graver danger as more and more crewmen fell before the Ryugin. Only a handful of sailors were still alive on deck. The ones who had thrown themselves overboard were quickly discovered by the beast which wasted no time in swallowing them whole. Trojanu could hear the screams of panic rising up from the terrified passengers below. In minutes the lower decks would be exposed and then the real carnage would begin. And over by the port rail, his wife squatted attending to her Spriggan friend. Trojanu could not – would not – lose her. It was not an option.

He scanned what was left of the deck looking for anything he could use to turn the situation to his advantage. Miraculously, despite its shrouds being in tatters, the mainmast was still intact, standing contumaciously against the Ryugin's wrath. A few spears lay scattered across the deck, but the monster had already proven itself to be impervious to such petty attacks. The sponsons on the port side had been completely smashed and the carronades they held had dropped to the bottom of the ocean, but the starboard carronades were still intact. Trojanu eyed them dismissively. 'Little good they'll do me, unless I want to go fishing.' He looked at the Ryugin thirty yards off the starboard bow and then back to the carronades. An insane, desperate and potentially magnificent plan formed in his head.

He swivelled around to face the bridge. 'Ensign Kumari,' he called to the helm. 'The carronade nets, how large are they?'

'Just under twenty foot square sir,' came the reply.

'That'll do nicely,' he said to himself, his plan defining itself in his head. He turned to some crewmen who had gravitated to the mainmast which seemed the only remotely safe place on deck. 'You two! Take the weights from one of the nets and attach a grapnel to each corner. Once you've done this, load the grapnels into the carronade and await my orders. Is that clear?'

The men were stunned by the directions but Trojanu's tone was so decisive they found themselves swept up by it. 'Yes sir!' they answered confidently and scurried off to fulfil his wishes.

The Ryugin dived again. The uneasy wait for its inevitable attack was taking its toll on the surviving sailors. The crewmen fastening the grapnels to the net were only too happy to have something to occupy their minds between assaults. They completed the task without delay, taking care not to impale themselves on the small anchors' surprisingly sharp pointed heads. Within minutes, the grapnels were loaded into the carronades, two in each with the net hanging between them.

Trojanu was impressed with how quickly the sailors had expedited his request. 'Good work!' he called. 'Now, man the carronades!' The men took up positions on the starboard sponsons, taking hold of the gun's handle with their left hands whilst their right automatically went to the firing mechanism. Both carronades were loaded with a small lump of Cold. All that was required to fire the gun was the press of a finger which would release the hammer upon the volatile fuel in the carronade's chamber.

'When I give the signal,' Trojanu continued, 'I want you to fire on the right flank of the creature, just behind the frill. Strike above the nape, where its gills are!' he bellowed. 'You must cover the gills with the net, no matter what. Do you understand?'

'Yes sir, aim for the gills on the right side,' one of them replied. The other shook his head vigorously to indicate he also understood.

'And you must fire no matter what. Without question.'

'Yes sir!' they dutifully answered.

He walked to the starboard rail, standing between the sponsons, scrutinizing the waves. 'Now where are you, you damned monster?' he muttered to himself.

'Trojanu, what are you doing?'

He spun around. Sumi stood there, eyeing him with more suspicion than he could bear.

‘Sumi,’ he said guiltily. He could not explain to her what he intended to do. He stepped forward. Their hands touched. Sumi. His wife. His reason for risking all. It was a moment of dreadful sobriety for them both. She knew her husband intended some noble act that would save her and all those souls below deck.

He knew she was not going to allow it.

There was a time when she would have applauded whatever deed he intended. But marriage had changed all that. ‘Whatever you intend, Trojanu, I do not want you to do it. Do you hear me?’

Trojanu heard nothing. All sound, all sensations ceased as he focused his mind on the desperate act he was about to undertake. He turned from her and quickly made his way across midships and picked up two discarded spears which he attached to his back before climbing the rigging of the mast. He made his way up onto the broad gaff that suspended the remaining shreds of the mainsail. His fingers curled around the parrel which fastened the topsail yard to the mast and waited for the beast to breach the waters to starboard.

But he was looking the wrong way. The Ryugin had changed its tactics. Rather than rising away from *The Princess Orani* to give itself space to ram the ship, it had quietly slid up beside the ship’s hull and now hovered high above Kappo on the port side.

‘Kappo!’ Sumi screamed as the massive head of the Ryugin crashed into the deck in a sickening eruption of gnashing and biting. Timber, flesh, blood and bone burst out from the monster’s jaws but its appetite was not satisfied. It gulped and chewed at the deck. Somewhere in the middle of it all was Kappo.

The Ryugin was so absorbed in its attack it did not notice Sumi’s presence until she had driven her sai through the skin of its left eyeball. The beast bellowed in pain and rolled from the deck to the safety of the waters below.

Amid the splintered timbers left behind lay Kappo, his rapidly rising and falling chest indicating that he was still alive. He was covered in a thick coat of his own blood, but he was conscious. Sumi knelt by his side, tears filling her eyes. The Spriggan was almost unrecognizable. His skin was torn and his cheek bone broken so severely, she struggled to look him in the face. She lifted his head to cradle it in her lap and made a horrific discovery. Both his arms had been ripped off. They lay there on the deck beside him in a perfectly parallel line. Kappo seemed unaware

of the catastrophic condition of his own body. He did not scream nor did he give much indication that he was even in pain. He just lay there, smiling sweetly at the Susanese princess he so adored. And then he spoke.

‘I’m afraid I will not live to see Sarras again, dear princess. I am sure this brute intends to masticate upon my bones.’

Sumi did not know what to say. She looked around helplessly but all those who were still alive on the deck seemed unable to respond, transfixed by the horror before them. Only Trojanu moved, making his way across the yardarm to join his wife.

‘You stay there!’ she snapped at her husband. ‘You stay there and you finish this!’ Her voice was harsh and strained.

Trojanu stopped in his tracks. He gazed down at her, a twisting ache where his heart once was, feeling her pain. Her eyes widened like a cornered animal and he backed away. Sumi did not break the stare until her husband had resumed his position in the centre of the yard.

‘Oh Kappo!’ Her voice trembled with such poignancy, the Spriggan blushed under the film of blood that covered his face. ‘This is just so... wrong.’ Her voice trailed off into mute hopelessness. She had nothing to say to him.

Kappo smiled gently. ‘It is enough to gaze upon your lentiginous face.’

‘Lentiginous?’

‘Freckles. You have freck –’

Suddenly Kappo’s eyes widened as he looked over Sumi’s shoulder. He brought his hooves up swiftly and wedged them between his chest and her stomach. With explosive force, he thrust his legs outwards sending her flying away from the larboard railing. Then in a deafening blur, the timbers of the deck shattered as the Ryugin’s teeth fell down around the Spriggan like a cage.

Sumi slid across the wet deck until she snagged some cordage that lay around the capstan in the centre of the boat. By the time she had gathered herself, the Ryugin had completely devoured Kappo.

Beside the capstan, Sumi spied a discarded sword. She rolled over, picked the weapon up and rose to her feet in one fluid movement. She knew by the hot fetid air on her back that the Ryugin was only a few feet behind her. She spun around to see a huge opaque eye staring back. Her sai was still embedded in the beast’s pupil and she realised instantly that the monster could not see her with that eye. The creature had brought up two long scaly claws onto what was left of the port rail. It was trying to board the boat.

Suddenly, the Ryugin screamed in brutish delight – it had just noticed Trojanu standing high above the deck. It shot a thin, sinewy arm out to grab him. As it did so, Sumi thrust down with her sword and nailed the creature's tongue to the deck. The beast howled so loudly, Sumi felt her heart skip a beat. Trojanu watched his wife lean down heavily upon the hilt of the sword, refusing to be intimidated by the snapping teeth above her head. The Ryugin thrashed about wildly but its tongue remained pinioned to the timbers.

Its claws pummelled the deck but Sumi managed to evade each attack. She decided to press her advantage, committing to a course of action that would have even unnerved her husband. The princess pulled the sword out of the deck and the Ryugin's tongue shot back into its mouth. Its head rose up and it opened its jaws to strike. Rather than retreat from the beast, Sumi dived towards it, the Ryugin's acrid breath belting her in the face with the impact of the heaviest blow.

In an insanely brave, almost suicidal display of athleticism, Sumi leapt up between the Ryugin's jaws. Before it could attempt to swallow her, she rammed her sword into the roof of its mouth. The jaws spread even wider as the monster released a high-pitched screech of pure agony. Sumi rolled out and fell ten feet to the deck below.

She landed awkwardly and the fall winded her. The Ryugin meanwhile was thrashing violently in the sea off the ship's port side. Its broad tail cracked across the surface of the ocean like a whip, and then it swung around and sliced into the deck, missing Sumi by inches, shattering the capstan to pieces. Sumi took a deep breath and lifted her head to see where the creature was, only to have her entire view obscured by the Ryugin's thrashing tail. She had no time to react. Her body took the full force of the fluke sweeping across the deck like a scythe. The next second she was airborne flying out across the water, three of her ribs broken like twigs.

From his vantage point on the mainmast Trojanu saw what had happened, and although every instinct in his body told him to go after his wife, he knew her best chance for survival lay in him defeating the creature.

'You stay there and you finish this!'

The Ryugin had disappeared beneath the ship's hull and Trojanu prayed that it would rise to starboard. If it didn't, all would be lost.

He did not have to wait long for his prayers to be answered. The beast broke the surface thirty yards off starboard. Without hesitation Trojanu ran full pelt along the wet beam on which he stood. It was a feat few could emulate on dry land, but Trojanu did not falter. He covered the

length of the spar in seconds and reaching the tip hurtled himself out into the air. At the same time he screamed, 'Fire!' and the two seamen on the sponsons did not let him down. In perfect synchronicity, the carronades erupted. Trojanu was momentarily disoriented as the ship's net pounded into his back, carrying him towards the foul beast.

As planned, the net and Trojanu slammed the soft fleshy skin behind the Ryugin's frills. The grapnels embedded themselves into the scaly hide of the beast and Trojanu was pinned to it. But he was exactly where he wanted to be. In front of him huge gills puffed open and clammed shut. He pulled out the spears he had fixed to his back and went to work on the Ryugin, ramming the long, iron lances into the pink spaces between the gills.

The searing pain behind its head was more than the creature could bear. It churned the ocean trying to remove the cruel torturer that had somehow fixed himself upon its neck but it could not reach him with tail, fang nor claw. Again and again Trojanu struck. The Ryugin became so wildly agitated that it had lost all sense of itself. All it knew was pain and it would endure anything to rid itself of it. It twisted its spine to breaking point trying futilely to end the torment. The sea became a cauldron of white foam and boiling blood and still the pain continued.

Sumi had landed far from the ship. She tried to swim to it but found that her ribs made any concerted movement impossible. She could do little more than stay afloat and that alone took a supreme effort. She had not seen Trojanu's valiant leap from the ship, nor could she see what was driving the creature into such a mindless rage. She watched the beast senselessly ram its right flank into *The Princess Orani's* broken hull.

And then the Ryugin turned towards her. It did not seem aware of her; rather it seemed to be fleeing the scene. This seemed inconceivable at first, but seconds later, everything made sense. Sumi could see a spout of dark blood had sprung from the behemoth's right side. A wave momentarily obscured her view of the beast but when Sumi rose on the next swell, she saw an horrific image that would stay with her to her dying day – her husband draped in blood, trapped in a net on the side of the terrible creature, stabbing it with the ferocity of a demon.

The Ryugin dived into the water before her. It was the last time Sumi ever saw her husband alive.

Chapter Six The Endless

Somehow he had survived. Gerriod had been battered badly by the freezing currents of Worldpool, but he was alive. In the plummet into the blackness, he had temporarily lost consciousness as his lungs were crushed by the ferocious flow, but then he was released. He had been falling, surrounded by ice, water and broken pieces of his ship, and his descent had felt like an eternity. And then the fall was broken by a bone-shattering impact upon the surface of an underground lake.

It was dark and the brittle waters swirling around his body made him shake uncontrollably. Moments before the Worldpool swallowed up *The Crimson Dawn*, Gerriod's hand had caught hold of a line attached to the gaff rig. Although he and the rig were swamped with water and huge chunks of ice, the gaff popped to the surface of the large underground lake, pulling Gerriod up with it. A thunderous roar drowned out all his other senses and all he could think of doing was moving away from the sound. Fortunately the wake of the torrent pouring in from the world above was pushing him away from the centre of the dark expanse of water and within a few minutes he was far enough away from the din that he could hear his own laboured breathing, every exhalation accompanied with an awful rasping noise. Gerriod guessed he had broken a rib or two.

His eyes slowly became accustomed to the subterranean realm in which he found himself. He was surprised to find three sources of illumination, two of which were lax in their intensity, but provided enough light for him to gain a sense of where he was.

The mariner was in a vast cavern, a small part of the impossibly vast realm called the Endless. The rock had a phosphorescent quality and emanated the most delicate red glow. High, high above, the cascading waters of the Worldpool were tinged with the gentle glow of night seeping in from the world above, giving a softness to the dreadful surge that crashed into the Endless with deafening ferocity.

The ethereal, red illumination of the stony surrounds revealed a dark, ulterior lake into which the blue waters of Lake Erras were poured and mixed until they became black. Much of the lake was cloaked in the grey spray created by the tremendous downpour. Lumbering waves washed the shores of the lake and Gerriod could see in many places, achromatic openings where the inky waters spilled into deeper darknesses beyond. He could hear the sound of crashing rapids and the distant rumbling of unseen waterfalls. It seemed the lake was just the beginning of a vast network of underground waterways.

The third source of illumination was inconsistent, but brilliant when it was there. Around the cavern fluttered glowing swarms of shatterbugs. The beautiful creatures were prolific in the cavern, but the space was so massive that they did little more than light up the rocks they flew past.

Gerriod pulled himself onto the shore, groaning as his suspicion of broken ribs was confirmed. He was groggy from the fall and his head throbbed. He clawed at the ground as he dragged himself away from the water. Suddenly his hand recoiled as he touched something soft. Fleeshy. Gerriod lifted his head to see the pale white form of a female. Most of her garments had been ripped from her body and it was with an overwhelming sense of despair he realized it was the Tethran leper who had been torn from *The Crimson Dawn* moments before the entire ship had been consumed by the vortex. Her body had been brutally basted in the frozen surge and Gerriod found it hard to look at her. Her dull eyes stared up at the cavern roof, all emotion sucked from them by the vicious Worldpool. Gerriod was surprised to find that he felt a strange sense of guilt over the fact he had survived and she had not, a situation made ironic by the fact that she had tried to kill him less than an hour earlier.

The mariner edged back from the water until he found a smooth, egg-shaped boulder to lean against. Strangely, the boulder lacked the phosphorescent quality of the walls of the cavern. He coughed and his mouth and nose cleared themselves of the thick smell of the lake water, only to be assaulted by a stench he would remember for the rest of his life. The smell was so palpable he swiped a hand to push it away from his face. Gerriod could feel the fetor wriggling up his nostrils, forcing itself down his throat until its tendrils squirmed about in the pit of his stomach. His hands covered his nose. His head started reeling. He was vaguely aware of a buzzing sound which only added to the sensory chaos in which he found himself. Gerriod turned using the large rock he was leaning against to rise from the floor of the cavern.

His hands recoiled as soon as he touched it. It felt as if it were humming, and it seemed to respond to his contact, the agitation intensifying as if a hive of winged bugs lay within. On the edge of his hearing Gerriod thought he heard whisperings but his head was thumping from the impact of the water and his senses had not yet gathered themselves together.

The boulder was not just egg-shaped. It was an egg. A huge egg. Gerriod guessed he had stumbled upon the nest of some unimaginable denizen of the underworld. To his right, a line of similarly shaped eggs stretched out, following the slow sweeping arc of the lake's shoreline. There must have been thousands of the pale white ovoids lining the vast shore. Gerriod was intrigued but did not want to investigate. The putrid

smell wafted down the shoreline, a deterrent to any who would seek to go that way.

The offensive odour emanating from the nearest egg was suffocating him with its stench. He felt his knees grow weak. Nausea rose up in the mariner and he slumped to the ground. It took a supreme exertion of will just to drag himself away.

As he crawled, his hands fell upon a most unusual path. Running adjacent to the shore, a road of sorts seemed to have been worn into the rock. A track of divots in the stone could be seen, each small hole surrounded by flakes of scree. He crossed the path, hauling himself away from the rotten smell until he could breathe without retching. He looked back at the road. It was about twenty foot across and continued as far as Gerriod could make out in both directions. It was an avenue of sorts, lined with the strange eggs encircling the black lake. At times the road rose high above the water, running along ledges and outcrops, and in other places it hugged the shoreline just yards away from the lapping waves. In a few places the route crossed natural bridges under which the waters of the lake flowed before disappearing into dark culverts.

Suddenly Gerriod had the feeling he was not alone in the vast cavern. He scanned the area and in the diffuse light of the cavern he could make out a large shape moving against the far wall, almost half a league away. The creature was a hazy silhouette against the lambent, red rock across the waters. It was larger than any beast Gerriod had ever seen and although he could not make out the specifics of the creature from such a distance, he knew it was not one he should seek to befriend. It scuttled along like the shatterbugs that once nestled in *The Crimson Dawn's* hold, only a thousand times bigger, walking with the vigilance of a sentry as if it were guarding the lake.

Gerriod froze as he watched the beast slowly make its way around the cavern. As it gradually drew a little closer, he could make out details that did nothing to quell his rising anxiety. Its shape was like nothing Gerriod had ever seen. The upper part of its body seemed human but it was attached to a segmented body. Attached to each section was a pair of legs shaped like pikes. There were ten legs in all and they stabbed the ground with every step. Its head seemed to be adorned in large circular horns which rose out of a shaggy white mane. It lumbered along on the shoreline road, its gaze sweeping this way and that. Gerriod pressed himself down on the floor of the cavern and edged his way to a small outcrop of rock where he could be hidden from view.

The creature continued to make its way around the lake. Gerriod had no opportunity to move any further and hoped his cover was enough for the beast to pass him without becoming aware of his presence.

It came down a rise towards him and Gerriod quickly gained a horrifying appreciation of how large the beast was. The legs alone were at least thirty feet long and encased in an impenetrable exo-skeletal shell. Each leg ended in a thin needle that amazingly bore the full weight of the monster. The shiny, ebony torso attached to the creature's metameric belly hovered high above the cavern floor. Gerriod could see now that he was looking upon a female but her face had none of the gentleness he had perceived in the few women he had known in his life. Her physiognomy was cold and expressionless. As a cloud of shatterbugs passed by, the creature's nacreous eyes blazed forth from her sinister visage. They were iridescent orbs, shiny, sparkling with magnificent, malevolent intensity.

Gerriod guessed that the creature was intelligent. He could not have guessed where she was from or how long she had been stalking through the cavern, protecting the eggs.

Her name was Succellos, she was eons old and was entirely evil. The *clack-clack* of her approach sent chills up the mariner's spine. He felt vulnerable and exposed despite his hiding place. The staccato rhythm of Succellos' gait played in counterpoint to his quickening heartbeat. The percussive *tap-tap* grew louder as the creature lurched closer, carving little niches in the rock as it approached.

And then, for the first time since Gerriod had laid eyes on her, Succellos stopped. She sniffed, detecting a smell in the air that had not been there before. Her eyes scanned the path and a low, rumbling growl emanated from her girth. She took a few steps forward, purposeful and intimidating. The stone shattered as did Gerriod's hope of ever returning to the world above.

The monster was anxious, and Gerriod knew she suspected his presence. He looked around for an avenue of escape. The cold black waters seemed his only refuge and he prepared himself to run to the lake's edge.

Suddenly, a low moaning note sounded from a horn at the far end of the cavern. Succellos spun around and clattered off in the direction of the noise. Gerriod's heart was in his mouth and for a few long moments, he was unable to move, such was his terror.

When his heart had returned to the place that was reserved for it in his chest, Gerriod stuck his head over the rock outcrop to see where the terrible beast had gone. She had galloped to a large flat area about twenty feet above the lake. Upon this natural dais, other beings had gathered. Gerriod could see indistinct human shapes through the grey mist that hung above the water. There were many of them, and they stood in a column. Lances and swords suggested they were soldiers of some kind. Despite the red hue of the cavern rock and the soft blue light falling

through the Worldpool with the waters of Lake Erras, these beings were totally monochromatic. They were sullen-looking, almost docile, although the presence of weapons suggested otherwise.

At the head of the column two men – captives apparently – were being dragged across the cavern floor. At the centre of the dais, the soldiers stopped. The captives were thrust to the ground. The way in which they fell suggested they were bound. The column of soldiers split in half as an individual made his way through the phalanx. The man leaned upon a staff as he walked the crooked path of a cripple, but he seemed to possess the authority of a king. He turned to the soldiers and as one they knelt in deference to him. He spoke. The pounding of the waters falling from Lake Erras drowned out any opportunity Gerriod had to hear what was being said but he dared not approach the dais for fear of being discovered. He had no choice but to watch the bizarre event that was to unfold before him from a distance.

Succellos made her way to the new arrivals in the cavern. She folded her thin legs beneath her enormous body and bowed before the man with the staff. The beast's show of complaisance was cause for concern in Gerriod's mind. It was unlikely that anyone she bowed down before would be a friendly towards him.

He thought of escaping into the black waters nearby but he had no idea where the currents would take him. Gerriod was a pragmatic man and that meant that in the absence of alternatives he would accept his current situation which amounted to hiding behind a rock watching the bizarre, misty show before him.

'Lord Caliban, your seat is ready.'

Despite the fawning nature of Lucetious' body language, and the reverent connotations his words held, his voice was lacking in emotion. His cadaverous hand indicated a chair fashioned in the style of a throne and located in the centre of the dais. The chair had a high arched back, crafted from the tusks of one of the Endless' many unnamed creatures. The cushioned seat was made from the dark grey hide of the same beast. The throne had been the first of Lucetious' many gifts to Caliban. The lieutenant had been quick to recognise the opportunities a mind like Caliban's could bring about. It was Lucetious who had convinced others of his kind to follow the leper and now they all stood on the brink of a new age where the Ghul would dominate two worlds.

'Thank-you Lucetious. You are too kind.'

Caliban's manner was one of gentility but this bore little resemblance to the man's heart. He sat down on the seat, reclining back,

throwing his legs across one arm of the chair like an indolent prince. He laid his staff across his lap. Before him, the Ghul made preparations for the fate of the two captives. They were Myrrans – ‘overworlders’ the Ghul called them – unfortunates who had been abducted weeks before. Iron manacles clanked into place as the men were fastened to rusty fixtures on the floor of the dais.

The poor abductees were high-ranking officials in the Cessair parliament, the political body that presided over the affairs of the world above. At the request of the parliament’s leader, Chamberlain Llyr, the men had travelled to Morae to investigate the Pryderi abductions, and in doing so had fallen into the hands of the Ghul.

Caliban looked beyond the struggling captives and gazed upon Succellos. She had bowed down before her master like a faithful pet and remained still, waiting for a command.

‘Succellos, my sweet, do not crouch before me.’ He gestured for the creature to rise and as he did so, the tattered sleeve over his left arm fell back to reveal a stump. He glanced at his forearm and then gently folded his garment back over the stump with his swollen and scarred right hand.

With a clatter of limbs upon the stone, the creature rose to its full height, dwarfing everyone else in the cavern. The Ghul moved back ever so slightly and the two government officials lifted their heads around to see what Caliban had in store for them. ‘Succellos, come to my side. I have people I want you to meet.’

‘Yes, Caliban. To your side. People to meet.’ Her voice dripped with wickedness, every syllable a threat. The shafts of her legs rapped on the stone and her shadow fell on the two men manacled to the rock. She spun around and lowered her torso, so she was almost level with the prisoners.

‘Her name is Succellos and she is almost as old as the rock on which you kneel,’ Caliban said grandly as if looking after introductions at a formal ball. Then his voice changed. ‘She will bend you to her will. And her will is my will.’

‘Most honoured to have your company,’ she taunted. ‘Seldom we have visitations from the Overworld.’

One of the captives, a pale fat man draped in purple velvet and sweat, rose up defiantly. ‘We are not visiting, you obscene thing!’

Succellos looked over at Caliban, a mocking show of wounded pride on her ebony face.

‘Now, now, good sir,’ interceded Caliban. He lifted himself out of his throne and limped down to where the man knelt with his arms chained

behind his back. With his right hand, Caliban softly, paternally, patted the man's bald head. 'Dear Mr Windle, we may not see the light of the sun down here, but we still have expectations of good manners. Your attack upon Succellos... most uncivilized.' Caliban's gnarled fingers stroked the poor fellow's temples menacingly.

It was unclear whether the bureaucrat was more shocked by the use of his name or reviled by the rotten flesh of the hand touching his head. He pulled back away from Caliban and fell onto his rump.

The other captive, a tall, dark-skinned man with a thin, sombre expression, lifted his head and held Caliban in his gaze. The man had been beaten badly. A mess of dirty bandages had been wrapped around his head. A thick, red blot stained the bandages – the Ghul had torn off one of his ears when he refused their invitation to accompany them to the Endless. Despite the injuries that had been inflicted upon him, he held himself with pride and authority. 'How do you know his name? What do you want from us?'

Caliban limped back slowly to his throne and sat back down with a sigh.

'Ah, now there's an interesting question Lucetious,' he said to his lieutenant, who just nodded sycophantically. 'What do I want? What do I want?' Caliban clearly enjoyed having a captive audience and played out his part with relish. 'I want what you want, Mr Melkin – yes, yes, I know your name too – I want what every man desires. Equality.'

Samuel Melkin glanced at Porenutious Windle who just looked back at him quizzically. He turned back to Caliban who was grinning with the satisfaction of someone who was in total control of the situation. Melkin rose up as high as his bonds would permit. 'No man desires equality. Man's ambition will not be satisfied with equality.'

If Caliban had two hands, he would have clapped them in delight. A gleeful sound broke from his thin lips. 'Yes, yes... that's true!' Caliban conceded, impressed with his captive's response. 'You are quite the philosopher, aren't you Samuel?'

Ignoring his captor's provocative use of his first name, Melkin held the leper in a vice-like gaze and said, 'Who are you?'

'In legal terms, I am the injured party. In sociological terms, I am a pariah. In religious terms, I am akin to a god.'

'In psychological terms, you are insane!' spat Melkin, already tired by his host's theatrics. 'A god!' he sneered. 'Look at you. You're a leper who lives in a hole in the ground.' He looked derisively at the Ghul lining the dais. 'Your inexplicable command over these walking corpses does not make you a god.'

Caliban smiled, his teeth hanging like shingles on a dilapidated hut. He clasped his left arm and did not move for quite some time. Beside him Succellos shifted her weight and the rock beneath her legs splintered inaudibly. Lucetious turned his head, watching his master from the darkened recesses of his eyes. The rest of the Ghul just stared at the scene before them, displaying little interest or concern, blank expressions painted on their etiolated skin.

‘My name is Caliban Grayson. Thirty years ago, I lived a luxurious life in Pelinore with my father Gideon and twin brother Remiel. I was a student of the arts, and lived a happy life until my father’s many years caught up with him. Daddy fell ill and then things went awry.’

Melkin looked quizzically at Caliban. The leper’s response was not what the bureaucrat had expected. He looked across to his companion, but Windle seemed so preoccupied with the creature known as Succellos, it was doubtful he had even heard Caliban’s soliloquy.

‘My twin doted on him and my father reciprocated Remiel’s interest, so I left the palliative care of my father to my brother and contented myself with my studies. I rarely saw my father. My brother, on the other hand, I saw daily. He would come down into my room beneath our stately home, bringing me food and drink. Remiel was most concerned about me, concerned about the books I was reading, concerned about the visitors I entertained, and perhaps he was concerned about certain practices in which I dabbled. Anyway, my father took his time to take his permanent leave of us. Days faded into weeks and weeks into months.’

He stopped, lost in his thoughts. Long seconds passed and all that could be heard was the thunderous tumult of the waters of Lake Erras crashing down upon the centre of the dark lake. The Ghul stood to attention, patient and dispassionate.

Samuel Melkin glared at Caliban, his face taut as he stifled innumerable comments he wanted to hurl at his captor. In contrast, Windle’s eyes flickered everywhere – upon Succellos, upon the Ghul’s swords and spears, upon Caliban’s ravaged skin. His temples twitched with terror.

Suddenly Caliban’s head jolted up. He looked around as if unfamiliar with his surroundings and then relaxed again.

‘Lord?’ inquired Lucetious perturbed by his master’s erratic behaviour.

‘I’m sorry everyone,’ Caliban said lightly. ‘I was a thousand leagues away.’ His gaze sharpened and it was directed at the tall, dark-skinned man at his feet. ‘Mr Melkin, what think you of my tale thus far? Now, your honest opinion Mr Melkin. We don’t have secrets here in the Endless.’

Melkin kept his eyes fixed on Caliban and stated plainly, 'I find it difficult to comprehend how a son could show such scant interest in his dying father.'

Caliban raised what was left of his eyebrows, surprised by Melkin's audacity. 'Yes, yes. I suppose you're right. I should have shown more interest. That was my undoing. But family relationships can be so difficult at times, can't they?'

Melkin said nothing and Caliban resumed his story.

'Unfortunately something happened in the dark days my father clung to the fraying tatters of his existence. I became sick. Terribly sick. My skin became acutely sensitive to sunlight so I avoided venturing outside. My brother found an apothecary and brought me drugs that were supposed to ease the pain, but my condition only grew worse. A physician was called and gave his diagnosis – I had contracted leprosy. Knowing Pelinore's well-established intolerance of lepers, Remiel arranged for passage across the Nessian Sea. My memory of that time is hazy. The drugs my brother was feeding me robbed me of clarity. As we made our way across the bogs of Tuatha, I stopped taking them and the fog shrouding my mind slowly dissipated. On the morning we arrived in Palia, I realised my brother's intention was to take me to Sanctuary and leave me to die in that hellhole of the leper colony.'

Caliban looked up to see what effect his tale had upon the pair before him. Windle was so struck with fear that it was plain he had not heard much of the story at all. Melkin by contrast was unmoved. Caliban's story did not draw from him one drop of sympathy. He knew he faced a madman who had survived for thirty years on the servile attention of his underlings. Melkin could not – would not – indulge him. 'Is there a point to this story?' he said coolly.

For a second, Caliban's eyes flared up. Melkin could see he had angered the leper. But Caliban quickly adopted a nonchalant gaze that suggested otherwise. One of his legs hanging over the throne's arms swung idly in the air and he smirked as if to show Melkin that his comment had amused him. Looking up into the roof of the vast cavern, he addressed the bureaucrat. 'Mr Melkin, I am disappointed that an advisor to the honourable Chamberlain Llyr could be so lacking in the skills required for diplomatic relations.'

This was more than Samuel Melkin could bear. He strained against his bonds as he moved forward to confront Caliban on this point. 'Diplomatic relations? We have been abducted, beaten and no doubt you plan to give us over to this... this thing.' He nodded towards Succellos who just grinned back at him. 'There's no diplomacy here. Release us at once, you damned leper!'

‘Gentlemen,’ Caliban said softly, ‘you have been treated with great courtesy, and in response you have heaped insult upon insult upon me and my colleagues. And furthermore –’

‘Insult? Insult?’ screamed Windle hysterically, his prodigious bulk shaking with every syllable. ‘Word has reached Cessair of the Ghul abductions in Morae, the genocide in Camulos, the massacre of Skyfall, the attack upon *The Princess Orani*. You are in obviously in command of these... vermin. Do not lecture us over matters of courtesy when you are clearly the architect of all this bloodshed. Let us go immediately!’ Windle’s heart was racing and with Succellos hovering above him, panic had overtaken every sense.

‘Mr Windle, may I suggest to you that manacled as you are, sir, you are in no position to dictate terms,’ Caliban mused, stifling the joy he felt in seeing such anxiety.

‘And you, *sir*,’ Melkin said, emphasizing the ‘*sir*’ with as much sarcasm as he could muster, ‘though you may speak with the eloquence of angels, you are nothing but a petty thug, living where you deserve, under the dirt of the world.’

Caliban shook his head with all the subtlety of a performer in a pantomime. ‘Lucetious, these bad manners cannot be endured. I had hoped we would avoid unpleasantness. Please break one of Mr Melkin’s fingers.’

‘What!’ Melkin cried shrilly. ‘No! No, please...’

The Ghul lieutenant strode across the dais and walked behind the pair in chains. He took a position behind Melkin and without hesitation but with surprising strength, snapped one of his fingers. The resulting cry bounced off the cavern walls until it was swallowed up in the deluge thrusting in from the lake above.

Seeing this cold display of violence, Windle quickly decided to change tack. ‘We are of little value to one as significant as yourself,’ he said obsequiously. ‘We have nothing to offer you.’

Caliban swung around in his throne so that both feet were planted on the floor. He leaned forward to look at Windle’s sweating, fat face. ‘Excuse me?’ he said, his voice low and menacing.

Windle blinked uncontrollably, his nerves shot to pieces as the sounds of Melkin’s whimpering burrowed into his ears. ‘I was just humbly suggesting that –’

Caliban frowned, his scourged face a portrait of displeasure. It was enough to stop Windle from continuing. ‘Mr Windle,’ Caliban sighed, ‘tell me, are you an invertebrate?’

All colour faded from Windle’s face as he sensed that he had placed himself in harm’s way. ‘I... I do not understand.’

Caliban leaned even closer. Windle could feel his captor's hot, noxious breath upon his face. Caliban's dark eyes glowered malevolently and he did not blink, as if his leprosy had taken from him his eyelids. 'I asked whether you are an invertebrate. I think you are. At least your friend here has a backbone. Please show a little grit. I am mired in subservience as it is. Do not toady to me.' There was no softness to his voice.

Windle was out of his depth. Melkin's defiance resulted in one of his fingers being broken but his own attempts to placate Caliban had drawn from his captor even greater animosity. He knew to say nothing would also annoy the leper and so he found himself deep in a trilemma from which he could not extract himself. Fortunately, Melkin, in a fog of pain provided Windle with a distraction that spared him of the need to respond.

'We are unarmed,' Melkin hissed through clenched teeth. 'How dare you treat diplomats thus.'

Caliban turned his head so that he was eyeball to eyeball with the defiant bureaucrat. 'There is no asylum down here Mr Melkin. You seek sanctuary – you will get none. Down here, rules of fair play don't apply. You are in my domain now. In the Endless, only the law according to Caliban is enforced.'

Melkin stared back proudly. The searing pain shooting down his arm from his broken finger was not enough to quell his choler. 'And was it Caliban's law that had the Kobolds killed?' he demanded, his voice booming in the empty space.

Caliban sat back in his throne and deliberated his response, all the while keeping his eyes on Samuel Melkin. 'You are misinformed,' he said after some time. 'The Kobolds have not been wiped out. They have just been... relocated.'

Melkin dropped his eyes from the leper as he digested Caliban's comment. Before leaving for Morae he had heard tales of atrocities that had been uncovered in Camulos. The entire country had been razed and not a Kobold had been found alive. As he travelled north from Cessair to the land of Morae, Melkin had struggled to come to terms with the apparent genocide that had taken place in Camulos. It had been something that had deprived him of sleep. For weeks he had carried with him the images of the Kobolds' demise and now he was face to face with a man who claimed the Kobolds were still alive. His mind was spinning. He looked up at Caliban and asked, 'Where are they?' his suspicion obvious.

'Oh you needn't worry about the Kobolds. They are safe, busy with some jobs I have given them.'

Melkin was blessed with a sharp mind and from Caliban's ambiguous statement, he deduced the truth. 'You have them opening up routes to the lands above. That is how you have spread throughout the Myr without being seen: the Ghul incursions into Morae and Camulos; the monsters that have been released to distill carnage upon Skyfall and the Jurojin Straits. You have forced the Kobolds to dig for you.'

Lucetious gazed across to his master, unnerved by the clarity of Melkin's analysis. But Caliban was not threatened by Melkin's astute mind. In fact, he was delighted by it. He fingered the end of his left arm furiously, excited by what he just heard. 'Mr Melkin, do you play Siege?'

Not for the first time in the conversation, Melkin was taken off-guard by Caliban's wayward discourse. 'What?' he mouthed incredulously.

'Do you play Siege? I remember it was very popular in Cessair many years ago.'

Melkin did not like entertaining Caliban's whimsy, but the throbbing pain radiating out from his broken finger reminded him that he was the vulnerable party in this exchange. 'I don't understand the question,' he said quietly.

Caliban's face flashed a look of annoyance that threatened to grow into something greater. 'Come now Mr Melkin. It's a simple enough question. You have an insightful mind, that much is clear. I am wondering if you play Siege. My guess is that you do, and that you are very good at it. Am I correct?'

A bead of sweat ran down Melkin's dark brow. He knew there was more to the question than mild curiosity. He knew his answer would impact upon him in some unforeseen way. Suddenly, unexpectedly, a question thrust itself through the crowd of thoughts in his mind and made its way to the front. 'Where are the Spriggans?'

If Caliban was surprised by this question, he did not show it. 'I asked you a question first, sir,' he said irritably. 'Do you play Siege?'

Melkin was undeterred. 'What have you done Caliban?'

'I used to play Siege all the time, in my youth.'

'The Spriggans!' Melkin shouted. 'What have you done to the Spriggans?'

'My brother was a formidable opponent, but these Ghul have no head for strategy. Why even Lucetious can't offer a mild challenge.'

'Answer me, damn you!'

'I had the Ghul make me a board, complete with pieces carved out of bone.'

‘Caliban, tell me what you’ve done,’ Melkin snarled. He knew Caliban’s refusal to address the questions confirmed his suspicions – the Spriggans had been wiped from the face of the Myr.

Caliban watched as the realisation of this horrible truth spread across Melkin’s face. ‘Samuel,’ he said softly, almost apologetically. ‘The Spriggans were an unfortunate casualty in –’

‘War?’ Melkin interrupted, his face contorted in rage. ‘War? We’re not at war with you!’

‘Yes, you are,’ Caliban said coolly. ‘You just don’t know it yet.’

‘You are insane!’ Melkin retorted. ‘You ask me of board games whilst your minions are out wreaking death and destruction across our lands. The Spriggans were a peaceful folk. Why kill them?’

‘They sold weapons. Weapons that could be used against us.’

Melkin leaned forward, straining against the chains. ‘Your isolation down here has made you paranoid.’

‘I am most disappointed by this lack of political acumen. A diplomat of your abilities should be keenly aware of the necessity of strategy, of the beauty of elaborate and meticulous planning.’

‘What sort of plan involves the slaughter of thousands of innocent people? Was the wiping out of the entire Spriggan nation an example of political acumen?’

Without warning Lucetious bent down behind Melkin, grabbed his hand and snapped another finger in half. ‘Enough disrespect,’ he said, his unemotional voice making his act of violence even more shocking.

Caliban smiled, touched by his lieutenant’s unsolicited display of loyalty.

Melkin screamed in agony. ‘You lunatic!’ he bellowed at Caliban.

Porenutious Windle crouched down even lower. He thought he was about to faint. The sound of Melkin’s fingers snapping kept replaying in his mind. Petrified that he would be next, Windle started whimpering like a beaten animal, even though he had not been hurt to this point. Had he known what would soon befall him, he would have fainted many times over. ‘Samuel, please,’ he pleaded to his companion, ‘do not give him cause to harm you.’

Hearing this, Caliban turned back towards Windle. ‘Ah, Mr Windle, you speak at last! Your prudent advice is characteristically cowardly. I think you will find, my fat, purple friend, that some people must learn their lessons on their own. Do not worry about Mr Melkin. He has eight digits left.’

Despite the pain in his hands, or perhaps because of it, Melkin reacted to Caliban’s taunt. ‘You diseased bastard!’ he yelled, his voice a clarion call of defiance.

‘Dear me,’ muttered Caliban insincerely as Lucetious stepped forward and broke another finger. ‘Make that seven digits left.’

Melkin collapsed to the rock floor, his entire body consumed in pain. He curled up into a foetal position, his iron chain an umbilical cord connecting him to the cold, hard womb of the Endless. His breathing was fast and shallow and despite the cool air of the cavern, sweat had gathered on his brow. Melkin was a handsome man of forty-three years, but his trauma was such that his entire face was little more than a landscape of wrinkled, dark flesh. A glob of blood spilled through his thick lips. He had bitten his bottom lip in an attempt to subdue the scream his body wanted to release. Although his head had been clouded by the physical torment he was experiencing, he had enough presence of mind to stop himself from crying aloud – he would deny Caliban the perverse pleasure he would obtain from such displays of weakness.

The leper scratched his head as if he had an itch. He turned to his lieutenant and asked, ‘Now Lucetious, where was I?’

‘Siege, my lord.’

‘Ah yes, Siege. Mr Melkin, now for the fifth time, have you ever played Siege?’

Melkin wanted to refuse to answer, wanted to defy Caliban yet again, but he knew he could not endure the loss of another finger. The sound of the third finger snapping also heralded the cracking of his spirit. ‘Yes, I have,’ he whimpered, the pain from his left hand so excruciating, he thought he would lose consciousness.

The corners of Caliban’s thin lips curled upwards in a smirk of satisfaction. He had triumphed over the obstinate bureaucrat. ‘Please regale us with your knowledge of the game. Lucetious, just stay there in case Mr Melkin holds back.’

The Ghul commander nodded impassively.

Porenutious Windle had lost all colour from his face. His corpulent body was frozen in fear but his eyes were joined in an animated dance of desperation. From the depths of his watery orbs, he shot Melkin a look of absolute dread. ‘Please do what he says,’ the eyes cried.

‘The game of Siege was said to be invented 220 years ago by Queen Malia Essar of Tir Thuinn after the countries of Arnaksak, Cephalonia and Tuirren went to war over the sovereignty of the island of Usnach.’ Samuel Melkin was struggling but he managed to string together a sentence so coherent and detailed Caliban could not help but be impressed. Melkin’s face lay flat against the stone floor and a small patch of saliva and blood pooled next to his mouth. His eyes were shut as he reached deep into himself and found the strength needed to satisfy

Caliban. He would give the vile monster what he demanded, but not what he sought – he would not plead for mercy.

‘The battle fought on the island decimated the ranks of the armies of all three countries but it did not resolve the dispute. The white frozen lands of Usnach were the scene of horrific carnage, and thousands died as each army tried to gain the upper hand. Fearing years of crippling war, the Queen of Tuirren created the game of Siege and offered it to the other two countries. Rules were established and a seven-tiered board was created for the game. The finest strategic minds in each country were trained and on the icy fields of Usnach a tournament was played exactly one year after the conflict began.’

The mere act of talking gave Melkin the strength he needed to lift his head from the rock.

Caliban was enthralled by the mettle his captive had shown and he chewed on the edges of his cloak, captivated by the story and its telling. ‘Go on,’ he urged, ‘go on.’ He sat forward, like a small child listening to a story he knew but wanted to hear again and again.

‘Victory went to Cephalonia. The tournament was won by a woman by the name of Addison Cole from the city of Cibola. Tuirren and Arnaksak relinquished their claim upon the island. Ironically though, the Cephalonians soon abandoned the colony they established there. It was said that the island had been soaked in so much blood, it had been claimed by the dead warriors for all lost souls, and the Cephalonians, fearful of vengeful spirits, left the wasteland, never to return. And even to this day, many believe the souls of those who die before their time roam the frozen wastes waiting to bid farewell to the ones from whom they have been ripped away. For this reason, Usnach is now known by many as the Isle of Departure.’

Caliban could hardly contain himself. After years of limited conversation with the Ghul, Samuel Melkin’s intricate retelling of this unusual piece of Myrran history was fresh air in a realm sorely needing it. ‘Oh, most impressive Mr Melkin!’ Caliban exclaimed. ‘Detailed and accurate. You are a veritable encyclopedia!’

Melkin stared back coldly, unwilling to respond to the praise he had been given.

‘I do love my history too,’ Caliban said proudly. ‘When I was a young man, I read avariciously. Whilst all the boys and girls were playing in the sun, I was in a cellar pouring over ancient texts, tomes that told me many long-forgotten things, things about this world under the Myr.’ He gestured up at the vast space surrounding them, his eyes gleaming. He then returned his gaze to Samuel Melkin. ‘Good sir, do you know the greatest lesson history teaches us?’

‘I’m sure you’ll illuminate me,’ Melkin said plainly, letting his words and not his intonation convey his sarcasm.

Caliban smiled a wicked smile, clearly amused by Melkin’s daring. ‘Oh yes, I shall illuminate you, sir,’ he said softly, his voice cold and menacing. ‘The greatest lesson history teaches us is that in time, all things fade.’

Melkin lifted his head, not understanding the thrust of the statement.

Caliban’s eyes shone. He was pleased he had piqued his captive’s curiosity. ‘*Magicka fed a tempa*. The Morgai magick that has kept the Myr safe for so long has faded. I can set the Ghul free.’

‘And in doing so you will bring about your own demise! You will be hunted down and killed.’ It was said with the courage of one who had accepted his fate. Samuel Melkin knew his other fingers would be broken if Caliban’s whim bent that way. What he said or did was now immaterial. He also realised that the madman would not let him go, and in that hopeless certainty, he found some comfort. His fate was inescapable, determined by a mind that had been eaten away over long years. Melkin knew that it was futile to think he could alter the course.

Caliban’s mood darkened somewhat. ‘*Hunted down and killed* you say!’ he sneered. ‘If that is the final outcome of my efforts, Mr Melkin, I do hope you will come to the Isle of Departure to see me off. I must say, your insight into Usnach was an unexpected delight. Tell me, do you think my father waits for me there... to say goodbye? I never got the chance to bid him farewell.’

Melkin held his decrepit antagonist firmly in his gaze and said without a hint of emotion, ‘Your father died a natural death. He does not wait for you.’

Caliban stared back coldly at the surprisingly resilient bureaucrat.

A sliver of a smile crept across Melkin’s upper lip. ‘What is it you want Caliban?’

‘I want what we all want. To find my place in the world.’

Melkin cast an eye around the gloomy cavern. ‘It seems you have found it.’

‘Sir, you would be less abrasive with me if you had lost what I have lost.’

‘My mind, you mean?’ he said sardonically.

‘I have lost something other than my mind,’ Caliban countered. ‘I have lost a brother. Do you know what that’s like, to lose a brother?’

‘Everybody dies.’

‘Oh he’s not dead. He’s just... missing. I seek to find him. And you will help me.’

‘We are mere bureaucrats.’

Surprisingly, it was Windle who had said it. As soon as the words left his mouth, he dropped in head in supplication.

'No. You are the Chamberlain's right and left hand. You set the agenda,' Caliban stated unequivocally.

'You are misinformed,' Melkin said with none of Windle's trepidation. 'The Minister for Justice, Maeldune Canna, is the Chamberlain's chief advisor. We are but small cogs in the machinations of the Myr's politics.'

'I know what you are, Mr Melkin.'

'Of course you do. Shall I tell you what you are, sir?' Melkin said calmly.

It was a surprising question and the impudence of it was not lost on either Caliban or Lucetious. The Ghul stepped forward to break another finger but was waved off by Caliban who merely said, 'Continue.'

It was a triumph of sorts. It did not change his fate, but somehow it altered the relationship being forged in the crucible of the conversation. 'You are a victim who is trying to reassert himself but you have been hurt so deeply, you do not care who you harm in trying to –'

'Yes, yes. Quite bored now,' Caliban snarled without warning. 'You diplomats – you do drone on.'

Windle dropped his head and stared at a small pebble that softly glowed red, its phosphorescent light doing little to dispel the darkness that had enveloped him. Caliban's mercurial disposition frightened him beyond reckoning. Losing control, he started weeping, fearful of the price of Caliban's impossibly swift changes of heart.

Caliban looked down at the frightened husk of a public servant. 'Tears, Mr Windle? You should be made of sterner stuff.'

Windle looked up forlornly. 'I do not want my fingers broken.'

'Then you need not worry. I have quite a different fate for you. Succellos, he is yours.'

The beast rose swiftly. The sharp ends of her legs clattered on the stone as she lifted herself high into the air. She thrust her torso downward and for a few brief seconds, she was face to face with Windle. She leaned in close and her breasts rubbed against the bureaucrat's sweat-stained shirt. She closed her eyes and smelt him. As she inhaled, a flagitious smile spread across her black lips. 'Thank-you Caliban. He is ripe. He is ready.'

She raised herself and made her way behind the pair chained to the rock floor of the cavern. Windle was in such a state of shock, he did not turn around, but Melkin did and was horrified by what he saw. Succellos had raised herself high so that her massive abdomen was lifted from the ground and swinging beneath her. From the bottom of her abdomen a

long, dark spike emerged, like the stings of certain insects, only hundreds of times larger. It was the length of a sword and just as sharp.

‘Get back, you monster!’ Melkin screamed but Succellos ignored him, caught up in a delirium of her own.

‘Such a bouquet!’ she sang to herself, still enjoying the fumes of fear rising up from Windle’s body.

‘Porenutious,’ Caliban said with great familiarity. ‘I would like to exert some influence upon the Assembly of Nations. Over the coming months, the Ghul attacks and the rise of the Cabal will spur the Assembly into action. I need you to steer the course of that action. Your Lord Chamberlain – he must be influenced. You must use your guile, your cunning. I will furnish you with full details before you are taken back to the surface.’

Windle just nodded dumbly. He was not really listening. Tears continued to flow from his eyes carving clean tracks across his dirty face. He just stared out through the watery veil and waited for whatever it was Succellos had in store for him.

Melkin by contrast was horrified. ‘Caliban, please call this thing off,’ he screamed as he watched Succellos’ sting extend even further. ‘In the name of humanity, I beg you to stop this.’

But Caliban was not touched. ‘I gave up humanity a long time ago,’ he replied softly. ‘There is no use for it down here.’ He bent close to Windle and whispered, ‘I’m sorry Porenutious – this will hurt.’

Succellos leaned forward and her massive abdomen swung up high behind her. Then in a blur of movement, she thrust her sting forward. The entire bulk of her body came crashing forward into Windle’s spine and he screamed as Succellos’ sting buried itself in his entrails. For a moment, his eyes shone with agony then quickly dulled, becoming vacant, as if his entire essence had been drawn from his body.

He slumped forward and fell lifelessly to the ground as Succellos, groaning in ecstasy, withdrew her sting. After a few moments indulging in the sensations coursing through her dark veins, she bent down towards Caliban and said, ‘He is yours now.’ The great creature then clattered across the dais and made her way back to the road encircling the vast underground lake.

Melkin bellowed in rage. He had no words. He just howled like a beast as he watched Succellos stalk away. She had satiated her strange appetite and had no more interest in the captives. His screams of rage meant nothing to her.

Caliban was similarly dismissive of Melkin’s fury. He clicked his fingers and Lucetious was by his side. ‘Lieutenant, see to it that Windle’s wound is dressed and healed. You may leave Mr Melkin with me.’

Lucetious nodded and with a gesture, commanded his subordinates to take Windle away. They obeyed without delay. Melkin looked on helplessly as long thin fingers clutched at the robes of his companion and unceremoniously hauled him across the stone. The column of silent soldiers left the cavern, with Lucetious at their head and the heavy bulk of Porenutious Windle being dragged at the tail.

'I'll kill you,' Melkin said so quietly Caliban wasn't sure whether he had actually said it.

'Somehow I just do not see you as a threat to me.'

'I still have one hand left you monster,' Melkin sneered.

'As do I, sir,' Caliban retorted. 'Now, Mr Melkin, hear your fate. You will remain here as entertainment for me. You and I will play Siege. One day, I may even release you back to the world above a free man – without Succellos' caress. If you refuse to indulge me, you will be strung up by your remaining seven fingers until you die. Those are my terms. Do you accept?'

'I accept your terms.'

Gerriod had heard nothing of what had transpired but what he had seen had mortified him. He recognized the danger he was in from the outset, but was compelled to watch the shocking situation that played out before him. He had bitten his hand to stop himself from screaming when he saw the fat man in purple impaled upon the monster's sting. His terror rose to unimaginable heights when that very creature left the dais to return to its circumnavigation of the lake. As the Ghul filed out of the vast chamber, Gerriod fled into the darkness on the far side of the road encircling the lake.

Fortunately, he found a small passage in the rock, a tunnel of sorts. Of course, he had no idea where it led, but in light of the lumbering beast that was rapidly approaching, his destination was inconsequential. He fumbled his way down the passage, and did not stop until the sound of the crashing waters was muted by the rock.

Melkin's eye caught sight of movement in the opening to the cavern through which the phalanx of Ghul had just exited. A tall, lean figure appeared there, draped in rich dark fabrics lined with silver brocade. Numerous rings upon the figure's hands glistened in the red light. There was something distinctly familiar about the person. It was a man, that much was clear, but his face was in shadow, hidden by a deep cowl that had been drawn up over his head.

The man stepped forward, his fine leather boots creaking as he made his way over to the throne upon which sat Caliban.

Despite hearing the approach of the stranger, Caliban did not move. It was clear he was expecting the visitor and that was enough to quell any hope that had momentarily flared up in Melkin's mind.

The man reached back and pulled down his cowl. He had fine, almost feminine features. His skin was smooth and youthful, although his sharp eyes reflected the experiences of many years. His cheekbones were well-defined, granting his face a statuesque beauty. Like all Acora, his eyebrows arched high above his dark, brown eyes. There were no lines upon his brow, but his long, dark hair had receded slightly, hinting at his age. Long, pointed ears split through his locks which cascaded down past his ornately lined collar. The man's cloak was pinned to his tunic with a highly unique, silver brooch encrusted with black diamonds and shaped in the form of a gillygull. The brooch was the symbol of the Royal House of Carrucan.

Caliban grinned salaciously at Melkin, his grey skin gaining colour as mischievous delight ran through his body like blood. 'Mr Melkin, I believe you know...'

'Maeldune Canna,' Melkin gasped, stunned to see one of his colleagues moving so freely through Caliban's realm.

The Acoran looked down at Melkin whose mouth was gaping at the sight of one of the Myr's most influential politicians. 'Hello Samuel,' he said nonchalantly, his thin voice displaying little concern and even less surprise. It was almost as if he expected to find Melkin in such a situation. Maeldune then turned to Caliban and bowed. 'May I?' he asked, his long velvet-clad arms reaching out for the staff that Caliban had used earlier.

Caliban nodded. Maeldune reached down and swept up the knobbly bone staff. For a second, he weighed it in his hands and then in a motion that was as unexpected as it was fluid, he swung the staff around and slammed it across Melkin's skull. The crack of bone on bone reverberated around the cavern and Melkin dropped to the stone floor with a sickening thud.

'I do hope you haven't killed him Minister Canna.' Caliban's mordant smile gave little indication of whether this comment was sincere or not.

'He'll live,' Maeldune replied as he wiped the staff with a handkerchief he had pulled from the hem of his robe. 'I'm sorry. I've made a mess.' His manner was polite, but not obsequious. Within seconds, he had removed the smear of Melkin's blood from the head of the staff. 'As good as new,' he said holding the rod aloft.

Caliban gave Melkin's still body a fleeting glance and shrugged. 'Maeldune, old friend, let us walk. One of my attendants will come to collect Mr Melkin.'

Maeldune helped Caliban from his throne and the pair slowly made their way out of the cavern. Neither spoke for some time, until Caliban asked, 'Maeldune, did you find her?'

A proud, thin smile spread across Maeldune's face. It signified triumph. 'Yes, my lord. Your daughter is alive and as well as can be expected.'

Caliban stopped. Without turning to face Maeldune, he rasped, 'What do you mean by that?'

'As you know, the Sessymirians do not take well to bastard children. She has paid the price for her illegitimacy.'

'They cut her hand off.' Under a veneer of dead skin, Caliban blanched. 'They are barbarians. The Sessymirians will be among the first to be intimately acquainted with my wrath.'

'I have made arrangements that should accelerate the process. Your daughter will prove to be a most beneficial ally.'

'In what way?'

'In spite of her illegitimacy, she has risen to a position of great prominence. Your daughter is in charge of Strom Mir, the largest of the Nilfheim mines.'

'Strom Mir! The site of the Sessymir breach! This is a most fortuitous development!' Caliban sang excitedly. His mind raced as he considered the magnitude of the information. Within seconds of hearing Maeldune's news, his brain was contriving ways to best exploit the unlooked for advantage that had been placed in his lap. 'Now you're sure it was her Maeldune? This couldn't be a mistake?'

'The birthmark,' Maeldune said as he touched his face, 'is unmistakable.'

'She is beautiful,' Caliban said enigmatically.

Maeldune paused. 'She is indeed. As beautiful as the night.'

Caliban nodded. The response pleased him. 'And she remains in Nilfheim?'

'Yes. She wanted to see you but –'

'But you told her to stay.'

'Yes.'

'To dig.'

'Yes.'

Caliban considered Maeldune's decision. He had put practicality before sentimentality – it was the right choice. 'Good. You have done well. What of her mother? Killed for her crime?'

‘Annika is dead.’

Caliban said nothing in response to this. He had assumed she was dead long ago. He did not grieve. The desire for vengeance had killed in him the capacity for grief. In the Endless, one did not survive by having a soft and bleeding heart. ‘Maeldune, why is it you have not found my brother yet? Is the world above too large for you?’

‘Caliban, it has not been easy. I have set up spies in every city.’

‘What of Pelinore?’

‘I searched Pelinore myself but with to no avail. It is clear he left the city many years ago, not long after he stole you away to Sanctuary.’

‘Then my Cabal will continue to tear the Myr apart until you find him.’

Maeldune smiled. ‘If you must. It matters not to me.’

The path upon which they walked twisted its way through the Endless until it emptied out into a cavern so large, the red roof resembled a sunset-soaked sky. On the long, flat rock plain before the pair, dwellings could be seen. They were strange-looking domiciles. Huge hides had been stretched over intersecting arches of extraordinarily large bones. These brown domes were the abodes of the Ghul. Hundreds of them lay upon the land. The Village, as the place was known, was a chaotic sprawl, and though it was a place where the Ghul came together to eat, sleep and communicate, it was not a community in any real sense. The occasional Ghul could be seen attending to daily duties such as sharpening their teeth on ivory flints, or killing and eating the rattu that infested the Village. There were very few Ghul who were actually talking, and most of these were on their own anyway. It was a sad place, a lonely place.

As they made their way through the maze of domes, Caliban observed that something was troubling Maeldune and questioned him on the matter.

The Acoran thought long and hard before answering. ‘Caliban, I have heard that Morgai can change their appearance, can shapeshift. How am I to find your brother if he is blessed with this talent?’

‘It has been many decades since you and I explored the ancient texts together, but have you forgotten so much? The talent you describe can only be found in female Morgai. Males inherit the ability to heal. To move objects with the mind. To transform base metals into gold. These are the rewards of our hereditary succession.’ His voice rose slightly as he spoke. ‘Rewards that should have been mine!’

He stopped and grabbed Maeldune's face with his only hand. He turned the Acoran's head so he was looking at him face to face. Maeldune's nostrils flared as the smell of Caliban's rancid breath crossed the small distance between them. 'Look at me closely Maeldune. Imagine my face free of the ravages of this disease. That is the face you seek. Find him and the world above is yours.'

Maeldune tenderly took Caliban's hand from his face. 'The world will be *ours*,' he corrected, his voice soft and clear.

'Whilst the sun shines upon the Myr I must remain here below. My brother has seen to that. This is no mere disease I have contracted. The poison Remiel has fed me was more intricate than that. Have I not told you, my skin burns at the touch of the sun?'

Maeldune said nothing. Caliban's comments were always best digested slowly. He would take his time with them. He had known Caliban since the days of their youth and had realised long ago that it was always better to listen than to talk when in his company. Caliban was capable of discerning all manner of meanings from the smallest comments and with so much to gain, Maeldune did not want to compromise their arrangement by saying too much. He knew that Caliban's affliction was not just a simple case of leprosy – if such a disease could be called simple – but this news of his ailment occluding his return to the world above was both unexpected and full of promise. If Caliban could not enjoy a homecoming in the wake of the chaos he had unleashed upon the world, others should be ready to take advantage of the situation. And who better than the Minister for Justice?

'Lucetious! You surprised me!'

Maeldune looked up, surprised by Caliban's exclamation. They had arrived at Caliban's cottage and his lieutenant was waiting by the door.

Lucetious gave a slight bow. 'My lord,' he said softly to Caliban whilst keeping one eye on the Acoran beside his master. 'I have the Pryderi witch Meggan attending to Windle's wounds. He will be ready to be dispatched to Cessair tomorrow.'

Caliban gave a slight nod. 'Good work, Lieutenant. Stay a moment whilst I bid farewell to Minister Canna.'

Lucetious returned the nod, and stepped back reverentially.

An acute sense of time passing shot through Caliban's heart as he looked up at the Acoran to whom the past thirty years had been much kinder. Maeldune had hardly aged a day in over three decades. He still looked young and full of life. Although his face was sallow – it had always been so – his good looks gave his cool personality an enigmatic

quality. Maeldune's reputation for aloofness had not hurt his popularity with women. Although his deep, dark eyes were the type to ensnare the prettiest Acoran noble, they were often unfocussed, as if his mind was not where his gaze lay. His proud, baronial features had been enough in recent years to gain the hand of an Acoran princess.

Of course, his looks had no such influence in the Endless. Down here the Ghul viewed him with suspicion and none more so than Lucetious who stared at Maeldune, his eyes like stones.

Maeldune gave the Ghul commander a quick glance before giving Caliban his attention. 'What are your wishes?'

'My wishes?' Caliban said, a little scornfully. His face reflected the saturnine quality evident in his voice. 'I thought I had made these clear Maeldune. Find my brother Remiel!'

Maeldune's face did not betray any emotion. Years of listening to endless political debate in Cessair had inured him to the excesses of emotion often found in those who occupied positions of power. 'Caliban, I can assure you, I am trying,' he said without any suggestion of offence in his reply.

'But you have no leads!' Caliban said incredulously. 'After all this time?'

'I did not say that,' Maeldune responded. 'There are rumours.'

Caliban's dour look faded as curiosity spread over his scabby face. 'Yes?'

'I have heard there is a priest who lives in the abbey at Garlot. It is said he has powers that hint at something more than religious inspiration.'

Caliban thought carefully about this comment. Although it was expressed in Maeldune's typically obtuse fashion, it did signify something to be considered. 'Maeldune, this priest. His name? What is his name?' he asked quietly.

'He goes by the name of Father Gideon.'

'Father Gideon!' Caliban exclaimed loudly. It was like the sound of a branch snapping. 'How audacious of Remiel to hide behind our father's name!' he cried, his voice assuming a tone of triumph. 'Maeldune, my servant Scree will take you to Madron's Pass, where lies a breach in the mountains above Nessa. From there you will travel south-east to Garlot and find this holy man. If he is indeed my brother, he will smell you out should you make a hasty move. Be careful. Subtle. Use your political skill. Force will not work. He must want to come to me.'

'What of the Ghul incursions? If this is your brother, then...'

'Maeldune, the Ghul will continue to scour the Myr until I deem otherwise. You do not need to concern yourself with them.' It was a gentle rebuke and Maeldune did not question Caliban further.

Caliban's servant Scree, a wretched-looking Ghul female with a permanent sneer upon her face, appeared beside her master. She was fastening a ragged scabbard to her belt as she scanned the Acoran up and down. It was clear she had heard Caliban's instructions and without a word she led Maeldune away.

Caliban watched the two walk away in the dim light, making their way back through the Village below.

'Is it wise to place so much trust in one so deceitful?'

Lucetious' question brought a wan smile to Caliban's face. In lesser Ghul, the comments would have smacked of temerity, but as always, Lucetious had Caliban's best interests at heart.

'Lucetious, how could you not like the Minister for Justice? So pernicious, so willing to do what is required of him,' Caliban said glibly. 'You two are not unlike.'

'I beg to differ, my lord. The Ghul, we are what we are. Creatures of darkness. Kin to evil. We do not pretend to be one thing and –'

'Oh Lucetious, take pity on him,' Caliban said with pervasive familiarity. 'He is ambitious. Always has been. He thinks he can sense which way the wind will blow.'

'Down here Lord, the wind does not blow.'

'Precisely, Lucetious. Precisely,' said Caliban emphatically, enjoying the poetry of the exchange.

'I do not believe that we can rely on him,' Lucetious said prosaically, evidently ignorant of the metaphor in which Caliban had just taken so much delight.

Caliban sighed slowly and heavily, tracing out circles in the dirt with his boot. 'I do not rely on one man. Quite the contrary.' He paused for a moment, a precursor to deeper, more significant contemplation. 'It's a bit like a game isn't it?'

Lucetious recognized the rhetorical nature of this question and waited patiently for Caliban to proceed.

'My brother and I played Siege often. Now, Remiel, he was good. He would turn your gaze away from the most dangerous pieces. He would move one piece to endanger my king and force me to attend to the nearest, most immediate threat, but all the while he would be moving other pieces around the board and so claim the victory. It took me some time but I learnt a lot from my defeats.'

Lucetious gave no indication whether he understood Caliban's point. Prompted by this apparent lack of insight, Caliban explained himself further. 'Maeldune is but one piece. Others are being moved around the

board as we speak – Windle, for example. Maeldune knows he's on the board, but he is facing the wrong way. His real opponents are standing behind him but he won't discover that until it's too late.'

Maeldune and Scree had faded from view. The Village below was still, save for the movement of three figures making their way up the slope to Caliban's cottage: two tall, slender Ghul females with long white hair, accompanied by a squat, dark-haired female who was clad in jagged bone armour that still proudly bore the bloodstains of the countless Spriggans she had slain almost a year before.

'Chabriel, Drabella and Defecious are here,' Lucetious observed, his soldierly duty to the facts driving him to state the obvious.

'And so they are,' Caliban replied.

The trio halted a few feet in front of Caliban and Lucetious. They stood in a line, Majors Chabriel and Drabella standing proud and tall whilst the low-set Sergeant Defecious slumped, leaning on her sword as she tried to regain her breath from what must have been a rather fast march across the Village.

'Your orders my lord?' said the sisters in unison. Defecious, not to be outdone quickly shouted the same comment, hoping her volume would hide the fact that she was last to speak.

'Gather round underlings,' Caliban said with a sense of urgency in his voice. 'It is time we stepped up our attacks. The Kobolds have dug deep and delivered more of the Cabal to us. The Kaggen, Abaddon, Kleesto and Anaresis are all ready to join in the chaos currently being wrought by the Ryugin and the Morrighu.' Caliban was almost gloating. 'Major Chabriel, I think you need to take a break from those infernal Pryderi. Take Kleesto out to the Isle of Grisandole.'

'Grisandole?' Chabriel remarked, her interest aroused.

'It is unlikely my brother will be there,' Caliban continued, 'but there may be other Morgai still living in the citadel. If you can, kill any you find, especially the women. The last thing we need is some forgotten seer botching our plans. Take some marroks with you.'

'Marroks, Lord?'

'Yes, if they can track down the Pryderi, they should be able to pick up the scent of a Morgai.'

Chabriel nodded. 'Yes, my lord. Is that all?'

'No. There is something else. I need you to locate two items for me. I believe both to be hidden on Grisandole. The first is an ancient book

bound in leather with golden writing on its cover. It is called the *Incanto*. I would be most pleased with you should you find it.'

'And the other?' Chabriel asked.

'Something of sentimental value. I will give you the details later. This is an important mission Chabriel. If any overworlders get in your way, you know what to do.'

'It will be my pleasure, Lord,' she said, her hollow voice sugared with malicious intent.

Noting the glee in Chabriel's response, Caliban added, 'Except Pryderi, Chabriel. You have killed enough witches for the time being.'

He then turned to the squat soldier beside Chabriel. 'Defecious, you'll head to the Sulis breach. Take Anaresis to meet the Helyans.'

'It will be my pleasure, Lord,' Defecious replied, copying the confident Chabriel word for word, her grisly voice doing nothing to disguise her limited imagination. Drabella gave her sister Chabriel a quick look, rolling her eyes as she did so, not caring whether Defecious noticed the contempt she had for the stumpy sergeant.

Caliban continued. 'Drabella, you will take Abaddon and go deep into the swamp of Mag Mel, to the town of Marshmead. The people there have much to pay for. The swamp's mists are not thick enough to obscure the apothecaries from my view.'

Drabella did not know what Caliban was talking about, nor did she care. All that mattered was that he had given her another opportunity to exercise her malignant will. 'It will be my pleasure, Lord,' she said dropping her voice an octave in an attempt to mimic the low-voiced Defecious.

'And the Kaggen?' Lucetious asked.

'It will be sent to the Sessymirian city of Nilfheim.'

Lucetious thought carefully before responding to this. 'Lord Caliban, forgive me but we have not yet deployed all Kobolds assigned for that region. The Sessymir breach is far from open. Perhaps it would be worth considering sending the Kaggen to another location. It will be months before we have broken through the frozen rock beneath Nilfheim.'

Caliban grinned.

'In spite of her illegitimacy, she has risen to a position of great prominence. Your daughter is in charge of Strom Mir, the largest of the Nilfheim mines.'

'Let us be patient, Lucetious. One never knows the possibilities that may come our way when we are patient.'

Gerriod stumbled through the half-light of the underworld realm. He wasn't sure whether he had been wandering for hours or days. Time had been contorted by the darkness. Occasionally shatterbugs would shoot by, momentarily illuminating the caves and passages with a light so pure it seemed out of place in the dim world of the Endless.

At one point, he noticed hoofprints in the dirt. The soldiers he had seen back in the cavern, as far as he knew, did not have hooves. Nor did the gigantic creature that lurked around the dark lake. Gerriod 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. He had also met cloven-footed Spriggan traders.

But his thoughts were broken by something that caught his eye as he rounded a bend in the underground tunnel. Before him lay a grotto where a swarm of shatterbugs danced in their own ghostly light. The waters of a wide pool lapped at the walls of the small cavern. The ground in the centre of the grotto was raised, like a small, underground island. On top of the mound were two large beams, fashioned in the shape of an X. As Gerriod drew closer, he could see that the beams were actually bones, the femurs of a colossal beast. He edged closer to the bone edifice.

It dawned on him that the simple structure was actually a crucifix.

'Oh dear gods!'

Upon the crucifix the wasted figure of a man in ragged clothes could be seen hanging limply, silhouetted against the halo created by the glow of a small cloud of shatterbugs hovering nearby.

It was a grisly sight. The man had been bound to the crucifix with thick green vine. Gerriod could see the man's back, stretched hard against the ivory cross. Deep cuts and dark welts covered almost every visible patch of skin. The blood was still wet, so Gerriod assumed the poor wretch had only been recently killed.

The mariner stealthily made his way across the mound. The victim seemed to be an old man. Long white hair fell from his bloodied scalp. His motley garb was Tuathan as indicated by the traditional maroon and gold scarf that had been hung in mockery around the man's neck.

And then something happened that made Gerriod yelp in fright. The corpse moved.

'Gerriod?' it said.

'Dad?'

Chapter Seven Bregon Woods, Morae

The Pryderi population of the Bregon Woods had halved since the Ghul had come to Morae. At first, it was just the children, but more and more Pryderi women had disappeared.

Arinna Brine hung from the wide branch of the watercherry tree. In her head hundreds of voices cried aloud, tried to drown each other out. Arinna was one of the few Pryderi who could pick up the thoughts of others, a skill passed down magically-sensitive lineages. Although there were times when the talent was extremely handy, there were other times when it was a bane. This was one such occasion. The coven had gathered to discuss the situation regarding the missing Pryderi and Arinna's head had become a battlefield where the screams of psychic missiles reverberated across her skull. Her palms went up to her temples. 'Stop it! Please, stop it!'

Scores of women looked her way, unsure of how to accommodate her request. Although Arinna was much respected in the coven, she was also feared. Her sensitivity to the Pryderi's mental debris gave her a somewhat erratic disposition. Her emotional waywardness was amplified when the Ghul stole her baby earlier that year. It pushed her towards the edge. Her moods swung from depression and hopelessness to rebellious hostility. Numerous Pryderi quickly learnt that it was unwise to upset Arinna. At best those who disagreed with her received a severe tongue-lashing; at worst, they were temporarily transmogrified into small animals, or so the rumours went.

She looked around the group. The coven numbered over 300 Pryderi, but no more than 100 had gathered for their meeting high above the forest floor. Some had stayed away fearing repercussions from the Ghul, but many more had accompanied the Ghul back to the unknown realm from which they sprang, seduced by the hope they would see their children again. The Ghul commander Chabriel had made it known that those members of the coven who were willing to follow them to meet with Caliban would secure the welfare of their children. As the dark days slowly passed, and an increasing number of children continued to be taken, more and more of these invitations were accepted. The coven's official line was that submitting to these demands would only encourage the Ghul to take more children, but many women quickly lost their political sensibilities when faced with such a dilemma.

Lara remained firm in her decision not to submit to the Ghul ultimatum. It was not that she loved her daughter less than any other witch – quite the contrary – but she suspected that if she submitted to the Ghul, she may well condemn her daughter to a more terrible fate. The Ghul wanted the Pryderi for something, and that need would keep her baby Birren alive. She had to find another way. Her mother would have expected as much from her.

Lara took her position near Arinna. She knew her friend was struggling, as was she. They both looked dreadful – nightmarish visions of the Ghul and the one called Caliban had intruded their dreams every night. These terrible imaginings were common among the Pryderi who shared their dreamscape the same way other Myrrans smelt the same things or heard the same sounds. Although the communal dreams had always unified the witches, it was also hurting them, bringing on a weariness few of them could have previously imagined. Lara was only too aware of the intensity of Arinna's dreams and wished she could find a way to ease her pain, to ease all their pain, but there was no incantation for such a thing. She just had to endure until a way revealed itself.

'Now to business,' Arinna said, her proud voice putting all conversations to rest. Small patches of sunlight playfully jumped across her silken robes, like the golden frigs of the Wort River. This soft light gave her face a mystical quality, a softness that belied the turmoil beneath. All eyes were upon her. In that dappled, safe space high above the ground they would decide their fate. In a handful of hours, the blanket of day would be pulled away leaving them naked and vulnerable to the darkness. The entire coven knew intuitively that the time had come to alter the course of the events that had befallen them. They hung expectantly, their black and grey silk gowns billowing and swaying around their serpentine forms. They were all hoping that Arinna would provide them with the means to return to the peaceful, isolated existence they had enjoyed for so long. Despite all that had happened, in the warm afternoon breeze that filtered through the watercherry leaves, this hope did not seem misplaced.

'I am sure everyone here has a tale to tell but this is neither the time nor the place to be swapping stories. We are here to clarify the details of what has transpired and to determine what must be done.' Arinna spoke succinctly and with the certainty they had come to expect from her. Despite her flaws, she was a natural leader. 'So what do we know?'

'It is certain that the Ghul are being organized by one called Caliban,' said the robust Arethusa who had taken her usual place in the higher branches. She was a young, headstrong witch who spoke plainly.

‘Yes, the one called Chabriel frequently refers to him,’ said Callisandra, a beautiful young witch with blazing red hair.

‘And who is Caliban? Their king?’ Arinna asked.

‘I don’t think he is one of them,’ said grey-haired Lissa, the coven’s oldest witch. ‘The name is Scorian.’

‘A Scorian?’ remarked Lara surprised by this comment. She had heard the name *Caliban* whispered amongst the coven and had just assumed he was Ghul. She had pictured him with a pale, dead face much like Chabriel’s. She found it difficult to imagine him as a Myrran. It was hard to picture anyone other than a monster being capable of abducting children.

‘It would seem he commands them with absolute authority,’ Lissa continued. ‘They appear to revere him.’

‘Or fear him,’ added Callisandra.

Arinna nodded. ‘But what does he want with our children? Why is he taking our babes?’ she asked, straining to keep her voice measured and clear.

‘They are too young to have anything to offer him,’ observed Callisandra, who was yet to have a child. ‘Why would anyone want them?’ She was yet to master the art of tact and a number of hostile glances were shot from bough to bough as her insensitive comment reverberated around the trees. Although she lacked Arinna’s ability for reading thoughts, Callisandra quickly realised what everyone was thinking. Her face went as red as her hair as she offered an apology which swiftly faded into a mumble. ‘I didn’t mean that we don’t want them. I meant...’

‘Yet someone would not go to these lengths on a whim,’ said Arethusa, saving Callisandra from further discomfort. ‘There is a purpose at work here. If Caliban is from Scoriath, he would know the Pryderi children would be too young to have learnt any incantations. In terms of our magicks, they are empty vessels.’

There was a moment of silence. Arinna let the witches consider Arethusa’s comment before she added her own. ‘I agree. The children have been taken for a reason. They are part of a much bigger plan. I believe the children will be used as a bargaining tool.’

‘A bargain!’ exclaimed Lara, horrified that her baby Birren could be used in such a way. ‘For what?’

‘Caliban’s brother?’ Arethusa asked. She swung down to a lower branch. ‘Many Pryderi have heard Chabriel make mention of a sibling, someone called Remiel Grayson. Caliban seeks him. Perhaps these abductions are an attempt to force this person from hiding.’

Arinna shook her head slightly, her upside-down hair accentuating the movement. 'No.' It was said with such conviction that many witches found themselves agreeing with her despite having no understanding of what had led her to such a conclusion.

Arethusa frowned. 'But the Ghul have said that —'

'I do not believe that their motivation was to provoke some Myrran we have never heard of to come forward and hand himself over to his brother. It doesn't make sense. If Caliban wanted to make a statement, why use the most insular race on the face of the Myr to make it? I doubt anyone outside Morae has any idea of what we've been going through, nor would many care. Also, Caliban merely wanted to gain the attention of his brother, wouldn't killing the children be more effective?'

A number of the Pryderi blanched when Arinna conjured up the horrible image of their children actually being slain.

Next to Lara, a diminutive witch with straw-coloured hair was clearly agitated. Her name was Sonia and she had lost her child that week. Tears welled up in her eyes. 'Then what does this Caliban want?'

'He wants us.' Arinna said it so decisively that it became fact.

'What does he want with us?' asked Lara, trying to fathom what use she could be to anyone else in the world.

'Sisters,' Arinna cried proudly, invoking the sense of sodality that had kept the Pryderi united for centuries, 'this works to our advantage. It gives us leverage. I don't know what Caliban wants from us, but he must need it badly to go to all this trouble.'

All nodded bar Arethusa. 'Leverage? How so, Arinna? We are completely at his mercy. These Ghul would not hesitate to put our babes under the knife.'

Arinna could feel the heat coming from Arethusa's mind. From all their minds. The Pryderi were frustrated. They felt they were powerless. Arinna believed otherwise.

'Caliban needs us.' Arinna spoke slowly, carefully. 'Why us? What do we have that other Myrrans don't?'

It was a rhetorical question. Lissa was quick to see Arinna's point. 'Magick,' she said, her voice a deep croak.

'Yes!' Arinna said triumphantly. 'He requires our magick. Talents that could stop us being victims, should we find the courage to fight back!'

Arethusa's mind flared up in Arinna's head. 'Fight back?' she exclaimed so loudly that a flock of nesting yaffle-birds erupted from the higher branches. 'Are you mad Arinna? You know what these filth will do to our children if we rebel.'

Arinna felt a flurry of mental activity as Arethusa's remark stimulated the anxieties of the other witches hanging in the branches. 'You are right Arethusa,' she responded. 'If we fight back now, our children will be slain. But perhaps, when we are reunited with our young, an opportunity will present itself.' She paused for a moment to give the coven time to digest her comments. 'As you know, Caliban has already taken some of us. I imagine he plans to gather us all eventually. But he is in no hurry. He seems to make his moves slowly, carefully. And I believe we can turn that against him.'

'Arinna, you assume much,' Lissa remarked, 'but I believe you are right. The Ghul are arrogant. After weeks and weeks of servility, they would not expect us to rebel. But our magick is not strong enough. We are not what we once were. We would be killed in the attempt, I fear.'

Arinna bowed respectfully to Lissa. 'I believe the Ghul are scared of us,' she said. 'They were quick to forbid the use of magick against them.'

'Arinna, some have tried and are now dead,' said Lissa, ever the voice of reason.

'For all we know, the Ghul are vulnerable to us in some way, but we have failed to find and exploit that vulnerability,' Arinna contended, secretly growing annoyed with the old witch's caveats.

'You may be right, but with so many children taken, we cannot risk direct confrontation. Not here, not now.' Lissa's tone was not combative but the opposition in her voice was clear.

'Where have they gone?' asked Callisandra, her eyes flickering from Arinna to Lissa for answers. 'Where have they taken the children?' Her voice trembled. Although she had no children of her own, in the week just past Callisandra's older sister Meggan had vanished. Compelled by the Ghul, Meggan had quietly left the grove in the hope of being reunited with her child Agatha. The threat of violence upon her daughter was all the encouragement she had needed. The following morning Callisandra awoke to find a heart-breaking letter her sister had penned explaining her actions and asking for the coven's forgiveness. Meggan's departure filled Callisandra with such hate and helplessness, she thought she would die.

Lissa put out a gnarled hand and placed it upon Callisandra's small, rounded shoulder. She had no words of comfort, no assurances that everything would be alright. Callisandra clutched at her hand all the same.

'When I was a child,' Lissa said to the gathering, 'my mother warned me that if I did not behave the Ghul would take me away. I knew she did not mean it and I doubt she even believed that the Ghul ever existed. The Ghul in my mother's stories lived below the earth, in a place

called the Endless. She said they would only come out after dark, when evil things stirred, and would spend the night looking for children who had not gone to sleep.'

'It seems your mother wasn't lying,' remarked Arethusa wryly.

A sagacious expression spread across Lissa's face. 'So it would seem. A lot of the old stories are rooted in fact. Perhaps this place, the Endless, does exist, deep down beneath our feet.'

Lara thought of that terrible night in the grove, how the Ghul had just appeared from nowhere to take her child. It would make sense that they came from below. The thought of Birren being held in a hole in the dark earth sickened her. She turned to Arinna and exclaimed, 'What should we do?'

It was time to conclude the discussion. The witches' emotions were already frayed. To discuss the matter with no resolution would be an act of cruelty. 'Whatever Caliban intends it cannot be good. Perhaps he plans to add us to his ranks, turn our thaumaturgy against other Myrrans. Perhaps he desires something only our magick can deliver to him. We could spend all day wrapped up in conjecture. We must take control of the situation. We must turn our talk into action. We must show our children what it means to be Pryderi!'

Her confident words resonated. The witches' trust and hope floated across the space towards her. This pleased Arinna. She could now make the point she had intended to make from the start. 'We could be powerful enough to stand and fight...' she said seductively, 'if we reclaimed the *Incanto*.'

Long ago, the great book of spells known as the *Incanto* had been stolen from the Pryderi. It was rumoured to be hidden on the Isle of Grisandole to the west. There were many theories behind the theft but it was generally believed that the proud race of beings known as the Morgai had grown resentful of the Pryderi's skills and took the grimoire from its sacred place in the Bregon Woods. Although the Morgai denied the theft, the Moraen covens suspected that the text had been secreted away in some dark chamber within the Morgai citadel on Grisandole. Many Pryderi sought out the ancient tome but none were successful in locating it.

As the years passed, many of the stronger, more complex spells faded from memory and what had been retained was only a shadowy reflection of the magick once performed by the Pryderi. For centuries, the witches existed without their book and they became weaker in its absence.

Lara turned to Arinna considering the magnitude of the idea. 'You want us to search for the *Incanto*?'

'We must respond to challenges as they present themselves to us,' replied Arinna. 'Finding the *Incanto* would turn the tide against the Ghul. With the grimoire, we could be strong again. The *Incanto* is the key, Lara. We should never have stopped searching for it. For generations we have failed to realise the simple truth – without the *Incanto*, we are incomplete.'

'For all we know, the *Incanto* no longer exists,' Arethusa suggested. Her voice contained a curious mix of skepticism and hope. Arinna could see Arethusa's mind. She was not against searching for the text. In fact, her mind glowed with the promise of what the book could do for their situation. But she was also riddled with doubts. 'Why do you think we can locate what no other witch has been able to find for centuries?'

Arinna had prepared an answer for this inevitable question. 'Because we have so much more to lose. I cannot believe that something we had crafted over a millennium of spell-casting could just fade into oblivion. That is not the way of things. With the power of the *Incanto*, we will achieve the stature of our forbears. We can relearn the great spells. And we will make our way down to Caliban's realm and take back what is ours.'

It was a stirring speech. None were unmoved by it. But one witch was touched more than the others. She was ready to act, ready to risk everything to get her daughter back. 'I will find this book,' Lara said defiantly. 'I will do what it takes to bring our children home.'

It was late afternoon when the coven finalized the details of their rebellion. Lara Brand would travel to Grisandole, the last known location of the *Incanto*. It was rumoured the Morgai had all died out and that Grisandole was now just a lonely island that even ghosts had deserted for happier places. The Morgai citadel was said to be atop a cliff overlooking the empty Sea of Hodur. If the *Incanto* was no longer there it was hoped that Lara would be able to find some clues concerning its whereabouts. Arinna believed that a book so powerful should leave behind 'echoes of magick' and all Lara would have to do was listen carefully to hear them.

The coven had also decided that Lara would go alone. 'One witch may go unnoticed,' warned Lissa, 'but the absence of many could have terrible consequences.'

Lara hung from the broad branch that ran out from the bole of her tree, her dark purple gown floating around her like a flock of gillygulls on an ocean breeze. It was an overcast day but Lara had torn a hole in the clouds with an incantation Arinna had taught her years before. It was a simple spell and considered a waste of magick by some in the coven, but as the sunlight streamed through the tiny gap in the grey blanket above, Lara couldn't think of a better use for her abilities. The air around her was warm and comforting.

Next to her hung Arinna who was using magick to eat some honeygrapes. The honeygrape bush lay at the base of the tree. Every now and then one of the thin branches of the bush would go taut and a golden honeygrape would pop off as if picked by an invisible hand.

Arinna would often use her skills in such a casual way. By contrast, Lara had to concentrate hard to achieve the simplest incantation. She admired Arinna's talents but wished she wouldn't show them off so regularly.

'Do you want a honeygrape?' Arinna asked as she bit down on one of the grapes. 'They're very good.'

'No thanks Arinna,' Lara replied. 'I'm not very hungry.' She wasn't lying. Ever since she had agreed to journey to Grisandole, her hunger had completely disappeared.

Suddenly, an idea jumped into Lara's mind. So strong was the thought, Arinna could not help but read it. 'I'm sorry Lara. I cannot go with you to Grisandole.'

Lara did not conceal her disappointment. 'Do you think it's too dangerous for two of us to go?'

'It's not that,' Arinna replied. 'I have other... plans.'

'Plans?'

'Yes. Once a year, on the summer solstice, representatives from all parts of the Myr meet in Cessair to discuss matters of great importance. They call it the Assembly of Nations. The summer solstice will be upon us in six weeks. With the coven's permission I will travel to this assembly and entreat their help.'

Lara was surprised by this news. 'You? But you hate the Myrrans more than anyone.'

'That is true. I can't deny it. I know their minds. I know what they think. But I am willing to put all that aside for the sake of our children.' She was committed to the idea. It was apparent to Lara that her friend had thought long and hard about her plan.

'But Arinna, we do not need the help of outsiders.'

Arinna shook her head. 'I disagree. This is a bad situation Lara and I am not so proud that I will not make alliances with those I despise to ensure the safety of my child. For my baby Pippa, I'm prepared to do anything.'

Lara thought about this for a moment, then nodded. 'I know what you mean.' After a long pause, she added, 'I will go alone to Grisandole and do what I can do.'

'You're very brave Lara. Your mother would be proud of you.'

'I'm not brave, Arinna. Just desperate. There's a difference.'

Arinna could feel just how terrified her friend was. 'I'm proud of you too.'

Above the thick branch, their serpentine tails wrapped around each other, in an intimate embrace.

'You're worried about the Ghul, Little One?' Arinna asked. She had used the term *Little One* ever since she and Lara were young. They had grown up together in the distant village of Coldbrook. Lara had been taken in by Arinna's mother when her own mother had been killed that terrible day in the meadow. They had grown up as sisters, which was an uncommon situation in Morae. Most Moraen women gave birth to one child so the concept of sisterhood was a little unusual, much like the birth of twins among other Myrran races. Arinna and Lara enjoyed their special arrangement and formed a bond that very few others experienced.

'No. Not the Ghul. The marroks. My scent is known.'

Arinna was aware of Lara's predicament. The albino marrok would be able to smell her out leagues away. The marroks never forgot the scent of blood. 'He won't touch you, Lara. We'll make sure of that.'

The look on Lara's face indicated she did not share her friend's confidence. 'But Arinna, how will I get to Grisandole? How will I even get out of the woods?'

'We will use our skill to furnish you with a steed.'

'A snorse?' Lara groaned. The snorse was used widely over the Myr. Arinna was adept at riding one, travelling frequently on snorseback in her journeys between Bregon Grove and her more conventional home in Coldbrook, but Lara hated them. It was not their ugly, bulbous eyeballs on long stalks nor was it the host of popflies that congregated around their rears – it was their erratic movement across the land. She always felt as if she were seconds away from sliding off the back of a snorse and so she avoided riding them at all costs.

Fortunately Arinna put her fears to rest. 'No. We need to keep you off the ground. You won't be riding a snorse.'

Suddenly images of falling from the back of an airborne beast made the thought of clinging to the mane of a snorse a most appealing proposition.

‘You’ll be fine,’ Arinna said. ‘Trust me.’ She picked another honeygrape from the bush far below. As she opened her mouth to swallow the floating fruit, Lara stuck out a hand and took the grape. She popped it in her mouth proudly, a smug look on her face taunting Arinna. ‘I may not be as gifted as you Arinna,’ she teased, ‘but I’m a lot smarter.’

‘Oh I doubt that, Little One,’ Arinna replied. ‘I knew you would do that as soon as you thought it. That’s why I picked the rotten one.’

She had timed her reply beautifully. Lara had already bitten down on the rotten grape. There were few things in the world that tasted as bad as a rotten honeygrape. Rancid juice, pip and skin exploded from Lara’s mouth as she cursed herself. For thirty years Arinna had been able to read her thoughts. She would have to be extremely wily to fool her.

‘Come on,’ Arinna laughed. ‘We have things to do.’

The incantation was a difficult one. Lara needed a beast that could fly to Grisandole and back. No such animal dwelt in Morae but this did not dishearten the witches – there was another way.

Lissa remembered a transmutation incantation that would help Lara. As matriarch of the coven and the eldest Pryderi in the grove, Lissa had cast many spells that were unknown to the other witches. But she could not perform the difficult magick on her own. Lissa told the coven what had to be done. Unlike most incantations, this ancient spell required ingredients. The coven had to find the wings of a bird to enable flight, the heart of a beast strong enough to face the danger ahead and the body of an animal strong enough to contain such a heart.

The creatures were quickly found and killed with a mercy spell. The individual parts were laid out in a circle in the middle of the clearing at the centre of the grove. Although the coven had nothing to fear from the Ghul – it was midmorning – a number of witches lined the perimeter of the glade, looking for any sign of the marroks that patrolled the forest floor.

Lissa held her gnarled hands out over the body parts lying on the grass before her. She closed her eyes and began a complex incantation, repeating it over and over. After numerous repetitions the other witches also shut their eyes and slowly joined in when they understood the cadence and tone of the spell. The incantation grew louder and louder. As more and more Pryderi added to the chant, the air under the trees became still and warm, heavy with the sounds of magick.

The dead body of a blue lobbse that had been placed on its back in the circle shivered. Legs that had been curled into its abdomen miraculously unfurled and kicked at the air. Its long tail flapped up and down until the creature managed to flip itself over. Its little black eyes blinked as if encountering daylight for the first time.

The lobbse made its way clumsily to the pair of wings that had been torn from the body of a young gillygull. Although unattached to a body, the wings started flapping slowly and lifted off the grass. They hovered in the air for a few seconds and then settled on the back of the lobbse like a shatterbug coming to rest on a twig. The lobbse craned its head around to look at its new wings and flapped them gently. It lifted slightly off the ground and hovered there in the air, very pleased with itself.

The lobbse then noticed a moist red mound on the grass – a heart of a grizzum. Lowering itself back onto the grass, it trotted over to the heart and sniffed at it. Its small beak bit tentatively at the bloody organ. Pausing for a moment, it savoured the taste of the strange meat. Then it spread its mouth impossibly wide and it bit savagely at the grizzum's heart. It devoured the organ in seconds.

Suddenly, the lobbse started convulsing. Its beady black eyes looked around in fright. It folded its wings upon its back and fell prostrate upon the grass. The convulsions grew more and more violent and with each spasm, the creature increased in size. The ring of Pryderi around the creature maintained their chant, seemingly oblivious to what was happening before them. Only Lissa moved. Although her eyes remained closed, she slithered back as the winged, blue lobbse before her grew and grew. By the time the incantation concluded, it was the size of a small hut.

'It needs a name,' said Callisandra, wiping away the sweat the demanding incantation had produced on her brow.

'How about Puddy?' Lara suggested, panting from the exertion of the spell. 'I once had a pet squirl named Puddy.'

'Then Puddy it is,' Arinna said. Although she did not look as fatigued as the others, Lara could tell that the incantation had taxed even her.

Lara slithered across to her friend. 'I should leave immediately. I don't know how fast Puddy flies, but I would like to be in Grisandole before nightfall.'

Arinna placed a hand on Lara's shoulder. 'I agree, Little One.'

'Will you be here when I get back?' Lara asked hopefully.

‘No. I will return to Coldbrook today and from there travel south to Cessair.’

‘Oh,’ said Lara meekly.

Arinna held Lara in her eyes. ‘Little One, listen to me. Should you find the *Incanto*, give the book to Lissa when you return to Bregon. Do not read it yourself. It contains dark magick that is best left alone.’

‘I understand,’ Lara said obediently.

‘There is one more thing,’ Arinna said, dropping her voice to a whisper. ‘I did not mention this to the coven, but I must warn you. Grisandole might not be as deserted as the rumours suggest.’

Lara’s eyes widened. ‘What? There are Morgai still there?’

‘There may be one,’ Arinna said with great sobriety. ‘Years ago, before I was born, my mother met a beautiful Scorian woman by the name of Lilith Cortese. She was making her way west from Pelinore. A storm that lasted days had settled upon the land around Coldbrook and the woman took shelter in my mother’s house.’

Lara was mesmerized. She had grown up in that house. ‘And she told your mother she was Morgai.’

‘No. She wouldn’t dare. The Morgai were well aware of the contempt with which we Pryderi held their kind. But there was no disguising it. A Morgai’s essence is very strong. My mother knew Cortese was Morgai as soon as she stepped inside her house. As you know, she’s no fool, my mother. By the time Cortese left, she was not only sure of what the woman was, but also where she was going.’

‘Your mother didn’t say anything to her?’ Lara asked. ‘About being Morgai, I mean?’

‘In the days they shared, my mother grew to like her despite everything. She decided not to make an issue of it.’

Lara leaned forward, trying to keep the volume in her voice low, despite her heightened emotions. ‘But you don’t think she’ll be there, do you? That was at least thirty years ago. I mean, if she’s there, what will I do? I’m no match for a Morgai.’

Arinna shrugged. ‘I don’t know, Little One. I don’t know.’ She took Lara’s face tenderly in her hands and kissed her on the forehead. ‘Now you be careful, okay?’

Lara tried to smile but couldn’t. She was too nervous. She turned and slithered across to the clearing where the winged lobsle Puddy was lying, happily munching on a number of shatterbugs it had swatted with its big, blue claw.

Puddy shuffled about on the verge, not quite sure what to make of the trembling witch who had climbed onto his back. The other witches had provided a saddle for Lara but she was not feeling very comfortable. It was not really a saddle at all. Callisandra had taken an old chair from her tree hut and used some lengths of rope to fix it to the lobbse's back. Arethusa had also fashioned reins from the rope and handed these to Lara who sat apprehensively upon the chair.

'Pull left if you want to go left. Pull right if you want to go right. If you want to stop, pull both ropes towards you,' Arethusa instructed her with great confidence.

'Since when did you know how to steer a creature that never existed until an hour ago?' Lara said, vainly trying to extract some humour out of the situation.

'Well, it's got to be the same as steering a snorse doesn't it?' Arethusa laughed back.

The witches moved back to give Puddy some room. He stretched his wings out wide and gave them a little shake. Lara wrapped her serpentine tail around the legs of the chair on his back.

'Hey, if I pull back on the reins and he stops, won't we fall out of the sky?' she called to Arethusa.

Arethusa thought about this for a moment and said, 'Yes, you probably will. Just ignore that thing I said about pulling back on the reins, okay?'

Lara shook her head in disbelief. She was amazed she had agreed to such madness. Puddy flapped his wings again and the ground dropped away. Before she had any real sense of what was going on, Lara was high above the treetops. Puddy circled around, unsure of himself. His little legs kicked at the air, unsure of what to do. Lara swallowed hard and pulled the reins down hard left. Puddy turned left. Lara pulled the reins down hard right. Puddy turned right. After a little bit of experimentation, she turned him to the west. She relaxed the reins and he set off in a straight line bound for Grisandole.

It was late afternoon when the nameless peninsula upon which Grisandole lay came into view. It was not hard to find. Surrounded by grey ocean on three sides, the mountainous stretch of land thrust out into the sea like a knife.

Lara had never been out of Morae. She was accustomed to thick green woods and deep blue rivers. The first thing that hit her about the land beyond was how colourless it was. For all she knew, the entire world was monochromatic and the only place where colour existed was

her own home. It certainly felt like that now. Even the sky above her was grey.

The snow-covered peaks below were impossibly tall and steep. Lara had never seen snow before but Arinna had told her all about it. Etched across the ridge of mountains she could make out a thin line, a road or mountain path. It disappeared under deep drifts of snow only to reappear further down the peninsula. She wondered what sort of person would be hardy enough to walk such a road. The name *Lilith Cortese* entered her mind but Lara would not dwell upon her and quickly thought of other things.

Puddy seemed quite happy cutting through the sky, flapping his wings. She found the rhythmic pounding of his wings to be strangely comforting, although she still felt incredibly vulnerable sitting on an old chair strapped to the back of a creature that wasn't even a day old. He squawked from time to time, and every time he did so he looked around as if not quite sure of where the noise had come from.

The peninsula seemed to be thinning. Lara looked up ahead expecting to see the citadel somewhere ahead but a bank of dark, grey clouds obscured her view. Grisandole lay at the very tip of the peninsula and that was either in the midst of the achromatic mass of clouds, or beyond it.

Lara realized that she had no idea about how to make Puddy descend. As soon as she thought this, he stopped flapping his broad wings. He stretched them out wide and glided gently down towards the cloudbank before them.

It was a weird sensation flying through the clouds. Lara felt displaced, as if she were in a dream, unable to wake. She could feel tiny droplets soaking through her silken robes. Before long her delicate garments lay flat against her scales. Somewhere deep below she could hear the sound of waves crashing upon rocks, but could see nothing but grey mist.

Suddenly she broke through the clouds and what she saw took her breath away. The Isle of Grisandole lay directly ahead. The isle itself thrust up from the dark depths of the ocean to the equally brooding depths of the sky. Grisandole was even more barren and depressing than Lara had imagined. No trees clung to the steep mountainside of the isle. No beach encircled it. No seabirds flew above it. It was a place as lifeless as the Myr's distant moons. All was rock upon which nothing moved, save for the endlessly buffeting wind and waves. The peak of the conical isle was crowned with tall black towers and battlements devoid of flags or any other sign of habitation. On its own, the Morgai citadel seemed

immense but in the context of the empty, lonely landscape surrounding it, it seemed insignificant. Its crumbling columns ineffectually pricked the thick skin of the sky. The sense of isolation that pervaded the isle was as chilling as the cold winds slicing across the cheerless sea below.

Underneath Lara a long thin causeway was being pounded by relentless grey surf churned up by the inhospitable Sea of Hodur. The causeway ran a league from the end of the peninsula to the actual isle, a straight, narrow and dangerous road to an uninviting destination. In a few places, the causeway had fallen away, leaving gaps so wide that Lara was actually glad to be sitting on an old chair on the back of a big, blue, flying beast.

Puddy flapped his wings as they drew closer to the isle and they climbed higher and higher towards the black stronghold of the Morgai. Lara could feel the movement of his powerful wings through the rickety legs of Callisandra's chair. She felt her stomach lurch as her back pushed heavily against the back of the chair. Forbidding walls hewn from black rock came into sight and quickly disappeared as Puddy pitched forward to land on one of the citadel's wide balconies.

They were in a garden of sorts. Puddy's claws dug into the soft earth and Lara breathed a sigh of relief as everything stopped moving. Dark green vines and tangled thorns lay all around. Thick claw-weeds covered the area like a disease. In a few patches, flowers grew but their colours were subdued as if they were trying to remain inconspicuous amongst the weeds. The balcony was oval shaped, about 100 feet from end to end. A low parapet encircled the area, except for the southern end which was bounded by a huge wall of roughly hewn bricks. In the centre of this wall was a tall, thin archway beyond which lay a stairway covered in darkness.

Lara slid off the chair and down Puddy's back, but her serpentine tail which had clung tightly to the chair's legs during the harrowing ascent to the citadel was tangled in itself. She toppled forward and landed face down in the moist, prickly grass. Thick, noisome mud splashed up onto her face and neck.

'Oh, wonderful!' she muttered, more embarrassed than hurt.

Puddy turned his head her way and grunted inquisitively. His beady, little eyes blinked at her as if to ask why she was lying on the damp grass.

'What are you looking at?' she snapped and he quickly pulled his head away, as if upset by her tone.

Feeling guilty, Lara got up and walked around to apologise to her strange steed, but he shuffled about so she could not see his face. 'Fine then you big, dumb crustacean! Go ahead and sulk!' she yelled.

Her voice was swallowed up in the cold wind blowing over the crumbling stone parapets running around the sides of the garden. Far below her, waves crashed upon the jagged rocks that ringed the isle like guard towers protecting the citadel against any who would be so foolish as to approach it by sea.

Lara looked up to see towers, balconies and stone gantries high above. Flying buttresses stretched out over empty spaces where walls had once stood. The citadel was massive. It hugged the steep sides of the isle, spread out across its western, northern and eastern faces.

She and Puddy were on one of the castle's lower balconies. At irregular intervals above her, similar platforms jutted out from the structure. These landings were not all as secure as the one she had found herself upon. The masonry had fallen away from many, providing a vertiginous view to anyone who stood upon them. But no-one stood anywhere. As far as Lara could tell, the place was completely deserted.

She slid across the flat, weed-filled lawn to an area where three-foot high slabs of stone sprang out of the ground. There were twenty or so of these stone objects spread out in lines across the northern end of the balcony. Most were covered in creeping ivy. Lara reached out a hand to pull the ivy aside to see what lay beneath. Before she could lay a hand on the foliage, it shuffled away of its own accord revealing a short but thick granite tablet. It was a tombstone.

*Here lies Tessa Cole,
Mother of Addison
Born 52nd day of summer 1292
Died 1st day of winter 1512*

*...said the Darkbird,
'Nevermore.'*

Tessa Cole, Lara thought to herself. *Morgai?*

She slithered across to the next grave along. She was startled by this one – it had a large deep hole before it, roughly the size of a man. At the bottom of this hole lay a coffin, the lid of which had been smashed in. Lara did not tarry over the hole but she could see no sign of the corpse that should have been within the casket. Had someone broken in to it, or worse, had something broken out? She didn't want to think about it.

She turned to the granite stone at the head of the grave and read the inscription:

*Finally at rest after long labours
Gideon Grayson*

*Shed not for him a single tear
Nor linger on this sombre tomb
He lies not within the coffin here
But shines above our brightest moon.*

Lara repeated the last line of the epithet to herself. *That's nice*, she thought. *I wonder who he was.*

She slowly made her way through the small cemetery, pausing to read each inscription. The concept of burying the dead in the earth was alien to the Pryderi who burnt their deceased on funeral pyres. Although the thought of all the Morgai's bones under her feet was a little disturbing to Lara, she liked the gravestones and in a perverse way enjoyed the strange sadness they evoked. It was not until she read the last stone that this feeling of sadness was replaced by intrigue.

*Eve Cortese
Born 20th day of spring 1406
Died 1st day of winter 1639
Wife to Balthasar
Mother to beautiful Lilith
At long last asleep.*

Lilith Cortese! This grave contained her mother. Arinna was right. The woman was one of the Morgai. The headstone said that Lilith's mother had died in 1639. That was 190 years ago which meant Lilith had to be at least two centuries old. Lara knew the Morgai lived well beyond the lifespans of Pryderi, but could she expect a woman who was over 200 years old to still be alive? She did not know, but she doubted she would find her in the citadel. From the edge of the graveyard, it looked emptier than ever.

Lara wended her way back through the tombstones. Puddy still lay in the middle of the weeds, but was no longer hiding his head from her. She slithered past him and crossed over to the thin archway in the centre of the castle wall. Inside, a thin flight of steps curled up into the darkness of the citadel. No torches were lit within. The only sign of life was a small colony of shatterbugs that had made their nest in the architrave of the archway. Even their light seemed subdued in the dull atmosphere of Grisandole.

‘Well, I can’t stay here looking at headstones,’ she said to herself and stepped under the archway into the blackness beyond. She closed her eyes and turned her palms upwards, as if expecting to catch something in them. Her lips moved in a slow deliberate rhythm, releasing a repetitive chant that echoed up the stairs. Lara’s eyebrows met as she frowned, straining to remember the nuances of the *El Illumina* incantation she had begun. Perspiration emerged from under her delicate scales and ran down the sides of her forehead to her cheeks. She brought her upturned hands closer together and cupped them. After long seconds, soundless swirls of soft yellow light appeared in her hands. The light spun, thickened and grew. Lara could feel its glow upon her eyelids but she kept her eyes shut and continued the incantation until she felt the light coalesce into a small sphere in her hands. The orb was neither liquid nor solid. It sat between Lara’s fingers, a gigantic, golden drop of radiance, lighting the passageway that climbed up into the chambers beyond.

Suddenly a low-pitched whimper sounded behind her. She spun around to find that Puddy had followed her over to the entry to the castle. He lowered his head and nuzzled against her side. A long thick whisker that protruded from his forehead slapped across her face as he pushed against her, seemingly unwilling to be left alone on the balcony.

‘Puddy, you have to stay here,’ she said to the oversized lobsle and turned to make her way up the stairs. A shuffling noise behind her indicated Puddy had no intentions of staying where he was. She wheeled about to find him completely blocking the entryway. His little legs scraped furiously against the flagstones but he could not squeeze through the gap.

‘I’m sorry Puddy, but you can’t come with me,’ Lara said softly. ‘You can’t fit through the doorway.’

The lobsle grunted something.

‘If you’re asking whether I know a spell to make you thinner, I’m afraid I don’t. Anyway, what are you afraid of? You’re as big as a house!’

Puddy tried one more time to push through the entryway. Failing this, he slumped down before the archway and lay there with his long head between his claws watching Lara ascend the stairs and disappear into the Morgai stronghold.

The citadel was larger than Lara could have imagined. Countless passageways and rooms spread out in all directions. Dust lay on long wooden tables and ornately carved chairs. It lay so thick on the ground that she left behind a winding trail wherever she slithered. In some

rooms, tall windows let in natural light but the day outside was so overcast and dull, it may as well have been night-time.

The deeper Lara went into the citadel, the more she began to doubt herself. Cold-faced statues lining seemingly endless hallways stared down at her, their stern countenances doing little to raise her confidence. The light radiating from the orb did not dispel her feelings of gloom. She had never felt so alone.

She sat down on a dusty couch that ran the length of a small antechamber and carefully placed the glowing orb in her lap. Nothing else occupied the room other than an old painting of a handsome man standing between two young boys. The boys in the portrait must have been twins as they bore a remarkable resemblance to one another, although one looked decidedly more sullen than the other. The portrait was painted outside in a courtyard. Behind the trio, tall sugar-elms were gilded in brilliant sunlight. Underneath the tree a fountain sprayed water into the air. In the distance Lara could make out small sailing boats upon a deep blue ocean.

Her thoughts suddenly turned to her own child. She lifted a hand to her neck and untied the top of her silken blouse revealing her chest. A soft blue light emanated from deep within, bleeding through the small stone embedded in the soft, scaly skin above her breast. The light gave Lara great comfort and she sighed. 'Birren,' she whispered to herself and the very sound of her child's name did much to lift her spirits. The light signified that her daughter was still alive and that knowledge gave Lara the strength she needed to continue the search for the *Incanto*.

She closed her eyes and cleared her mind. If she was to find the great book of spells, she wouldn't do so by aimlessly wandering around the citadel. Arinna had said to listen for the *echoes of magick*. Lara wasn't exactly sure what that meant but she knew she couldn't listen by mindlessly shuffling from room to room in the vast castle. She found a comfortable position and emptied her mind of all errant thoughts. In the half-light of the antechamber, Lara slowed her breathing and her heartbeat. Despite the strange surroundings and her sense of isolation, she became calm. She listened carefully, not with her ears but with every pore of her body. She allowed herself to fall into a meditative trance. She felt the soft touch of the mystical streams that ran through the air and the rock. Lara encouraged her mind and body to blur and in this heightened mystical state she reached out. Reached out and found...

Nothing.

If there ever had been powerful magick within the vast spaces of the Morgai castle, it had long since disappeared. There wasn't the faintest suggestion of any sort of thaumaturgy. Not an echo. She was also certain

that the Morgai woman Lilith Cortese was nowhere nearby. In the stillness of the citadel, Lara expected to sense someone as powerful as a Morgai, but there was nothing. At one point she thought she felt ripples of something familiar but put this down to wishful thinking. Or perhaps it was Puddy. It certainly wasn't the woman Arinna described. It was possible that Cortese occupied some distant corner of the castle, a tower high above but there was no need to dwell upon it. Lara was just relieved that she could go home – regrettably without the *Incanto*, but proud that she had seen the task through.

She decided to leave the antechamber and make her way back down to Puddy. It would be nice to have company again. She was tired of being alone.

However, Lara wasn't alone. On one of the citadel's uppermost courtyards, a group had gathered and they were the last people Lara wanted to see. The Ghul were on the Isle of Grisandole.

Major Chabriel looked around at the motley squad of soldiers before her. They had failed her and that made her dangerous. They had failed to find the book Caliban had sought, the selfsame book that Lara had been sent to find. Caliban did not explain to Chabriel why he desired the *Incanto*, but she knew it must have been important to send them all the way out to the forsaken island. They had also failed to find any trace of the Morgai. She did not like to disappoint but it now seemed likely that the book and the Morgai would elude her. They had searched the entire citadel and after almost a week upon the isle, she was frustrated and angry.

She looked out across the ocean. One of the Myr's moons shone through the massive army of clouds that had assembled upon the field of the sky. The clouds were moving, whipped into a silent march by the cold wind behind them. Chabriel gazed at the moon, not knowing its name or why it was there. She stared at it and became lost. The clouds seemed to stop in their tracks and the moon took up the march, silently striding across the dark sky at a tremendous pace and yet not going anywhere at all.

For one who had spent countless years underground, it was a mesmerizing sight. She looked down to where the churning sea relentlessly hammered against the acute rocks at the base of the isle. It was an incredible thing, this vast expanse of water surging with power, breathing in and out. Chabriel had led numerous missions into the Overworld, and increasingly found herself captivated by the incredible diversity of this realm that lay a short distance beyond the rocky sky of

her own world. The first time she had walked out into the world on the night the Ghul had invaded Sarra, she had stood transfixed by all she saw and smelled. After the first sortie into Morae, she often found herself lying awake in the red glow of the Endless revisiting the strange, unsettling smells that had assaulted her in the forest land of the Pryderi.

‘So what exactly is that?’ a voice behind her said.

Startled out of her reverie, Chabriel spun around and thrust a needleback spike out at the speaker who stepped back quickly to avoid being pricked by the paralysing weapon. It was Sergeant Droola, a gangly female who talked too much and did too little.

Chabriel lowered the spike. Droola was one of the few Ghul Chabriel would permit to speak to her in such a casual way. It was not that Chabriel liked Droola. To the contrary, she despised her, but the overly familiar woman had curried Caliban’s favour so Chabriel chose her words carefully. Until such time that Droola fell out of favour, Chabriel’s ambition dictated that she was civil towards the lazy sergeant.

‘What is what, Sergeant?’ Chabriel asked, trying to hide her annoyance over being disturbed.

Droola stepped forward and leaned on the low stone balcony. She stuck out a gnarled finger and pointed to the immense ocean far below them. ‘What’s that called?’

Chabriel shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ she said slightly embarrassed by her ignorance. ‘It’s just a big lake, isn’t it?’ she said dismissively.

‘It don’t smell like no lake,’ Droola replied.

Chabriel said nothing. Although she was considered intelligent amongst her kind, there was so much she did not know. There were so many things in this world that did not exist in her own. Things that many Myrrans took for granted – mountains, snow, sky and wind – were alien to her and she revelled in the chance to experience them. Many Ghul supported Caliban because he had given them the opportunity to hurt, maim and kill on a grand scale. Although Chabriel took pleasure from such pursuits, she was indebted to Caliban for other reasons. He had quite literally broadened her horizons and although concepts such as loyalty and admiration were not widely known among the Ghul, Chabriel felt a certain desire to please Caliban.

Standing on a balcony surrounded by so much space made her head ache and she relished the feeling. The Overworld was indeed an incredible place. If it were not for the cursed sun that returned at the end of every night, Chabriel would have been content to stay above ground forever.

Caliban had promised a day would come when he would shut out the burning sun. As far-fetched as the idea sounded, he had been a man of

his word thus far, so she had no reason to doubt him. He had opened the door to the Overworld and let the Ghul run free. She thought back on the slaughter of the Spriggans in Camulos. It had done much to convince the Ghul that Caliban was no mere Myrran, but rather a messiah, leading them back to a land they had long forgotten.

‘Droola, how fares your brother Gormgut?’ asked Chabriel. The Major was not usually one for conversation but did like to hear news from other parts of the Myr. Gormgut was responsible for handling Fulgora, the first of the Cabal to be released to the surface, just as Droola had been given the responsibility for Kleesto, the great beast that now lay sleeping somewhere inside the citadel whilst the Ghul soldiers searched for Caliban’s *items*.

Droola was surprised by Chabriel’s uncharacteristic willingness to talk, but was eager to respond whilst the opening was there. ‘Didn’t you know? He was killed some time ago. In Camulos.’

Chabriel was surprised by this information. The Ghul were not easily killed so news like this was significant. Gormgut was among the troops she had left behind to scour Camulos for the shatterstone the Kobolds had mined. The thought that any of the soldiers could actually be killed in the deserted land was almost inconceivable. ‘How did he die? I thought we had emptied Camulos.’

‘Apparently not. He was found on a tower in the north. Some marroks smelt him out. He was little more than a stain on the structure.’

‘A stain?’

‘It looked like something had just blown him apart.’

‘Too bad,’ Chabriel said. It was totally insincere but was the best she could offer.

‘No, not really,’ said Droola, almost cheerfully. ‘I never could stand the fat oaf.’

Three moons hung in the sky by the time the first of the reconnaissance parties returned from their search of the citadel’s lower rooms. A thick-set, square-jawed Ghul stood to attention before Chabriel. ‘Anything to report Captain Baggut?’ she barked.

‘Major, we have been unable to find any book matching the description we have been given,’ he said in an officious tone.

Chabriel scowled. ‘What description is that?’

‘A collection of paper sheets bound together on one side,’ he replied, now slightly nervous.

‘You idiot!’ she yelled. ‘All books can be described that way!’

Baggut looked down at his feet feeling stupid, but he wasn't to blame for his limited knowledge. The mere notion of books was strange to him as the Ghul did not read, nor did they have any medium for storing information of any type. He could feel Chabriel's eyes burrowing into his downcast head, awaiting a response. Lifting his head to face his tall commander, he said tentatively, 'Major, we have been unable to find any book... of any description.'

She stared at him for a moment, her face giving no indication as to what was going on underneath. The soldier half-expected her to strike at him with the needleback spike she was holding and his body tensed in anticipation. However, no such blow was meted out. Chabriel just looked up at the citadel and said, 'I doubt anyone has been here for years.'

'I'm not too sure about that, Major,' the soldier said carefully. 'We found tracks. Inside the citadel.'

Chabriel's head snapped to attention. This was important. This could make the long journey to Grisandole worthwhile. 'What tracks Baggut? You found footprints?'

'Not exactly,' the soldier said tentatively.

'What do you mean by that? Be exact!' Chabriel's impatience with the soldier billowed out across the balcony. A number of soldiers by the entrance to the citadel edged through the doorway and disappeared into the darkness within. Like Captain Baggut, they were very aware of the needleback spike Chabriel wielded.

'It wasn't footprints. More like a tail.'

Chabriel thought about this for a few long seconds and then her face contorted in rage. 'It's one of those damned witches!'

Suddenly, from behind Chabriel, Droola exclaimed, 'Look. There's a light down there!' She was sitting on the low parapet that ran around the balcony. Her head leaned out and her eyes were fixed on an area of the isle below her. As Chabriel came up beside her, Droola pointed to a balcony at least 1,000 feet below.

Chabriel's eyes squinted. 'It's one of the Pryderi. She's in the graveyard!' she snarled. She pulled away from the parapet and let fly with a volley of orders. 'You soldiers hiding in the doorway, make your way down to the graveyard. Baggut, round up any recon parties still in the castle. Get them down to that balcony immediately. Droola wake up Kleesto and bring her out here. We're going down there right now! We have a witch to catch.'

When Lara reappeared on the stairs leading down to the graveyard, Puddy didn't quite know what to do with himself. He leapt up and ran around in circles until he tripped over his flat blue tail. He then stretched his wings and flapped them happily. He hovered in the air for a second before returning to the flagstones where Lara stood curiously.

'I see you're no longer sulking,' she observed as she waved her hand to dismiss the golden sphere that had lit her way through the citadel. Darkness fell across the balcony. Lara put a hand out to pat Puddy on the head. 'It's time to go home,' she said softly.

Puddy lowered himself so that she could climb onto his back and take her seat on the old chair that still stood between his wings, like an old tower on a small hill. Before she did so, Lara paused to look at the Morgai cemetery one last time. A tinge of sadness crept over her. The Morgai were once great and now all that was left of them seemed to be a lonely cemetery clinging to a precipice on a desolate isle in a long forgotten part of the Myr. What hope did the Pryderi have for survival if a people as strong and ageless as the Morgai could so easily slip from the face of the world?

The thick clouds parted to reveal the Myr's triplet moons. Arma, Aldra and Colla spread their silvery light over the tangled garden and for a brief moment it looked pretty. Suddenly an incredible humming sound filled the air and a massive shape fell to the far edge of the balcony, blocking out the moons.

It was a creature of some sort but of a size and shape that Lara had never seen before. Silhouetted against the moonlight, she could see dark wings spread out along the edge of the balcony, spanning at least 100 feet across. Each wing seemed to be covered in massive scales, like the steel armour she had seen on the Scorian soldiers who visited Coldbrook from time to time. The dark grey scales scraped across the stone parapet as the creature settled itself and the sound set Lara's teeth on edge. The beast dropped its head and let loose a savage cry. The high-pitched noise exploded across the cemetery with such force Lara was pushed away from Puddy and slammed into the citadel wall.

The creature screamed again, this time concentrating its sonic assault upon Puddy who, despite his size, was belted thirty feet into a crumbling column in the eastern corner of the cemetery. Callisandra's chair shattered into countless pieces as the lobbisle struck the granite pillar. Lara winced when she saw Puddy slide to the base of the column and flop forward on the flagstones where he lay as still as stone. For a second it looked as if the entire structure would collapse, but it stayed intact, sparing the lobbisle from an ignominious end.

The grey, winged creature stepped across the gaveyard, crushing the tombstones under its six massive claws. Its head and body were also covered in steely scales which gleamed in the moonlight bathing the garden.

Lara picked herself up off the flagstones to see the monster bearing down upon her. Its great eyes peered out from its thin, wedge-shaped head. It opened its mouth and a long purple tongue shot out and wrapped around her waist.

Arms pinned to her side, Lara was lifted high into the air, the leathery tongue squeezing her so tightly she thought she would pop open. The creature raised the Moraen above its head and there high above thorns and weeds surrounding the graves, Lara saw the last thing she had expected to see – on the creature's thin, ridged back sat the Ghul commander who had abducted her daughter.

'Chabriel,' Lara hissed venomously.

'You remember me,' Chabriel said coldly. Lara just stared back, too stunned to say anything more. Behind Chabriel sat another Ghul, one Lara did not recognize. This one, a female also as far as she could tell, leered at the witch, relishing the moment.

'I remember you Lara Brand,' Chabriel said slowly. 'I remember the night we took your child. I also remember telling the Pryderi that none were allowed to leave the Bregon Woods.'

Lara was terrified but the Ghul's mention of her daughter had unleashed months of suppressed anger. 'What are you?' she screamed at Chabriel, ignoring the helplessness of her position. 'What sort of monster hides behind children?'

Chabriel stared impassively at Lara and answered: 'A ruthless one.'

The other Ghul leaned forward and growled, 'You should be careful how you speak to us, witch?'

'Is that a threat?' Lara spat back.

'It is what it is,' said Chabriel.

'I've had enough of your threats. You've pushed me far enough.'

Chabriel pulled a long bone knife from her belt and waved it in front of her captive. 'We will push, pull and twist you how we like, impertinent one. Caliban would prefer it if we did not slay anymore Pryderi, but I'm sure he would not miss one more witch. Two if you count your daughter.'

The tip of the knife slid under the scales on Lara's neck. Chabriel's eyes glowered, waiting for any excuse to cut the witch's throat out.

'Do your worst,' Lara taunted. 'I don't care anymore.'

Chabriel pushed the knife in slightly and a trickle of blood ran down its blade. 'Do you care so little for the fate of your progeny?'

‘I care more than a heartless beast like you could ever know,’ said Lara proudly. ‘But I am not so foolish to believe that my actions will have any influence over what you do to my daughter. I trust you as I would trust a marrok.’ Lara could feel the blade sitting on the tender skin under her scales. It would take the smallest movement for the Ghul to slit her throat.

‘You are reckless, Lara Brand,’ Chabriel warned.

‘No,’ Lara said sternly. ‘I’m not. My daughter is still alive because your master has deemed it so. You are not in charge here.’ Despite the knife at her throat, Lara allowed herself a smile. ‘You are just a lackey.’

Chabriel’s impassive demeanour was cast aside. She was incensed. Her face contorted with rage. Lara could feel Chabriel’s grip on the knife shift as she prepared use the blade. She closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable.

A scream of pure pain filled the night but it was not Lara’s. In a blur of movement, Puddy had leapt up from the base of the column and clamped down hard on Kleesto’s tongue with one of his claws, shearing through the muscular tissue with ease. Lara felt the tongue’s grip slacken and then she was falling to the tangled grass beneath. She quickly extricated herself from the bloody tongue which thrashed about on the ground like a crazed animal.

Kleesto howled wildly, its sonic blows punching into the citadel wall and courtyard. It bucked and spun, trying to stop the agony that had overtaken its body. Both Chabriel and Droola were thrown clear across the courtyard, colliding with the same column Puddy had hit only minutes earlier. The uppermost blocks teetered for a minute and then came down heavily right on top of them.

Kleesto’s frenzied bucking had also sent Puddy flying through the air, but the lobbles managed to spread his wings and regain control of his flight before colliding with anything. Kleesto spread its wings as well and soared off up into the dark skies above, its tormented cries boring into the cold night air.

Puddy landed near the fallen column. The Ghul’s blood seeping through the pile of broken blocks caught his interest. With a childlike expression, he watched the strange green ooze trickle out through the rubble and run into the grooves between the flagstones.

‘Puddy!’ Lara screamed. ‘We must get out of here! Come on!’ She was by the graves at the far end of the balcony. She quickly realized that luck was on their side but did not want to test it by spending a second longer on Grisandole.

Puddy by contrast had no sense of luck and ignored her protestations. He sniffed around the rubble looking for some sign of the Ghul who had been crushed under the thick column. The blood continued to flow but he could not see its source. Puddy stepped up on the mound, oblivious to the rocks and dirt moving beneath him.

Chabriel exploded out of the rubble and thrusting upward buried her long needleback spine into the soft flesh of Puddy's stomach. The lobbse reared up and clutched at his belly with his many legs. He fell backwards and rolled across the flagstones, each revolution driving the spine in further.

'Puddy!' screamed Lara who was stunned that her good luck has lasted for such a short time. She looked from Puddy to the two Ghul pulling themselves out from under the stone blocks that had fallen on them. Their skin had been ripped and their bones broken but they were still alive. 'Impossible!' Lara whispered to herself. Chabriel wiped the dirt from her arms and legs as if she had merely tripped over. The Ghul commander turned and seeing Droola's flailing hand, pulled violently at her subordinate, trying to free her from the rubble that was stained with their blood.

To the left of the Ghul, Puddy lay on his stomach staring up into the sky. He was wracked with pain but strangely, as he tried pathetically to extricate the needleback spike from his underbelly, he felt the pain subside. He tried to make his way to Lara. His body lifted momentarily before his legs collapsed under him. He attempted to drag himself across the ground but his huge claws refused to respond. The lobbse had neither the experience nor the intelligence to understand that he was paralysed. He could not even move his eyes. They just gazed upwards, fixed upon Arma, the Myr's largest moon.

A grey shape passed before the moon. Kleesto hovered for a second, its rapidly flapping wings filling the air with a deafening hum. Although every instinct in his blue body told Puddy to move, nothing happened. The needleback spine had done its work and the lobbse was vulnerable, totally at the mercy of the beast hovering above him.

But like his Ghul masters, Kleesto had no mercy to give. It erratically darted from side to side, wondering why the creature below did not try to flee. It just lay there, staring into the sky. Kleesto roared and the wave of sound pounded down on the lobbse and still it did not move.

Similarly, Lara did not understand why Puddy stayed where he was. She knew it was irresponsible, knew she would probably be killed for the gesture, but she decided to go to his side. She did not know how, but she would defend him from the Ghul and their pet.

However, before she had a chance to move, Kleesto swept down towards Puddy. Lara had never seen anything move so fast. Kleesto picked up the lobbsle in his thick claws and crushed the poor, short-lived creature. Puddy's shell shattered into countless pieces and yellow goo splattered down on the shattered gravestones of the Morgai.

Lara slid back towards the balcony's edge. She peered over the low parapet. The drop was frightening. Far below she could make out white explosions of surf where the Sea of Hodur crashed against the obstinate landmass in its way. Even if she survived the fall, she would soon find herself dashed to pieces against the rocks below.

At the far side of the cemetery, the two Ghul were rummaging around in the rubble. Lara was relieved that they were momentarily distracted but this relief quickly turned to despair when seconds later Chabriel and Droola held aloft what they had been looking for – their weapons.

Chabriel turned. Clutching her long bladed knife, she pointed its sharp tip directly at Lara. She was obsessed with killing the witch. Droola held before her a jagged-edged scimitar and waved it at Lara in a similarly threatening gesture. The pair made their way slowly across the graveyard, their broken limbs making their approach all the more terrifying.

No matter which way Lara looked at it, she was in for a grisly end. If she stayed where she was, she would be eviscerated by the sinister pair approaching her. If she fled over the parapet, she would be killed on the rocks below. She could try to invoke a spell but the sight of Kleesto furiously devouring on Puddy's innards had sent her mind into a palsy. Four of the monstrous beast's claws gripped the lobbsle's exoskeleton whilst its snout buried itself in the soft meat contained within, ignoring the excruciating pain shooting out from its tongue. The ugly sounds of chewing and slurping reverberated across the cemetery. Lara was sickened by the display and wanted to vomit.

When Kleesto finished dining upon the lobbsle's flesh, it callously cast aside the exoskeleton. Lara had to duck to avoid the discarded shell which flew over the balcony and fell out of sight.

Its meal finished, Kleesto turned its attention upon Lara. Its eyes narrowed as it approached her. The Ghul limped forward too, their murderous intentions burning like fire in their eyes. Lara looked backwards and forwards, from the drop behind to the trio approaching her. A choice had to be made. She looked at the rock face below her once more. There were no balconies below, no outcrop to which she

could descend. She was at the lowest level of the citadel. Then she saw something that gave her a grain of hope. She sat back on the edge of the parapet and slid off the edge.

Chabriel was furious. It was not the outcome she was expecting. She turned to Kleesto, her face livid. 'Go on you stupid thing – the witch! Find the witch!'

She grabbed Droola by the shoulder and shoved her towards Kleesto. As Droola mounted the beast, Chabriel shouted, 'Dive down to the water below and retrieve the body. I want to take Lara Brand's corpse back to the Pryderi to show them what happens to those who defy the Ghul.' She held her bone knife aloft and swung it down upon Kleesto's snout, slapping the creature with the flat of the blade. Kleesto hissed, baring three sets of brilliantly sharp teeth and a still bleeding tongue, but Chabriel was not impressed. 'Don't you bare your teeth at me, you dim-witted animal. If you weren't so busy feeding your face, the witch wouldn't have escaped.'

Droola stuck her heels into Kleesto's sides and it flew out across the cemetery and dived over the parapet. Chabriel made her way over to the balcony's edge and gazed down upon the rocks below, looking for some sign of the suicidal witch.

However, Lara was neither suicidal nor was she dashed to pieces upon the rocks below. As she fell down the steep precipice, Lara's arms and tail reached out for the thick patch of creeping ivy she had seen from the balcony. Her tail brushed against a sinewy length of vine and whipped around it desperately. Her long fingers clamped around the plant's green tendrils. She had not fallen so far that her momentum was greater than her strength. She held her place on the vine.

The creeping ivy covered an irregular patch of roughly thirty feet. The ivy was dense and Lara quickly realized that she could bury herself within it. She knew Kleesto would not be long in pursuing her and that she would be an easy target should the beast see her clinging on to the foliage hundreds of feet above the battering waves below.

She dug herself deep into the tangled vines and twisted herself around so she was looking out from the wall. Moments later the vast figure of Kleesto swept past her and sailed down to the pounding surf below.

She was safe for the time being. She could feel the light of the moons shining through the leaves surrounding her like a veil. She could

smell the pungent aroma of the ocean wafting up the cliff. Most importantly she could follow the small shape of Kleesto hovering over the dark water below, obviously searching for some sign of her body.

About twenty feet above her Lara could see the broad sweeping lip of the balcony. The underside was deep in shadow but the edge of the parapet was lined with the argent light of the Myr's moons.

Lara was exhausted and closed her eyes. At first she experienced deep and peaceful darkness, but then her head became full with images of the night's events – Droola's leering gaze, Chabriel taunting her with the long bone knife, the cruel sight of Kleesto licking out the insides of Puddy's exoskeleton. The images coalesced into a bloody collage and Lara thrust her eyes open to be rid of them.

Something had changed when Lara looked out through the vines. At first she wasn't sure what it was but then she realized that some time had passed. Perhaps hours. She could no longer see the Myr's moons above. The vine lay in the darkness of the balcony.

Lara leaned forward and cast her eyes down towards the sea. Kleesto was still there but it was no longer flying. It was perched on a thin wedge of rock that sliced through the sea about fifty yards from the base of the cliff.

Suddenly Lara felt movement around her and her heart skipped a beat. She could not see anything in the ivy with her, but something had definitely disturbed the vines. After long seconds, Lara realized that the ivy itself was moving. She shouldn't have been surprised. She had seen the creeping vines move earlier that night but she hadn't been in the midst of them at the time.

Carrying Lara with it, the ivy moved further down the cliff until it was out of the balcony's moon-shadow. She was still high above the savage rocks below, but felt safer now she had some distance between her and the cemetery where she had been subjected to such terrible violence.

She looked up at the edge of the balcony and found she was unexpectedly looking at the malefic face of Major Chabriel.

There was no mistaking the expression on the Ghul's face. She could see Lara hiding in the ivy, the sharp light of the moon betraying the Moraen in the green leaves.

'The witch, Droola!' Chabriel screamed with all her might. 'In the vines! She's in the vines!'

Droola was too far away to hear Chabriel. The crashing waves drowned out all other sounds. But Kleesto was a different beast altogether. Its aural abilities were far greater than the Ghul or any creature that walked below or above the Myr. It could hear Chabriel screaming from the battlements above and understood what she meant.

Kleesto's wings exploded into action and it darted up into the sky. So sudden was its flight towards the cemetery above, Droola toppled backwards and almost fell off the beast. The Ghul sergeant scrambled back onto the saddle she had fixed to Kleesto and shouted, 'What are you doing? We have to find the witch! Go back down.'

Kleesto ignored her protestations and barrelled on through the air. It could see the Lara hiding in the vines and let loose its fell cry.

Lara was slammed up against the cliff face, the vines surrounding her doing little to soften the impact of Kleesto's scream. Seemingly aware of Kleesto's assault and not liking it, the entire web of creeping ivy scuttled down the precipice taking Lara with it.

On the edge of the balcony above, Chabriel was shouting. Droola could not hear her and gestured to Kleesto to take her up. The flying behemoth ignored her and flew down to follow the rapidly descending ivy. Kleesto was focused upon one thing – Lara Brand. It associated the witch with the severing of its tongue and had nothing but revenge on its mind.

'Take me up,' Droola shouted but Kleesto continued to ignore her. Again the beast released a brutal scream, pounding Lara into the rock face. The Moraen was struggling to remain conscious. It was doubtful she would survive another assault.

Droola pulled out her scimitar and jumped from the saddle. She caught Kleesto by the neck and edged towards its triangular head. She leaned forward brandishing the scimitar in a most threatening way. 'You take me up or I'll ram this through your eyeball,' she hissed.

One of Kleesto's huge eyeballs swivelled back to look at the sharp tip of the weapon. The eyeball then swung back to the battered figure of the witch caught in the ivy. Droola pushed the scimitar forward so that it was only an inch away from the moist film covering Kleesto's left eye.

Suddenly the beast shot upward and within seconds was perched on the cemetery balcony. Droola clambered off to be presented with Chabriel's orders. 'Take her alive Droola. I want her alive.'

Droola was confused. The Major was intent on killing the witch only an hour before.

As if picking up on this thought, Chabriel said, 'She has lost all rights to an easy death! I can do more to her alive. I can make a most unforgettable example of her. Teach these damned witches a lesson.'

Kleesto was gone. The beast had quietly dropped from the edge of the balcony and made its way back down the precipice.

About halfway between the balcony and the water below, the creeping ivy had tried to wedge itself into a fissure in the rocks.

Kleesto screamed in frustration, unable to see the witch wrapped up in the ivy's green arms. The shrill cry thumped against the cliff face but the ivy did not move, nor did it give up the witch it held within. Kleesto screamed again but still the ivy did not respond.

Hovering to remain level with the ivy, Kleesto's eyes fixed on the green mass of leaves that concealed its quarry. The beast would not be denied. Suddenly, it shot forward, like a bolt from a crossbow. It slammed into the stone wall, cracking the rock and missing Lara by inches. Kleesto tried to pull back but the ivy had wrapped its tendrils around the creature.

Weakened by the impact, Lara lost her hold on the vines and slid out from her verdant refuge and tumbled down the cliff. Her skull struck the unforgiving rock wall and she lost consciousness, falling headlong to the reef below.

A surge of the tide rose to catch her and swept her out of the reach of the jagged rocks at the base of the cliff. The icy sting of the water and the heaving motion of the waves pulled Lara back into a conscious state and she yelped in pain. The tide withdrew from the isle's walls and within seconds Lara found herself pulled thirty yards out to sea. No longer buoyed by the swell, she slipped under the surface of the water. Her home in the trees of Morae gave her little opportunity for swimming lessons; she was sinking fast.

Suddenly, a gargantuan shape pounded into the water nearby. It was Kleesto, tangled in the creeping ivy, sinking towards the bottom of the ocean. The beast hit the waves with incredible force. The volume of displaced water was so great that Lara felt herself being pushed upward to the surface. As she broke through the waves, the Moraen sucked in the thin, cold air as if it were her last breath. Her arms flailed about and instead of slapping the water, they connected with something hard. Instinctively, her fingers clasped around the object, and beyond all hope, it was buoyant. Lara had taken hold of a large piece of Puddy's exoskeleton. It was concave and big enough for her to pull herself into it.

Caught in a benign current, Lara watched the Grisandole citadel drift away. She found it difficult to accept that she was still alive. She started shaking from the shock and wept as she was pulled out to sea.

From the edge of the cemetery balcony, Chabriel stared out across the ocean. She scratched her bony head wondering how everything had gone so wrong so quickly. She turned back to Droola. 'You fool. You and that stupid beast have allowed the witch to escape.'

Droola hung her head low. 'I'm sorry Major Chabriel,' she muttered. The silence that followed was excruciating. 'What happens now?' Droola added nervously.

A screeching bellow from the water below indicated that Kleesto had extricated itself from the ivy and had found its way to the surface. Chabriel gazed down at the gigantic creature flapping furiously as it pulled itself clear of the water. 'Dumb brute,' she muttered as she lifted her head and looked disconsolately out to sea. Far on the horizon the lanterns of a distant ship could be seen and further beyond that, the black sky faded to blue, signalling the inevitable arrival of morning.

'Major?'

The Ghul commander did not bother to look at her subordinate. 'I will tell you what happens now Droola. Tonight, you will begin the long 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.'

'Yes ma'am,' said Droola dutifully. Chabriel's intention to lay all the blame for their failure at her feet came as no surprise. She could do nothing but resign herself to her fate. She had heard of the Nursery, where Caliban kept the Pryderi babies. As a punishment, it seemed mild by most people's standards, but the Ghul had a strong aversion to their own offspring, let alone the younglings of others. Caliban added to the humiliation of those sent to the Nursery by making them wear aprons fashioned on the Scorian nannies he had known as a child.

Chabriel walked away and then stopped, remembering a most important matter. 'You still have the bones?' she asked.

'Yes ma'am. I do,' Droola answered sycophantically, hoping her reply would please the major.

'Then the trip hasn't been a total waste.'

A squad of ten Ghul came marching through the wide arch at the far end of the graveyard. One of them held a particularly vicious-looking albino marrok on a short leash. It was the same marrok that had attacked Lara

Brand the night her daughter was taken, the very marrok that had killed Lara's mother years before.

The soldiers stood to attention as their sergeant stepped forward and saluted Chabriel. 'Commander, we have completed our sweep of the castle,' reported Spulla, a sombre, old soldier who was more comfortable with marroks than he was with other Ghul. 'In a spire on the far western side, we found some signs of recent habitation. The marroks have detected traces of someone's scent, but it could be weeks old.'

Chabriel nodded. 'Remiel Grayson?' she said to herself, toying with the idea that they had picked up the trail of the one Caliban sought with such inexorable fervour.

Thinking Chabriel was talking to him, Spulla said, 'There were perfumes and fragrances. We believe the Morgai to be female. Apparently Myrran women like to disguise their smells with more appealing aromas.' Then he added, with no hint of humour, 'Perhaps Caliban's sibling has a predilection for feminine behaviour.'

'Don't be an idiot Spulla,' Chabriel snapped. 'It's isn't Grayson. It could have been a seer. I imagine she had a premonition of our coming and fled.'

The soldier nodded and remained standing at attention awaiting further orders. Chabriel considered the situation and said nothing for some time. Spulla was far too disciplined a soldier to disturb her from her reveries, so he waited patiently for her to speak, one hand patting the nape of the neck of the albino marrok.

'Sergeant, daybreak is near,' said Chabriel glancing over at the eastern sky. 'The burning orb will rise before the hour is up. We will hole up here until nightfall.'

'What of the Morgai female?'

Chabriel stepped forward so that she was only an inch away from the sergeant's face. 'She will be our prize. We will hunt her down and kill her. We can't have a seer interfering with Caliban's plans.'

A harsh scraping sound on the flagstones behind her alerted Chabriel to Kleesto's return. The beast was lying on the courtyard and was vainly trying to pull strands of ivy that were stuck between its pinions.

'You will stay with me, stupid creature' Chabriel sneered at Kleesto. 'You will be my mount. Hopefully, I will be able to knock some sense into you.'

Aboard the Acoran clipper *The Intrepid*, Captain Simeon Kallady moved to the prow of the ship, his two wooden legs clip-clopping across the deck as he went. With a *chink* of metal upon wood, he rested his hands on the

ship's gunnels. The hands were not really hands at all but rather a set of three silver hooks that had been attached to each of his arms. The claws were wrought in Camulos by a Kobold who specialized in unique assignments. Simeon had lost all his limbs in a terrible naval accident, but contrary to the stories that surrounded him, they had not been ripped from his body by the legendary white leviatha that haunted the oceans to the north. The truth of the matter was he had been crushed by a poorly rigged yardarm when his ship had been in port. But it seemed that people did not want to accept such a mundane explanation for his prosthetics and so the story of Simeon's fight with a fearsome sea creature grew until it became lore, and he was the last person to refute it.

The sun had not yet risen but the sky was rapidly growing lighter. To the east, he could see the citadel of Grisandole pointing up at the sky like a finger, warning ships not to come too close.

Overhead, silvery gillygulls circled the masts of his ship, their eyes upon the wake of the ship where great fish dined on krilla churned up by the ship's passing. The gillygulls were highly intelligent hunters. They used the ship's wake to hide their downward approach and it was very rare for a gillygull to resurface without a large fish in its mouth. Once the birds had their fill they would continue to hunt, but the fish they retrieved would not be consumed – at least, not by the gillygulls. The birds would dump fish after fish upon the decks of the clipper as a token of thanks for the inadvertent assistance the boat had given them in acquiring their breakfast. This was a nice change to the damned quawks that had defecated all over his deck the day before.

The closer *The Intrepid* drew towards Simeon's homeland of Acoran, the more time he was finding he was spending on the deck of the ship. Soon they would be passing the rugged cliffs of Camulos and after that, the green shores of north-west Acoran.

Simeon gazed over the ship's sails and rigging with paternal pride. This was to be the last voyage of *The Intrepid*; she had been decommissioned to make way for newer, faster ships that could complete the run to Sessymir in half the time she would take. One of these new clippers awaited him in the drydocks near Griflet, but like so many seamen, Simeon Kallady was a romantic at heart and was saddened by the inevitable passing of his first commission.

Franklin Baffin, the ship's boatswain came up on deck carrying a hot, intoxicating brew made from the crushed javo beans of distant Ankara. 'Cap'n, I made you a cuppa,' he said handing over the steaming mug.

'Thanks Bosun,' Simeon replied as his claws wrapped around the cup. The boatswain smiled. They had known each other for twenty

years, and never once had he heard Simeon Kallady address him by his first name. He wasn't even sure he knew it. He was a fine captain but an absolute stickler for protocol. It was either 'Petty Officer' or 'Bosun', never Franklin.

'Cap'n, I have the night-watch's report for you.'

'Anything of note?'

'No sir. A quiet night. As you can see we're just passing Grisandole. We made good speed throughout the night, averaging thirty knots an hour. We should be west of the Briar Patch by late afternoon.'

'Home in time for tea, eh Bosun?'

Baffin smiled broadly. 'Not quite, sir.'

Home in time for tea was Simeon's catch-cry, a reminder that no matter how daunting a voyage may be, no matter how dire a predicament, their homeland of Acoran would always be waiting for them.

Simeon gazed at the distant Morgai citadel.

'Grisandole. You know, Bosun, there was a time when a beacon would be lit in the tower, a warning to ships, that –'

He stopped his reverie and leaned over the gunnel straining his eyes in the pre-dawn light.

'What is it Cap'n?'

'I thought I saw something out there.'

'Cap'n, there's naught out there but white caps, cold water and jagged reefs.'

'But...' Whatever it was, it was gone. He leaned back and called up to the nest. 'You see anything Hawkins?'

A head appeared over the circular rail running around the main top. 'No Captain,' called back Hawkins. 'As long as we keep this line, we'll stay clear of the rocks.'

Simeon nodded, but his face was still unsettled. His man in the nest was staring straight ahead not to port. He stared back out toward Grisandole, scanning the grey waters for the blue shape he had caught out of the corner of his eyes, but there was nothing but white-tipped waves and black reefs. He took a large draft of the mug of javo and shrugged his shoulders.

'Cap'n, breakfast will be ready in the officers' quarters,' Baffin said cheerfully. 'Fried carpu and crane eggs on toast.'

Simeon's portly stomach growled in response. He needed no more provocation than that. He slowly turned to follow Baffin to the officers' quarters, but in the last moment before leaving something hooked his attention – it was not the blue shape he had seen before, but a small faint light rising and falling with the swell of the ocean.

Lara had seen the ship draw nearer, and in a desperate act, she had managed to successfully complete the illumination incantation in the vain hope that someone aboard would see it.

Simeon called to the night-crew to drop the sails and in the last remaining minutes of their shift, they pulled the Moraen aboard.

Lara lay on the deck of the clipper, breathless and emotionally drained. She felt extremely unnerved by the stares of the sailors who had never seen a woman with a tail instead of legs. Apprehensive about their next move, she blurted out, 'I am not a fish, so do not kill me.'

As the sun breathed its light across the southern reaches of the Sea of Hodur, Simeon Kallady threw a blanket around Lara Brand and led her to the warmth and security of his quarters below.

Chapter Eight Sulis, Helyas

If there was one thing Pylos hated, it was bureaucrats. Actually there were many things he hated, but bureaucrats were undoubtedly at the top of the list. Frustration began to take a hold of him as he stood before the senators who were surrounded by the excesses of public service. Among these faceless officials ran private servants who darted back and forth carrying carafes of wine, plates of exotic fruit and messages that were always delivered in whispers. Concubines lazed on the steps of the senate chamber, content with their lot in life. The Senate had become a place of indulgence, of distraction and frivolity, and General Pylos Castalia was at the end of his tether. Rays of light streamed in through the open windows set high in the dome of the Senate House, cascading over the robed figures reclining on cushions and rugs.

‘Senator Leippa, I do not believe my request is unreasonable,’ the azure-eyed Pylos stated through gritted teeth. He stood in the centre of the round room, a lonely figure under the cynical gaze of twenty-five Helyan senators, all men, all at least twice his age, and all unimpressed by the submission being put before them.

‘Oh but it is General Castalia,’ countered Augustine Leippa, an overweight, pompous man bedecked in red satin robes and gold bracelets. He held a small wicker fan in one hand with which he unconsciously swiped the air. ‘We live in peaceful times. In fact...’ he added, looking around the room smugly, ‘there are those who would argue that our army and naval forces no longer serve any justified purpose. To come here to request more money to fund the armed services... why, it borders on the ridiculous!’ It was a deliberately provocative comment and Leippa leaned back against plump, purple cushions to await Pylos’ response.

The only indication that Leippa’s comments had hit their mark was a slight shift in Pylos’ stance. He was an impressive figure, not tall but possessing a body that had been chiselled from a life of combat. He was clad in the plain, white sleeveless tunic of the Helyan army. Around his waist a leather belt hung, sans the short sword and scabbard he was asked to remove upon entry to the Senate House. Pylos’ skin was bronzed and his closely cropped dark hair adorned with a simple blood-ivy garland. Pylos hated wearing the garland but it was a part of the uniform required for formal occasions such as this one. His face, whilst not beautiful like some of the male concubines in the chamber, was youthful; he could be mistaken for a man twenty-years his junior. But his countenance was characterized by sobriety, a sternness made all the more severe by the

unmistakable scar that ran vertically from his forehead to the base of his left-cheek.

Pylos cleared his throat quietly and drew upon the restraint he had developed over thirteen annual appearances before the Senate. His voice was controlled and measured. '*Any justified purpose?*' he said, quietly echoing the senator's inflammatory comment without the emotion Leippa was hoping for. Pylos paused, and held the senator firmly in his gaze. 'Senator, if you wouldn't mind, please justify this – atop the outer wall of Sulis, 200 foot statues of members of this very senate are being erected whilst the gates below are in such a state of disrepair, they cannot even shut!'

A few laughs broke out across the chamber, but these were confined to concubines and servants who had temporarily forgotten their places. The senators were unimpressed with the General's observation.

'The gates!' Leippa scoffed. 'Again, the gates. General, forget about the gates. I have lived longer than you and cannot remember a time when they were required to be shut.' He looked among his peers and momentarily spoke about Pylos as if he were not standing ten feet away. 'Always on about the gates this one.'

Senator Leippa's colleagues nodded enthusiastically back at him. He clearly held sway over quite a few of them, and Pylos suspected that a coin or two guaranteed their loyalty to the fat man. Grunting dramatically as he turned his corpulent body back to face Pylos, the senator gibed: 'General, the city of Sulis is not so weak that we need to hide behind a closed door.'

Another senator, an older, gentler man than Leippa calmly put across his view. 'General Castalia, there are those among us who would argue that already too much money has been spent on equipping, training, housing and payrolling our armed forces and that those funds would be better directed towards more relevant pursuits.'

'With all due respect Senator Agenor,' Pylos said quietly, 'you will soon see the relevance when you are at the pointy end of an enemy's sword.'

A thin, rakish man to the left of the semi-circle listening to Pylos' petition started applauding him. His name was Thassus Pi and Pylos thought him to be most disingenuous man alive. 'General, you should be a politician,' he said sarcastically. 'You disguise your threats with rhetorical phrases such as *with all due respect*. What would you have us believe – that we are in dire peril?' He smirked at Leippa who mirrored the self-satisfied expression. 'Who are these enemies? There are no marroks at the door. No-one is baying for Helyan blood.'

A snort of laughter from Leippa was all that was needed to set the gallery into a round of disrespectful mirth. Thassus ran his thin hands through his greasy hair, resting them together when they arrived at the nape of his neck in a gesture of supreme arrogance.

Pylos was not going to dignify Thassus' contemptuous comments with a direct response. He looked up into the rows of senators spread before him, scanning the room for less antagonistic individuals. 'Senators, I only ask that you appreciate the ramifications of denying the armed forces the support you have given them over the centuries. The freedom you enjoy will be lost if we allow ourselves to be complacent.'

At first, no-one spoke. It was as if the novelty of the occasion had worn off and the assembled representatives just wanted to move onto other matters. All that could be heard in the chamber was the *clinking* of goblets on the stone rostra upon which the Senate was arrayed. Someone towards the back of the room coughed. A concubine yawned loudly. Whispers could be heard as a senator tried to get the attention of a servant carrying a plate of honeygrapes.

Leippa enjoyed the pregnant pause, but was first to break it. 'It seems our discussion has run its course General. Thank-you for taking time out of your busy schedule but there is no point continuing this palaver today. Your point-of-view has been heard –'

'Nothing has been heard!' Pylos shouted, his restraint exhausted. This show of anger was music to Leippa's soul; it looked as if his ruddy face would burst with glee. Pylos stepped forward and his chief antagonist edged back into the deep, purple cushions supporting him. Pylos raised a finger and pointed it threateningly at Leippa. 'The only beneficiaries of this pointless debate will be our enemies who will see Helyas' indolent body lazing in the sun inviting them to strike!'

Senator Leippa dropped any veneer of protocol and sneered at Pylos. 'Really General! From whom would you protect us? You are a soldier without a war. Diplomacy has made you obsolete.'

'And what if diplomacy fails? What if a new regime rises in our neighbours? What if the good Emperor of Ankara is succeeded by his mad son? What if another usurper claims the throne of Sessymir? And there are countries beyond our maps that could sail north and attack us.' Pylos knew as soon as he said these things that they would be subjected to ridicule and scorn.

The beams of light had imperceptibly tiptoed across the cool floor of the chamber and lit up a small shatterbug at the foot of one of the Senate guards. He had no head for politics but he found himself agreeing with Pylos, and caught himself nodding as the General spoke. Realising the temerity of his action and hoping it wasn't noticed by anyone in the

Senate House, he cast his eyes down and stared at his feet. He noticed the little bug and a tender look glimmered in his eyes as he watched it scurry away. It ran an irregular path towards the first row of reclining senators where it was promptly squashed under the sandaled foot of Senator Leippa.

The senator clapped perfunctorily and held the sole of his foot out for an attendant to clean. A young man clad only in a loin cloth kneeled before the fat man who smiled a lascivious smile at the youth. This smile quickly disappeared as Leippa lifted his head to address Pylos in the bitter manner he reserved for his exchanges with the General. 'And why would the Sessymrians invade us, General Castalia? Or the Kheperans? Or the Ankarans at the behest of the Emperor's mad son? By all the ancient gods Pylos, you are paranoid!' He paused to whisper something to the youth attending his foot who smiled back and promptly ran off into the shadows behind the rostra.

Pylos' stomach churned at the sight of the compliant attendant and was repulsed at the thought of where his liaison with the senator would lead. Scanning the room with its fawning attendants and ornamental concubines, his mind reeled. He thought it necessary to remind the senators of the proud and noble traditions that took place in the sunburnt training fields outside Sulis' walls. 'Senators. Helyan males spend all their adolescence preparing for war. It defines us. It makes us what we are. To dismantle our armies –'

'Enough General. It is you who is refusing to listen.' The venomous Thassus Pi stood and stretched out his hands, dramatically appealing to the gathering of senators who blinked back dully like a flock of shelp watching something they didn't fully understand. 'Perhaps,' he said, pacing towards Pylos, 'they should spend less time getting killed in your wargames and more time on matters that advance our society and augment our culture.' Thassus made his way behind Pylos, as if he were a prosecutor delivering the closing address to a jury already convinced of a defendant's guilt.

Pylos was incredulous. Despite the senator's hubristic parade, he just stared ahead and said, 'What you say is offensive in the extreme sir. *Augment our culture?* Why, our prowess on the battlefield is at the very heart of our culture.'

'Oh is that what you believe, is it General?' the lean senator spat as if the words were poison on his tongue. 'You have spent so much time abroad gallivanting around with your friends in the Cessair Guard, you have failed to notice that your country has changed. Helyas has progressed General. Perhaps it is time you caught up with it.'

Leippa leaned forward, enthralled by his colleague's cross-examination of Pylos Castalia. He could see Pylos' temples twitching. Leippa imagined that the climax of the action was only seconds away. He envisioned Pylos spinning about, whipping out the sword from a flanking guard with the speed and skill for which he was famed. He imagined the General, in a state of fury and frustration, burying the blade up to the hilt in Thassus Pi's bony chest. In his mind's eye, he revelled in the sight of gouty Thassus' blood splaying out across the Senate House and spattering the audience assembled. However, when the fantastic vision faded, he saw Thassus was very much alive, stalking around Pylos' statuesque figure.

Pylos' response did not disguise the hatred he bore for Thassus, but it fell well short of the tragic drama of Leippa's imagination: 'How dare you, Senator! The Cessair Guard has done more for Myrran unity than any other body on the face of the Myr. And if I remember correctly, it was this senate that originally nominated me for such a position.'

Thassus grinned to his audience. 'We thought it would do you good to get out and see the world, Pylos. After all, there is naught for you to do here.'

Pylos bit his bottom lip before responding. Thassus was taunting him, putting him on the defensive. It was not a position to which Pylos was accustomed. 'Do not cast a shadow over what I have achieved here or abroad. I need not remind the Senate that it was I who led our battalion against the Sedomo when they invaded the Tamu Plains. It was I who stood at the helm of our flagship when the Helyan navy cleared our shipping routes of the Tethran pirates that had slaughtered the crews of twenty merchant ships. And it was I who fought shoulder to shoulder alongside the Arnakki when the Sessymirians tried to establish a foothold upon Western Arnaksak.'

Thassus Pi walked away from Pylos, as if his response were of little consequence. 'General,' he hissed softly, '*with all due respect*, these are skirmishes – not wars.' Thassus clasped his hands behind his back, indulging in the sense of superiority he felt over Pylos. 'General Castalia, when was the last time you defended our country on Helyan soil?'

Pylos stood silently.

'Ah General – your silence speaks volumes. You have never defended Helyas because Helyas has never been attacked. Helyas will never be attacked.' The certainty of his statements echoed around the chamber.

'But... but it is our reputation that protects us.' Pylos was out of his depth. His voice had lost its conviction, not because he did not believe what he was saying; he faltered because he knew he had no chance of

convincing anyone present in that hostile gathering. 'Surely if we relax our –'

Thassus cut him off with a sharp, barking growl. 'No Pylos! It is not our reputation that protects us. The world has moved on. It is time you accepted that. The barbarous times you yearn for have long since past.'

Old Agenor leant forward and raised a finger to his mouth whilst looking at Pi, who fell silent immediately. Of all the senators, Pylos disliked Agenor the least, but he was still a member of a group of men who had long forgotten who it was they had been appointed to serve. 'Pylos, I have watched you grow up with great interest. You were exceptional as a child and you have been equally impressive as a man. You have performed your duties admirably. As Helyan Consul, you have protected Ambassador Rhodes on five journeys to Cessair, and reportedly saved his life on two of those occasions. As General of our armies, you have brought out the best in the Myr's finest troops. As a member of the Cessair Guard, you have ushered in an era of peace unrivalled in the Myr's history. What's more, you have the people's respect more than any member of this Senate.'

Pylos waited for the sting in the tale. He had never trusted compliments, even from one as decent as Agenor.

'But –'

'I knew it,' Pylos said to himself. 'There is always a *but*.'

The old man had paused, allowing Pylos time to ready himself for the qualification: '– but you are not adept in the realm of politics. We tax our people highly. Too highly some of us would argue.' A few nods were outnumbered by looks of annoyance from the senators. 'We cannot continue to pour money into a venture that offers little return, especially in peaceful times such as these.'

Pylos winced at the words. 'Senator Agenor, since when has the training and maintenance of our armed forces been considered a venture? And I would argue sir, that there are some lessons that cannot be learnt anywhere else but a battlefield. It is the Helyan way. Our very culture is at stake here.'

Agenor's eyes were misty. He genuinely liked Pylos and admired what he stood for. But he also believed that it was time to let go of the past. Agenor wanted to see in a new era before his life's journey concluded. 'Cultures change Pylos. That's what keeps them alive,' he said softly. 'We are suggesting a gradual dismantling of our military engine. We are not advocating any wider changes than that.'

Pylos' head dropped.

‘Your request for more funds has been heard, General,’ smiled Senator Leippa. ‘We will handover your request to a committee and...’

The word *committee* was the final nail in the coffin and it took every ounce of control Pylos had left to not walk over to the fat, annoying senator and throttle him.

It fell to Agenor to close the proceedings. ‘Pylos it is in the Senate that real change is effected. The hand wielding the sword is important, but it is the hand that signs the paper that keeps two counties in peace.’

‘Metaphor and rhetoric!’ Pylos thought to himself with disgust. But he was silent. He had stated his case as best he could and would do no more.

The triplet moons shone down on Sulis. Pylos walked out onto his balcony to take in the evening air. Below him the city streets spread out in intricate patterns, bathed in the silvery light raining down from the night sky. All over the city, the amber light of lanterns flickered outside the houses on the main streets. The comforting drone of sandcadas reverberated across Sulis as one would expect on such a warm night. Above this gentle hum, Pylos could hear snippets of conversation float up from the café on the street below. A warm spring night had lured many Sulians out of their domiciles to enjoy a carafe of wine and familiar company.

In the small park across the way, Pylos could see his neighbours playing Siege with pieces as large as a small child. A young boy was struggling to lift a piece for his father who bent down and helped him move it across the multi-tiered board. A shriek of laughter split the air and the boy danced around the piece he had just moved. He had helped his father execute the winning gambit. The two adults playing the game shook hands as the boy scrambled to the uppermost tier of the board holding his fists aloft in triumph.

He leaned one elbow against the marble balustrade of his apartment’s balcony whilst his other arm reached for a goblet of wine milked from the black grapes adorning the slopes of Mt Taran. Whilst the dark juice was not accompanied with the same reputation of Nessian wine, Pylos was no oenophile and would be the first to admit he could not taste the difference.

A warm breeze blew in from the north. Pylos inhaled. He usually enjoyed the scent of desert sand carried by such winds, but there was something else. Something stale. He tried to identify the smell, and failed; then the breeze fell away and the scent dissolved under his nose.

He put down his goblet and looked northward. Close by, a straight trail of orange lights indicated the main avenue leading up to the city gates. Lined by the palatial residences of Sulis' wealthy, the wide avenue was rather empty when compared to the lanes and alleys surrounding Pylos' abode. Clearly Sulis' elite had more sophisticated pleasures to enjoy than the simple company of neighbours on a balmy desert night.

From his balcony, Pylos could see twenty-one of the twenty-five statues the Senate was in the process of erecting on the walls above Sulis' main gates. They were colossal. Each giant senator adopted a heroic pose, some with hands clasped confidently on hips, others ironically holding weapons aloft in a show of power and might.

Pylos emptied the contents of his goblet down his throat and absent-mindedly reached for the carafe. His hand stretched out but the carafe was gone. Pylos caught a whisper of movement in the drapes behind him and instinctively threw himself at whatever was behind them. He slammed into the body of a solidly built man who groaned in pain. The curtains ripped from the railing and Helyan wine spilled out over the floor. Pylos found the man's neck under the material and gripped it within an inch of breaking it.

Suddenly bolts of intense pain exploded across Pylos' groin; the figure beneath the drapes had swiftly brought his knee up between the General's legs. An age-old Helyan obscenity erupted from Pylos' mouth as he rolled off his surprise visitor, taut hands wedged between his thighs.

The man beneath the curtains pulled the thin material from his head. Shock, guilt and annoyance were mixed haphazardly on the muddy palette of Pylos' face. There sprawled on the stone floor amongst the torn drapes and spilt wine was the Helyan Ambassador, Pedaeus Rhodes. Even in the relative darkness, there was no mistaking him – lean, olive-skinned and a handsome head crowned with closely-cropped, black hair. Winded and sore, he was panting heavily. 'General, you're supposed to protect me, not kill me,' Pedaeus joked, his hands rubbing his throat which was bright red where Pylos had grabbed him.

Pylos stood immediately, and then extended a hand to his old friend. 'I'm sorry sir. You took me by surprise.'

'A rare feat indeed! How is it that a mere diplomat can catch Helyas' greatest warrior unawares?'

Pylos did not bother to hide his chagrin. He picked up the brass carafe and laid it on the balustrade. 'I was a world away, and you – Ambassador – are no mere diplomat.'

Pylos was referring to Pedaeus' skill as a soldier. As youths, they had taken part in the Festival of the Forging, a brutal Helyan rite of passage where the weak were quickly separated from the strong in a

bloody, physical contest. Pedaeus and Pylos managed to extract victory from almost inevitable defeat and their triumph was still celebrated as one of the greatest moments since the event began. On the battlefield, Pylos had few rivals, but the blade of Pedaeus' mind was the sharpest in Helyas, and his wits saved their skins that day. This did not go unnoticed. In the ensuing years, Pedaeus was fast-tracked through the army ranks. By the age of eighteen he was a member of Helyas' elite Black Shields, a team of highly-skilled soldiers who conducted covert operations in countries as far away as Sessymir and Acoran. At the age of twenty-one, Rhodes was added to Helyas' diplomatic arsenal. As a Helyan emissary, he served abroad for fifteen years: five years in Scoriath and ten years in Tuirren. When his predecessor, Ambassador Ophion died, it was a forgone conclusion that the position would be offered to Pedaeus Rhodes. He took the post on one condition – that his boyhood friend Pylos Castalia would serve as his consul.

Consuls were usually high-ranking members of the military, and all were experienced in combat. There was a simple reason for this. The Consuls were entrusted with the wellbeing of their country's ambassador. Once a year, each country's ambassador would travel to Cessair, the great tower-city where the Assembly of Nations was held. They would be accompanied by their consul, who usually performed many roles: protector, advisor, confidante and friend.

It was unheard of that anyone would refuse such an honour, but Pylos was nervous about dividing his time between the army and the diplomatic corps. Whenever he was accompanying the Ambassador abroad, he worried terribly about his troops. This concern doubled when the Senate recommended him to join the Myr's international peace-keeping force, the Cessair Guard as well as continuing in the role of Consul. Despite his trepidation, Pylos managed these duties and represented himself with characteristic commitment and attention to detail.

Whilst he was away, control of the Helyan armies was left to Semiramus, a good man and a fine soldier but one hamstrung by a dreadful stutter. Pylos appointed him because he knew he was incorruptible, but there had been problems. Pylos had heard of entire platoons that had rolled on the sand in fits of laughter as Semiramus tried to give out commands. But that swiftly ended when they witnessed his prowess with a sword. It was for men like Semiramus that Pylos had plied his case with the Senate. He was not looking forward to telling such men of his failure.

Pylos returned to his contemplative stance on the balcony.

'I heard about your chat with the Senate today,' commented Pedaeus as he joined him.

'Waste of time,' Pylos grunted.

'Perhaps not. I hear that you stated your case well.'

'Who told you that?' Pylos asked, his curiosity only mildly piqued.

'Old Agenor.'

'He's just like the rest,' Pylos growled.

'I understand your anger, but I do not think the Senate will dismantle the armed forces. It's all part of the political games they play. By saying they'll give you nothing, when they finally do give you something, it will look like an act of generosity when in actual fact they've given you less than you originally requested,' Pedaeus explained, his smooth voice tinged with a slightly sardonic flavour.

'Gah! I have no head for such tricks,' Pylos stated bluntly. 'They make me sick.' He pointed dismissively at the statues lining the outer wall. The ones that had already been erected were lit from underneath by huge braziers filled with slow-burning Cold. The statues were beautifully sculpted, capturing the likeness of each senator in the most flattering way. It was as if each statue had been chiselled twenty years earlier, and whilst the senators were all recognizable, the wrinkles, the paunches, the bags under the eyes had somehow failed to find their way into the finished work.

'The Senate believes that the populace needs to have people to look up to.'

'Oh come on, Pedaeus. The history of Helyas is replete with heroes but have the senators seen fit to honour them? Not even the ancient gods were considered. It borders on sacrilege.' Pylos looked towards the city's main gate, over which stood – in pride of place – a fantastically inspiring sculpture of Senator Leippa. 'Look at that fat fool, holding a sword outstretched as if he were fending off the hordes of Antaeus. It is hypocrisy in the...' Pylos' voice trailed off to a murmur.

'Extreme?' Pedaeus offered, thinking, Pylos had forgotten the word.

'What was that?' Pylos said to himself slowly.

'What was what?'

'Out there.'

Pedaeus followed his gaze. Pylos was still looking towards Leippa's vast statue. 'Out there?' Pedaeus said, unsure of where he was meant to be looking. 'On the wall?'

'No. Beyond the wall. Out on the Sand Meadow,' he said pensively as he stared out through the broken gates of Sulis.

'Way out there?' Pedaeus said scornfully. He squinted, scanning the purple darkness outside the city. In the daylight the Sand Meadow was a

broad expanse of brightly hued sand, but at night it glowed an iridescent purple and mauve as the heat rising up from the desert dissipated into the empty night.

Pylos continued to stare. 'Something is there.'

'Pylos how can you see that far?'

But he was gone. He had picked up his prized shatterstone sword and leapt over the balcony to land on his neighbour's roof. From there he jumped from house to house making his way up the street where he and other senior military staff lived. At the end of the row of dwellings he leapt off into the night air. He caught a beam jutting out from the eaves of the local tavern, and high above the oblivious patrons twenty feet below he used his momentum to carry himself clear across the narrow street and over a tall sandrock wall on the far side.

Pylos landed outside a stable where twenty or so piebald snorses stood grunting to each other in low tones. He did not stop moving. As soon as his feet hit the ground, he dashed across the straw-strewn yard to where a large, calico-coloured snorse stood tethered to the wall. In one fluid motion Pylos removed his sword from its sheath and swung it as he leapt up and landed on the beast's back. The blade, shining darkly in the moons' light, sheared through the rope that kept the headstrong snorse in the stable. The same sword was then tilted and swung behind the creature where the flat blade slapped across the snorse's rear, instantly sending it into action. Its bulbous eyes shot up on their long stalks and the beast gave a low grunt as it bolted out of the stable and tore through the city streets.

Pylos leaned forward and patted his snorse. 'That's the girl, Lampetia, we're in a hurry.'

The snorse whinnied in response and effortlessly skirted around a fruit stall around which a small crowd had gathered to dine on gorseberries. As Pylos shot by, a number of them exclaimed, 'Wasn't that the General?' but he was out of earshot by the time anyone gave a reply.

Lampetia effortlessly jumped a small stone fence and cut down a steep alleyway leading out onto the broad avenue that ran from the city gates to the town square. She was a magnificent mare and considered the fastest biped in the land. Her small forearms swung uselessly as her powerful legs thrust her forward. A thick, bushy tail almost as long as her neck extended from her rear and she used this to keep her stability. Her broad, padded feet thumped rhythmically over the flagstones as she ran and hopped her way down to the avenue.

When they exited from the alleyway, Pylos could see a number of soldiers routinely marching down the wide street. Further up the avenue, a small stone guardhouse was situated beside the gate. A few citizens strolled down the street, their faces lit by the lamps that lined the way. Occasionally a shatterbug zipped past but there was nothing in the immediate area that shouldn't have been there. All was as it should be. Nothing was amiss.

As Pylos rode up to the courtyard at the city's entrance, the soldiers on duty saw him and quickly stood to attention. The General's sudden appearance may have been a surprise but the men were armed and manned their posts with a sense of discipline the Senate could never understand. The squad raised their hands and saluted their general. Pylos saluted back and jumped off his mount. Without being asked, one of the soldiers, a young private named Melpone, grabbed Lampetia's reigns whilst Pylos strode up to Semiramus, a tall, slender man who wore a permanently nervous expression on his face.

'Where is the Captain of the Watch, Lieutenant?'

'He is p... p...'

Pylos nodded encouragingly at Semiramus. He had known the man since childhood and loved him dearly despite his constant stammering which could be most frustrating in the heat of battle. Semiramus was a fearless soldier and excellent tactician, but these qualities were sometimes overshadowed by this infamous stutter. Fortunately, he had introduced a system of hand gestures to give orders on the battlefield, and these were soon adopted by the entire army so effective were they in influencing the tide of a battle.

'Patrolling, Semiramus?' Pylos offered.

The lieutenant smiled broadly. 'Yes sir. Qu... Qu... Quintinius is on the western wall.'

'I want you to send someone to fetch him. Also send a man to the barracks. Wake the entire company – we're in for a fight.'

Despite his complete lack of comprehension, Semiramus signalled to a nearby soldier to fetch Quintinius and another to run to the barracks to rouse the company. A trio of soldiers by the guard house were given the signal to close the gates as best they could. These thick oak doors had long since fallen from their hinges and it took all three men over a minute to shut just one of them.

In that time, Pylos had clambered up the steep stairs to the walkway atop the city's broad walls where sentries patrolled the ramparts on either side of the gates. Further along the walkway huge towers of scaffolding

stood alongside the newest additions to the pantheon of massive sculptures that adorned the city's outer wall. The scaffolding stood as high as the statues, a full 200 feet above the ground. Pylos commanded two of the sentries to climb the scaffolding. 'Call out if you see anything moving across the Meadow.'

'Yes sir!' they said in unison, each moving off to a tower without delay.

Pylos turned and placed one foot atop the short parapet before him. He leaned forward, his eyes burning as they searched for some sign of movement. He had seen shadows moving quickly across the violet meadows but now he saw nothing. Had his eyes played tricks on him?

No. Pylos was not one to second guess himself. This is what made him such a formidable force in the field. He had seen something out on the sands and the fact he couldn't see it now made it all the more suspicious. Below him, stretching out from the base of the walls, the sands pulsed their gentle, purple light. Something was there – he knew it. An eerie silence had settled all around.

He was gravely concerned but he would not let his men know it. He pushed down the panic that had risen from the pit of his stomach and breathed deeply. Whatever lay out there on the Meadow believed it had the element of surprise but it had lost the advantage – Pylos was aware of its presence.

He tried to bring order to his thoughts. Before he could command others, he had to command his mind.

'Excuse me, sir?' a nervous voice squeaked behind him.

Pylos turned to see the broad figure of the Captain of the Watch standing beside him on the wall, his hand raised in formal salute. Pylos smiled to himself. Although he had known Quintinius for years, he could never get used to the fact that such a hulking body held such a tiny voice.

'Quintinius – that was quick!' observed Pylos, dismissing the salute.

'You wanted to see me?'

Pylos put a hand on the captain's shoulder and gestured to the desert beyond. 'Tell me Captain, can you see anything?'

Quintinius surveyed the area beyond the wall but could not see anything amiss. 'No sir. Everything is as it should be,' he said as confidently as he could.

'Really?' said Pylos skeptically.

The captain was a little unnerved by his general's doubt. 'Ah, yes sir. It's been a quiet night.'

Pylos nodded. 'Has it, Captain?'

Quintinius was even more unnerved by this question. He was not a man of great intellect and found it a lot easier to hit things than to answer

questions. He wasn't sure how to respond to Pylos' question so he just stared off into the distance as if he had not heard it. After some excruciatingly long seconds, he realized Pylos was calmly looking at him, still awaiting a response. Quintinius' nerves frayed further, knowing he had to say something. 'I'm sorry sir,' he confessed. 'I'm not sure I follow.'

'I want you to close your eyes, Quintinius,' Pylos instructed.

'Yes sir!' the captain replied and shut his eyes so tightly, Pylos feared he would hurt himself.

'Relax,' Pylos said, amused by Quintinius' desire to please him. 'I want you to tell me what you hear.'

Quintinius' shoulders slumped as he tried to relax. There was not much to report. He could hear his own breathing, which was still laboured after his sprint through the streets to report to Pylos. He could hear the sound of the sentries climbing up through the scaffolding towers to his left and right. He could hear the soft flapping of his tunic as the warm breeze blowing across the sands swept over the wall. But these were not things that required comment. Everything was normal. Keeping his eyes firmly shut, Quintinius said, 'General Castalia, I don't hear anything unusual.'

'Open your eyes Quintinius.'

'Yes sir!' he squeaked and promptly opened his eyes as wide as he could.

Pylos was staring back at him sedately. 'Tell me Quintinius, do you hear any sandcadas?' he asked.

Quintinius quickly shut his eyes and concentrated. There was nothing. 'No sir!' he said in reply, his eyes clenched together like a fist.

'That's a bit odd isn't it Captain?' Pylos said conversationally. 'On a warm night like this?' Pylos gazed beatifically at his subordinate and added, 'You can open your eyes now Quintinius.'

The hulking captain frowned. 'Yes sir. That is odd. I remember hearing them earlier.'

Pylos smiled and Quintinius beamed back, relieved he had satisfied the General. But Pylos had one more question for the Captain of the Watch. Fortunately, it was an easy one: 'What makes the sandcadas go quiet Quintinius?'

'That's easy sir!' the Captain exclaimed. 'Two things make them go quiet. Cool weather and, well, people make 'em go quiet.'

'And it's not exactly cool tonight,' Pylos said, his mood suddenly solemn. 'There's something out there Quintinius,' he said staring across the Meadow. 'Something that shouldn't be there.'

Quintinius leaned forward to peer down into the Meadow. It was the same sandy field he had marched across countless times. In the moons' soft light everything seemed flat but suddenly, out of the corner of his eye he saw movement. He couldn't say he saw something move because there was nothing to be seen *on* the sand. And then he realized what was going on. 'General!' he exclaimed. 'Under the sand! There are things moving under the sand!'

'Yes,' said Pylos. 'We're about to be attacked.'

Suddenly, the sand below them exploded. Everywhere. The Ghul had arrived in Sulis.

One look at the skitteriks the Ghul were riding told Pylos the ten-legged steeds were as vicious as they were ugly. Free of the sand, the skitteriks hopped and scurried across the rock flats at the base of Sulis' walls. Their staccato-like movements could be heard as they scrambled up the tall, sandrock walls. As they neared the top, the two sets of mandibles framing each skitterik's face began frenetically chomping at the air in preparation for the feast ahead.

Quintinius started edging back away from the wall. Although he was Captain of the Guard and a soldier of some strength and reputation, he had never faced anything as frightening as this. The air became thick with the sound of mandibles snapping. Hundreds more mounted soldiers rose up from the sands and scurried up the wall. Quintinius was almost at the stairs leading down to the guardhouse when Pylos spoke again.

'Quintinius, I'd stop moving if I were you,' Pylos said calmly.

Quintinius froze just as a swarm of the skitteriks burst over the top of the wall. 'General?' Quintinius said nervously, his voicing close to breaking.

Pylos did not turn away from the ghastly attackers, nor did he immediately draw his sword. He just stood there atop the broad walkway atop the wall, staring straight ahead. He had faith his soldiers would know what to do.

Without warning, a thick familiar noise drowned out the chilling sound of the skitteriks. It was the sound of 100 arrows being loosed at exactly the same time. Pylos didn't have to turn. He knew that Semiramus would return in time. Assembled in the wide open space inside the city gates, a company of implacable Helyan warriors stood, their eyes fixed on the volley they had sent into the marauding hordes that had dared assault their city.

The arrows flew past Pylos and Quintinius and broke like a wave upon the creatures that had spilled over the top of Sulis' wall. Many of

the skitteriks screeched in pain as the metal-headed shafts sliced into their multi-faceted eyes. Arrows that hit the skitteriks' bodies just bounced off their chitin exoskeletons and flew off into the night. Quite a few of the Ghul riders were dismounted by the sheer force of the volley of arrows slamming into them. At least twenty skitteriks and riders fell back into the desert outside the wall, but there were many more to come and Pylos and Quintinius were all alone on the walkway. Below in the Meadow, hundreds more creatures were emerging each bearing a pallid rider armed with bone-white weapons.

The General and his captain were not alone for long. As soon as the archers had let fly their first volley, Semiramus had sent in his infantry to take to the walls. Within a minute a line of soldiers bearing pikes had taken their positions across the wall. They filled the area between the two scaffolding towers. Every twenty yards, a massive marble statue stood between the Helyan ranks. Unlike the troops, the statues had the luxury of being able to face the other way without being cut down by the fierce beings spewing over the top of the wall.

The fighting was brutal. Although the pikemen managed to repel many of the creatures, they could not hold them all back. A number of the skitteriks had made it onto the wall's wide top where they could wreak bloody havoc. The legs of the beasts ended in sharp claws that could shear through flesh with ease. The twin sets of mandibles on each skitterik took a terrible toll upon the lightly armoured Helyans. Some of the soldiers had literally lost their heads as the snapping jaws of the skitteriks carved a passage through the throng on the wall. And whilst their steeds made their presence known, the Ghul also wasted no time in reducing the Helyan numbers.

The Ghul did not have the brute strength of the skitteriks, nor did they have the combat skill of the Helyans. But they were fearless. They just kept coming. Many were shredded by a solid row of swordsmen behind the line of Helyan pikemen. These swordsmen hacked and thrust at the strange warriors and still they kept coming. Incredibly, many Ghul got up after the most devastating of blows. In fact, Quintinius was sure he had killed the same opponent at least three times. The shining Sessymirian steel of his sword was coated in the thick, green blood of the Ghul but there were no corpses at his feet.

Pylos knew he had killed at least a dozen of the pale soldiers attacking his city, but he had nothing to show for it. Every time he struck the wan-skinned warriors atop the skitteriks, they burst into flame. Their immolation was as violent as it was surprising. Pylos received minor

burns to his arms and face but nothing to stop him from ploughing through the enemies at his walls.

After a few minutes of frantic fighting, Pylos found that the attackers gave him a wide berth, preferring to throw themselves into thicker fighting than face him. This afforded him the opportunity of taking in the situation.

Although his men were performing brilliantly, it would not be long before they would have to give up the wall. Many pikemen had fallen, which meant the giant chilopods were able to wreak havoc upon the Helyan troops with their mandibles. The attackers continued to spill over the wall and a quick glance at the Meadow revealed that countless more were on the way. Below him, inside the city, Pylos' archers had kept their positions, every man poised to let fly the arrow each had nocked in their bows. Behind them a row of soldiers stood watching, waiting for the moment when they would be ordered into the fray. Each of these soldiers carried a small dark shield in one hand and short sword in the other. At their waists hung daggers, maces and bolas. Each man was a walking arsenal.

Pylos sighed, relieved at the sight of the infamous Black Shields, Helyas' fighting elite. They stood patiently observing the fight, secure in the knowledge that they would soon be called upon to contribute where it was most needed.

Pylos glanced at the gate below. 'That's strange!' he said to himself.

'What is?' said a familiar voice behind him. Pylos did not have to turn around to know it was Pedaeus.

'Nice of you to join us Ambassador,' Pylos said dryly. 'Don't worry – there's still a little bit of work left to do!'

Pedaeus shrugged off Pylos' comment. 'You said something was strange. Apart from the fact we are being attacked by living corpses on over-sized bugs, what's strange?'

Pylos plunged forward, burying his shortsword in the throat of a skitterik who had unwisely opened his mandibles wide to bite the General in half. The creature fell into a wild spasm, its death throes spectacularly animated. Pylos stepped back and said, 'The gates. Why aren't they coming through the gates?'

Another skitterik reared up and scratched at Pedaeus with its savage claws. Fortunately for Pedaeus, Pylos managed to slice off three of the claws before they got close. The skitterik toppled forward giving Pedaeus the opportunity to ram his blade through the top of its broad head, skewering it to the top of the wall. Meanwhile Pylos swung his blade in a wide circle that ended deep in the head of the Ghul riding the skitterik. The head promptly exploded.

Pedaeus was most impressed. 'How did you do that Pylos?'

'Do what?'

'Make it explode like that. I have stabbed and cut at least twenty of them and they don't explode for me!'

'I have no idea Ambassador. Maybe you're not hitting them hard enough.'

Pylos looked around at his men. They were inspiring but they were also losing. Many had been slain and many more were almost spent. 'We can't hold the wall for much longer. We'll have to pull back.'

He looked down into the courtyard to signal to Semiramus to pull back. Semiramus was looking at him, as if anticipating Pylos' needs. He gave a deep, unintelligible cry and then raised his fists together high above his head. He then brought them down sharply to his hips. Within seconds the soldiers on the walls dropped to the ground as a volley of arrows shot over them into the bodies of the Ghul and skitteriks atop the wall. The volley gave the Helyans enough time to vacate the wall without compromising their safety. The squad of Black Shields moved forward and formed a perimeter along the base of the wall.

Strangely, the attackers made no move to follow the retreating Helyans into the courtyard. They just lined the top of the wall, arrogantly ignoring all the arrowheads that were trained directly at them.

The Helyans could hear the skitteriks' mandibles clicking maniacally. The creatures' thin angry snarls reverberated across the courtyard and they twisted their heads around crazily, as if the temporary cessation of chomping and biting had driven them mad. By contrast the Ghul just stared impassively at the soldiers below, almost disinterested in the bloodied warriors they had been trying to kill only seconds earlier.

A space was made on the wall to the left of the gate. A huge black skitterik stepped forward. This one was not only bigger than the others but was also adorned with bone armour, not unlike that worn by the Ghul, only considerably larger. A fat, sneering figure sat on a leather saddle strapped to the skitterik's back. She had long black hair which was thick and matted. Her eyes were small and cold. Her face was a portrait of bitterness and discontent. Even though Pylos thought all these warriors were ugly, he felt this one stood out as exceptionally unpleasant on the eye.

'My name is Sergeant Defecious. We are the Ghul!'

She shouted it as if the very name was meant to instill fear in the hearts of all who heard her introduction. But it had been many centuries since the name of the Ghul had been uttered in Helyas, a country more preoccupied with sport and warfare than myth and legend. None of the soldiers were familiar with the name nor were they impressed.

Pedaeus leaned across to Pylos and asked, 'They are the *what*? I didn't quite catch that.'

'They are the girl,' Pylos replied tentatively.

'That doesn't make sense. *They are the girl*?'

Pylos didn't respond. The squat spokeperson atop the wall clearly had more to say.

'We seek one called Remiel Grayson. If you harbour this individual, produce him and we may spare your city.' Her shrill voice echoed across the courtyard before the gates.

Pylos turned to Pedaeus and said, 'I've had enough of this already. Semiramus, when I give the word I want all your archers to fire. I want every single arrow on her.'

An incredulous look spread over both Semiramus and Pedaeus' faces.

'You want all these men to shoot the same person?' exclaimed Pedaeus.

'*Her*? That's a f... f... female?' exclaimed Semiramus.

Pylos stepped forward, his eyes fixed on the Ghul's leader. He carried himself with absolute authority. His confidence in the face of such overwhelming odds seemed to irritate Defecious who sneered at the man standing proudly in the court below her. 'I did not give you leave to approach me, overworlder,' she rasped, her eyes glowering from their deep sockets.

'I will not waste my words upon you, foul thing, other than to say this – there is no such man in the town. And if he were known to us we would not hand him over to one such as you.'

'So be it!' spat Defecious. 'It matters not. We wouldn't have spared you anyway.'

Pylos turned his back on Defecious and walked back to the Helyan ranks. 'Kill her,' he said casually.

Semiramus lifted his right arm and slid his left hand along his forearm. All the archers' bows bent back in unison. Two fingers of his left hand then pointed directly at Defecious whose small eyes widened to twice their size when she saw his gesture. He closed his fist and the air became a blur as 100 steel tipped shafts shot across the courtyard and dug their way into her flesh. Remarkably, not one arrow missed. Some had buried themselves in her neck, legs and arms, but the majority tore into her torso, ripping it to shreds in less than a second. A few arrows pierced her cheeks and one had obliterated her left eye. For a second she hung there in a macabre pose as if the arrows had pinned her to the very air.

And then she toppled forward, over the wall and into the dusty courtyard. Her body bounced when it hit the ground and a good number

of arrows were driven in deeper, many of which pushed through her back in an obscene explosion of dark green blood.

Upon the wall, nothing moved. All eyes were upon the bloody body of the Ghul sergeant, even the beady black orbs of the skitteriks. What was surprising was there was no horror upon the faces of the Ghul. To Pylos, it seemed a particularly gruesome way to die, and the apathetic gaze of Defecious' subordinates puzzled him. They just stared at their commanding officer's body with mild interest. There was no violent response, no call to arms. They just looked at the sergeant's moist and mottled remains with little more than passing curiosity. At first it appeared that they regarded the slaughter of their leader as nothing more than a trifle. Then Pylos realized something. They were waiting for something.

Defecious' glutinous, green blood had spilled out over the sandy rock around her corpulent body. She was face down. Her arms, legs and hair were splayed out; it almost looked as if she were clinging to the ground. Broken arrow shafts covered her body like quills. Her left leg was twisted at an obscene angle – it had clearly been broken in half. Even her thick bone armour had been shattered from the impact. The Ghul above just continued to stare.

'What are they waiting for?' Quintinius' meek voice said, echoing the thoughts of many. He stepped forward, unnerved by the uneasy quiet that had fallen over the courtyard. Following the gaze of the Ghul above, he looked down at their fallen leader. Suddenly, a few stray strands of hair lifted and fell, as if disturbed by her breath. No one else seemed to have noticed it, not even Pylos who usually missed nothing. Perhaps it had been an errant gust of wind, but down in the courtyard Quintinius could not feel any breeze upon his face. The night air was still heavy and warm.

Impelled by curiosity, he walked forward tentatively, his blade drawn and ready. As he approached Defecious' body, he was sure he had caught a thin smile spread across the faces of the some of the Ghul above. He prodded the body with his sword.

Nothing happened.

He looked up again and a number of the Ghul had moved forward, teetering over the edge of the wall to catch a glimpse of what he was doing. Quintinius poked the body again.

Nothing.

He pushed harder with his sword and it pierced Defecious' skin and slid into her side. He was not sure why he did this. Maybe it was an

attempt to unsettle the invaders leering down at him, or maybe he just wanted to make sure she was dead. The body did not move and Quintinius quickly felt a sense of embarrassment wash over him as he accepted that no one could have survived the punishment that had been meted out to the Ghul commander. He turned to return to the other Helyans.

A sudden tug at his left leg stopped him in his tracks. He swivelled around to see Defecious' right hand around his foot. Her head was raised and her mouth wide open revealing jagged, yellow teeth. She bit down hard upon his ankle and the shooting pain that fired up his leg accompanied by an ugly, crunching sound put him in no doubt – she was very much alive.

Quintinius fell immediately, his ankle broken. As he hit the ground, he was vaguely aware of movement atop the wall but he was given no chance to dwell upon it. Defecious had sprung up over him and in a fury of teeth and claws set about taking her revenge.

The skitteriks cascaded down the wall like dark water over rocks. They let loose an ear-piercing shriek that rattled even the stoic members of the Black Shields who bore the brunt of the attack. The scraping of their claws and gnashing of their mandibles upon the soldiers' shields was terrifying, but Helyas' elite held the line until the sheer weight of numbers pouring down from the wall reduced some of the Myr's bravest soldiers to pulp.

Pylos gave the word to pull back but it was too late. In the space of a few seconds, a large number of the Black Shields were gone, killed under the ferocious onslaught of the Ghul. Semiramus wasted no time in preparing his men. His entire phalanx of archers had their bows drawn back again, waiting for a signal to release the shafts into the wave of enemies bearing down upon them. The archers had taken a kneeling position and had laid out their quivers before them so they could fire off successive volleys within seconds.

Behind the archers a long line of men stood whirling bolas above their heads. The bolas were simple weapons, basically three iron balls joined together by lengths of chain, but in the hands of a Helyan warrior they could be an incredibly effective way to incapacitate an enemy. Behind these men ran a supply line of sorts which connected this line of defence to the armoury inside the guardhouse. The soldiers who were not on the front lines had sheathed their swords so they could stock their brothers-in-arms with all the bolas they needed to keep the attackers at bay.

The skitteriks scurried over the bodies of the fallen Black Shields. Their riders held aloft swords that were already drenched in Helyan

blood. Suddenly almost all the Ghul riders on the front line of skitteriks were unceremoniously dismounted as countless bolas pummelled into them. Most of the bolas had wrapped around the Ghul's necks, breaking them instantly. The skitteriks were momentarily confused when their Ghul masters disappeared from their backs. Their heads swivelled around looking for the missing riders. When the skitteriks' gaze turned back towards the Helyans, the sound of 100 arrows being released from their bows signalled the last thing the creatures would see. Semiramus had directed his men to take out the skitteriks' eyes. The hideous shrieking that filled the ears of the Helyans was strangely reassuring – they could take down the invaders if they used the right tactics.

The skitteriks and the Ghul kept coming and the Helyans maintained the same defensive manoeuvres, cutting down the attackers before they got within mandibles' reach. It seemed incredible to most of the Helyans that the Ghul did not devise a way to counter their simple but effective defence, but Pylos knew better. There was method to the Ghul's unwavering attacks. It was not complicated – there were more of them than there were bolas in Sulis. Sooner or later, the Helyans would run out and when that happened the Ghul would swarm over them like Tethran stonemites.

Pylos and Pedaeus had moved behind the troops to discuss options. Pedaeus was uncharacteristically reserved, a reaction to the loss of the Black Shields, a force he had once served with in his younger days.

'We need to set up a barricade,' Pylos said sombrely. 'We have to contain this situation. Once those creatures get past us, there's no telling what they will do.'

'My friend, there is no time,' the Ambassador responded.

Pylos looked at the strange battle being fought in front of him. Although the Helyans were holding their own, it was not a stalemate. It would be only minutes before his men had nothing left to throw at the Ghul. Once that happened the invaders would rampage through the streets and slaughter every innocent in Sulis.

He looked up at the swarming hordes that continued to pour over the northern wall. Suddenly Pylos' eyes gleamed. 'Ambassador, I have need of your skills. You and I must bring down the scaffolding towers.'

'Huh?' was all Pedaeus could say.

Pylos pulled four men out of the supply lines and gave them orders. 'You two,' he said to two thick-necked soldiers, 'will come with me. Grab maces.' They nodded despite having no idea what they were about to do. 'And you two,' he said to two others with even thicker necks, 'will

go with Ambassador Rhodes. You will escort him to the right-hand tower. You must bring it down.'

'Anywhere?' asked Pedaeus, a little stunned by the plan.

'No. Take out the corner supports. Aim for the oaka tree at the far end of the courtyard, where the avenue begins. That's where the towers should meet.'

'A barricade,' said Pedaeus, understanding Pylos' intentions before the soldiers did. He shook his head. 'Scaffolding, Pylos? It won't contain them for long.'

Pylos nodded. 'I agree, but it might delay them. And I don't think it's just these fiends we have to worry about.'

The Ambassador frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'I think something's coming. Something big. And it's coming through there.' He pointed to the half-open gates. In the darkness beyond the gates was a deeper darkness, a place where the sands didn't glow and the stars didn't shine.

'What is that?' asked Pedaeus squinting into the gloom.

'I don't know but it's moving closer. It explains why the Ghul went over the walls instead of through the gates. Something is coming through those gates any moment now.'

'Well, we better get on with it then. Now what exactly do you want me to do whilst these two are hammering down the tower with their maces.'

A wry grin spread across Pylos' face. 'Just keep them alive Ambassador. Just keep them alive.'

Pylos disappeared into the shadows to the left of the courtyard battle. Pedaeus Rhodes moved off to the right. The Ghul were so intent upon breaking the line of Helyan soldiers in the courtyard they failed to notice the men making their way to the scaffolding towers.

In the middle of all this bloodshed, a squat, ugly figure rose unsteadily to her feet and surveyed the battlefield with her remaining eye. Defecious was truly hideous to behold. Long strips of flesh hung off her body, like pieces of pink meat hanging in a butcher's shop. Her left leg was broken so she put all her weight on her right. At her feet lay the bloody body of the Captain of the Guard. Quintinius had been mauled beyond recognition.

Suddenly a deep creaking noise drowned out all other sounds in the courtyard. It was a long, drawn-out noise, like a yawn of a giant being

roused from slumber. Every head in the courtyard looked up, including the Helyans who were just as surprised to see the two huge scaffolding towers to the left and right teeter high overhead. After an excruciatingly long time hovering over the lip of the northern wall, they started falling. The tightly packed line of Helyan soldiers were in no danger of being crushed. The towers fell simultaneously at 45 degrees to the northern wall.

Semiramus felt his heart skip a beat when the structures pounded into the ground behind his ranks. A great cloud of dust and sand billowed into the night air. The timber beams of the scaffolding bent and cracked as they impacted upon the city floor.

Now the soldiers were trapped. At their front were the Ghul and skitteriks; at their back a tangled mess of wood. Semiramus was not sure why the towers had come down, but his mind raced to think of a way it could be turned to his advantage.

Defecious put a bloodied hand up in the air and the Ghul stopped in their tracks. The skitteriks' claws scraped on the rock as they halted their manic push down the wall and across the courtyard. Semiramus' archers pulled back on their bows and waited for the signal to shoot.

'You stupid overworlders will now learn it is useless to stand against us. Let it be known across your sun-stained lands – any city that harbours Remiel Grayson will suffer the same fate as your miserable town.'

'We have not suf... suffered,' shouted Semiramus proudly. 'We... we can d...d... do this all night if we... we have to.'

A cruel smile spread over Defecious' torn face. 'You sh... sh... should not be their spokesman, tumble-tongue,' she said derisively. She swivelled around and shouted to the darkness beyond the gates, 'Unleash Anaresis! Let it loose!'

Pylos rejoined Semiramus by the front line and said, 'Did I just hear her mock you?'

Semiramus blushed as he nodded.

Pylos cast a quick look at Defecious who had folded what was left of her arms in smug anticipation of the terror that lay beyond the gates. She bent down to Quintinius' dead body. Grabbing him by the ear she pulled up his huge but lifeless frame, so that he sat up like a large child. 'This is what becomes of all who defy Caliban!' she cried. 'We praise him for this bounty!'

'Defy *who*?' said Pedaeus who had also returned, his face beaming with triumph having brought down the scaffolding tower exactly where Pylos wanted it.

‘Someone called Caliban,’ Pylos replied.

Pedaeus shrugged. ‘Who’s Caliban?’

‘No idea,’ said Pylos. ‘I imagine he’s the one who’s looking for that other guy.’

‘What other guy?’ asked Pedaeus.

‘What should I do?’ asked Semiramus.

Pylos considered these questions and decided to answer the easier of the two. ‘Kill her,’ he said to Semiramus.

‘We already tried that,’ Semiramus said.

‘Then kill her again.’

Without warning the half-open timber gates of the city shuddered as if knocked on by an angry god. The booming sound bounced off every surface in the courtyard. Another crashing noise and another. The gates flew inwards and there at the entrance to the city was the most nightmarish creature Pylos had ever seen.

Anaresis was massive, at least fifty foot high and just as wide. It resembled a half-deflated balloon, only where a balloon would have a silken surface, this creature had blood-red tissue and veins. It was as if its skin had been ripped off, leaving wet and bloody muscle and cartilage exposed. Underneath its amorphous body hundreds of legs no longer than a Spriggan’s scratched over the earth, moving the vast body forward. A great deal of the body sagged so much it lay on the ground where it spread a greasy stain upon the rock. All over the moist surface of Anaresis’ shapeless bulk seething boils and seeping furuncles glistened. The creature was horrific, its sack-like body as repulsive as anything the Helyans could imagine. Somewhere toward the top of the pink mass a long, thin neck protruded. It seemed perverse that something so swollen and tumescent could have such a slender, almost graceful neck. At the end of this neck was a head that was incredibly disproportionate to the creature’s capacious body. Anaresis’ head was no larger than a young child’s and had a face just as innocent. Wide eyes stared out at the band of soldiers that stood before it in the courtyard.

Defecious bowed to the Helyans. ‘We will take our leave of you now, men of Sulis. Let me introduce you to Anaresis. It will be staying with you until you can produce Remiel Grayson. I suggest you find him quickly. Otherwise Anaresis will overstay its welcome.’

Defecious turned her back on the Helyans and motioned to her troops to depart. They obeyed instantly, wheeling around and crawling back up the wall and over it. As swiftly as they had arrived, they

departed. Defecious hauled herself up onto a riderless skitterik and headed out to the Sand Meadow.

'She's getting away!' Pylos noted, disappointed by the sudden turn of events.

'We could fire upon her, b... b... but it might be prudent for the men to save their arrows for that thing, sir,' Semiramus said apologetically, pointing to the slithering, hulking mass making its way across the courtyard.

Pylos smiled. 'Yes, you're probably right Semiramus. I just don't like *her*,' he said referring to Defecious who was now gone from sight.

'I still can't believe it's a female!' Semiramus replied.

Anaresis bustled forward, its gigantic body making a slurping sound on the flagstones of the courtyard. Although its body moved slowly, its neck flicked about like a snorse's tail. It did not say anything as it scanned the group before it. It sniffed, taking in their odours. The Helyans were so unlike the Ghul. They smelt wholesome. Anaresis' mouth opened as it smelt the soldiers but no words came out. Pylos noticed a stream of saliva come dribbling down the creature's chin. It was salivating.

Suddenly Anaresis' head dropped low to the ground and the neck swept across the courtyard. Several soldiers on the eastern side of the line were caught out by the unexpected movement. The neck barrelled into them from their rear and they were thrown forward onto the skinless flesh of Anaresis' body.

As soon as the men touched the moist tissue they screamed. Anaresis' digestive acids ran over them, eating through their tunics and searing their skin. Pedaeus rushed forward to pull one of the men away from the wall of dripping meat. It was Private Melpone. Pedaeus clutched at Melpone's hands and yanked him away from Anaresis. He succeeded in pulling Melpone free but with terrible consequences. The soldier's entire back lay bubbling against the creature's body, dissolving into it. With his spinal column laid bare, Melpone was dead before Pedaeus had any idea what was going on.

Pylos realized instantly what was going on. 'That's not its body,' he shouted to Semiramus. 'That's its stomach!'

Semiramus watched the bodies of his fellow soldiers being digested alive. Their agony was beyond comprehension. He looked over at Pedaeus pathetically clutching at what was left of the man he had tried to rescue.

There was no other way. They had to fire upon the monster. Hopefully, some of the arrows would grant the dying Helyans a much quicker death. Semiramus raised his arm and gave the signal to fire.

The arrows were swallowed up by the grotesque body and the creature gave no indication that it had felt any pain.

‘Fall back to the barricades!’ Pylos yelled and his troops immediately responded. Although the soldiers did not panic, they wasted no time in getting out of harm’s way. They clambered up the fallen structure, each man secretly celebrating the virtues of their General who had shown incredible foresight in bringing down the scaffolding towers. The timber frames would not hold the creature for long, but they would give the soldiers the chance to regain their strength which had been depleted as wave after wave of Ghul had broken upon their line.

Pylos was the last one to ascend the makeshift wall of wood. He scrambled to the top to find something he had not expected to see – a crowd of civilians had gathered, many of whom had pushed through the soldiers to catch a glimpse of the monster that was attacking their town. Standing at the front of the crowd was the last person he had expected to find at the scene of a battle.

‘Senator Leippa,’ he said loudly, bemused by the man’s presence at the fight.

‘Don’t sound so surprised to see me here General Castalia. These towers almost crushed my house. I have been told that was your doing.’

This was not the Senate and Pylos felt free of the protocols and procedures that had always governed what he had said during Senate hearings. ‘Had I known your house was nearby,’ he said with a smile, ‘I would have aimed a little bit better.’

‘This is not the time for humour,’ Leippa snapped, infuriated by a small crowd of onlookers who had heard Pylos’ response and laughed.

Pylos looked back towards the courtyard. Anaresis was still some way off and moving slowly. Although he was disturbed by the crowd’s presence, they were not in any immediate danger. He quickly thought of a way to turn the situation to his advantage. ‘Senator Leippa, perhaps now would be a good time to discuss the annual funding for the military.’

Leippa drew himself to his full height as if to intimidate Pylos but it was a pointless gesture. Although not tall, Pylos stood a full foot taller than the fat bureaucrat who wrung his satin sleeve incensed by the impudence of his subordinate.

‘Do not think you can stand on the brink of disaster and blackmail me into supporting you and your thugs, General.’

‘Senator, it is you who stand on the brink of disaster,’ Pylos retorted, much to the delight of the growing crowd who were clearly on his side.

‘The Senate is above being bullied by the likes of you.’

Pylos thrust out his sword in the direction of the hulking mass of death that was slowly but surely making its way across the courtyard. ‘Perhaps you’d rather be bullied by the likes of that?’ he said emphatically.

Anaresis swung its head in Pylos’ direction. Leippa squirmed when he saw the horrible beast staring their way. He had also seen the gruesome deaths of the unfortunate soldiers who had been eaten alive by the creature.

The crowd all looked to Leippa for a response. They could see that he was terrified. Pylos milked the situation for everything it was worth. ‘Here Senator,’ he said holding out the pommel of his sword. ‘Take it. Take my sword. You go fight the bad monster.’

Leippa looked down contemptuously at the blade. His mouth widened as he tried to control his anger. ‘General, this is a stunt,’ he snarled.

‘No Senator. It is a necessity. And war is the mother of all necessity. The creatures that have attacked us this night will return. And when they do, we either have a fully functional army or we have you standing there, shaking, holding a sword.’

The crowd cheered. Leippa glared at them, maddened by their lack of support. He then risked a look over Pylos’ shoulder at the lumbering creature drawing ever closer. In minutes it would be at the barricade and there was no guarantee the broken mess of timber beams and poles would contain the thing. Should it break through all Sulis would suffer and they would blame the Senate. They would blame him.

‘You can have whatever you need,’ Leippa said quietly. ‘Just kill that thing.’

It had worked. It was a desperate gambit but Pylos had secured the future of the armed forces. Now he just had to find a way to kill Anaresis. ‘Get everyone off the barricades,’ he yelled to some nearby soldiers.

Pedaeus Rhodes pushed his way through the crowd as the Helyan soldiers started corralling the curious locals out of the way. ‘You have a plan?’ he said casually to Pylos.

‘Not yet,’ said Pylos truthfully, ‘but there’s always a way.’

‘You’re as stubborn as a grizzum Pylos, I’ll give you that,’ Pedaeus laughed. He looked over at the retreating figure of Senator Augustine Leippa. ‘I see your fan club was here.’

Pylos gave a reluctant grin. 'I asked him if he wanted to fight the...' His voice trailed off as he turned back towards the courtyard. 'Yes,' he said to himself. 'That'll do it.'

'What is it?' Pedaeus asked, intrigued by his friend's change of focus.

'I think I have a plan.'

Pylos quickly found Semiramus. 'Do you have any ropes handy? I need a line over 300 feet long.'

Semiramus nodded. 'There sh... should be something that will meet your needs in the ar... armoury. But that's on the other side of the creature.'

'Then pick ten of your fastest men to follow me.'

A minute later Pylos was dashing across the courtyard with twelve men in tow. Semiramus and Pedaeus were also in the group sprinting across the yard to the armoury. They ran close to Anaresis whose head and neck swung viciously in an attempt to capture some more Helyan delicacies to eat. The men were prepared for Anaresis' attacks and effortlessly avoided its attempts to make a meal out of them.

Semiramus quickly stole into the armoury behind the gatehouse and soon returned with a thick coil of rope in his arms. Pylos took this and slung it over his shoulder. 'Up onto the wall,' he said, racing towards the steps that led up from the guardhouse to the walkway over the gate.

All three moons were now high in the sky and the group of soldiers stood in the vast shadow of Sulis' largest statue. It was the 230 foot sculpture of Senator Leippa holding a sword aloft in a pose that was as heroic as it was ridiculous.

'Wait here!' Pylos said to his men.

'Hang on Pylos!' scoffed Pedaeus. 'You're not going to climb this statue are you?'

'Yes,' he said with grim-faced determination. 'I plan to bring it down.' He turned to Anaresis who had forgotten about them and was making its way over to the barricade where the smell of Helyan meat was most pungent. 'It's coming down on that!'

The men accepted his plan without question. He instructed one group of soldiers to hold onto one end of the rope he planned to haul up the statue. The other end would be given to a second group once he had wound the middle of the rope around the statue's neck.

Pylos had one last comment to make. 'If I don't make it, one of you must take my place. Volunteers?'

All twelve men stepped forward.

'That's what I hoped I'd see.'

He was astounding. The statue was smooth, carved out of Sessymirian marble, but Pylos made light work of it. He had spent some time climbing the Skyfall in his youth and did not find the statue to be a difficult climb. He made it up to the Senator's shoulders in no time and took a moment to take in the view. Anaresis had crossed the courtyard and pushed itself up against the barricade, sweeping its neck along the top trying to snag the soldiers who held the line there. Pylos quickly did a quick calculation in his head, adding the height of the wall with the height of the statue and comparing it to the length of the courtyard far below. 'Perfect,' he said to himself. With irrepressible delight Pylos slung lengths of rope around the senator's fat neck.

This done, he quickly threw the other end of the rope to the men. 'Now let's finish this,' he called as he took a position behind the head of the statue.

'Pylos!' Pedaeus barked. 'Are you mad? Get down here at once!'

'No!' Pylos barked back. 'I'll use my weight to make sure this statue hits its mark.'

Pedaeus knew it was useless to convince Pylos otherwise. 'Suicidal idiot,' he muttered to himself, as he rushed off to join the men manning the ropes. The two groups made their way down onto the courtyard, one going left of Anaresis, the other going right.

It was a terrific plan but it had one flaw. Pylos had no idea of how difficult it would be to topple the statue. Senator Leippa had given clear directions to those who built the statues that they should be made to withstand the fiercest Helyan sandstorm. To this end, huge metal rods had been placed in the base of each statue to reinforce it against strong winds. Twelve men would not be enough to bring the statue down.

From atop the statue Pylos felt something akin to despair. He had got it wrong. He had not gathered enough men to topple the huge sculpture. Within minutes, Anaresis would be through the barricades and out of range of the statue. He did not have time to gather more troops, nor did he have any other ideas to kill the monster in the courtyard.

And then he saw the reason why he was so willing to fight and die for Helyas – the people. Despite the soldiers who had pushed them away,

the citizens of Sulis had returned to the barricades to witness Pylos' plan. It was clear to them what was needed. The soldiers pulling the ropes weren't enough. Men and women of all walks of life risked their own safety to climb down into the courtyard to man the ropes.

The soldiers on the barricade had a choice – they could try to stop the public getting through or they could try to hold Anaresis' attention whilst more and more citizens poured over the scaffolding to help.

The soldiers gathered before Anaresis, edging dangerously close to the swollen exterior stomach of the hideous beast before them. Its neck whipped around again and again. It was so obsessed with catching the elusive soldiers before it, it failed to notice all the tender morsels that were sprinting across the courtyard to help pull down the statue.

The difference the public made was significant. The statue upon which Pylos was perched began to move. He could hear cracking and groaning floating up from the statue's base. Suddenly Leippa's body pitched forward. The courtyard rushed up to meet Pylos. He shifted his weight so that the statue fell directly at Anaresis' bloated body. With no sense of self-preservation until the last moment, Pylos rode the statue down upon the obscene beast. Leippa's outstretched marble sword came down hard upon the pink sack of tissue and blood and staked it to the ground. At once the stomach burst, like a balloon prodded by a pin, and Anaresis died in a wet and soundless explosion.

Pylos was thrown forward as the statue hit the courtyard. He toppled into the brave squad of soldiers atop the barricades who had been distracting the creature. He heard something snap when he bounced off the men and pounded into some timber beams at the back of the scaffolding. His head hit something hard and then his senses shut down and he was wrapped up in a cocoon of unconsciousness.

The first sense that returned was Pylos' hearing.

'Pylos – the ancient gods fight through you,' Pedaeus said as he carefully lifted his friend to his feet.

A sharp pain in his forearm made Pylos open his eyes. His arm had been wrapped up tightly in a white bandage.

'I'm afraid it's broken Pylos,' Pedaeus remarked. 'The physicians have already seen to you.'

Pylos shook his head, trying to dispel the fog that had settled upon him. 'How long have I been out for?' he asked, a little perturbed by his situation.

'Not long,' Pedaeus said.

'And the creature?'

'Dead. You did it Pylos! The beast is dead.'

Pylos felt his entire body relax. The knowledge of Anaresis' destruction was like a tonic. He was bruised and broken, but they had triumphed. 'Let me see it,' Pylos demanded.

Pedaeus helped him cross the barricade until they could see down into the courtyard. It was a strange sight to behold. The huge balloon of Anaresis' body had disappeared. All that was left of it was an ugly wet smear across the flagstones. In the centre of the courtyard, the gigantic, fallen figure of Augustine Leippa lay covered in the monster's blood. The jubilant citizens of Sulis had all congregated around the statue to share tales of what had just transpired.

'Well, I told you the statues served a purpose,' Pedaeus said wryly.

'Let's go down,' Pylos said.

Just when Pylos had thought he had seen everything that night, he noticed the bent figure of Senator Agenor making his way through the destruction. He spotted Pylos and hobbled towards him. 'Perhaps you are right General,' he said gently. 'We need our armed forces at full strength.'

'I am pleased to hear you say so Senator,' Pylos said as he bowed graciously to greet Agenor, 'but what happened to *the hand that signs the paper?*' Together they gazed upon the massive beast before them, skewered at the end of a marble sword.

Agenor smiled and nodded at the broken statue. 'It's a good thing he wasn't holding a quill,' he joked.

Pylos permitted himself to laugh, pleased by Agenor's willingness to see things from another point of view. Agenor laughed too, but his laughter quickly became a splutter and then a hacking cough. Pylos bent forward to see whether he was alright. Agenor coughed again and dark blood sprayed out of his lips onto his white beard.

'Agenor!' exclaimed Pylos reaching out for the senator whose legs were giving way. Pedaeus let go of Pylos and stepped forward to catch the old man. Agenor went limp in Pedaeus' arms.

'What's wrong?' Pylos asked as Pedaeus lay Agenor upon the courtyard. As the senator's back touched the paving stones, he winced. Pedaeus carefully turned Agenor onto his side. Agenor's tunic had been eaten away. The skin of his back had suffered the same fate. Raw and bloody flesh was exposed to the night air.

'Oh no!' Pylos gasped as his eyes fell upon the grisly sight. He turned to Pedaeus. 'He must have been struck by a piece of the creature when it exploded. His entire back has been eaten away.'

‘Yes. I’m afraid I got in the way a bit,’ Agenor said barely conscious. ‘I thought I could help out on the ropes, but –’

‘Senator, don’t speak. Just rest.’

‘Oh General, don’t tell me not to speak. I’ve been speaking all my life. I’m not going to stop now.’

Pylos smiled sadly.

‘General – the Senate will listen to you now.’

‘I know Senator, I know.’

But Agenor could not hear him. The old man had died.

Pylos and Pedaeus sat back on the balcony of Pylos’ apartment. Between them, two empty carafes of wine lay on the floor. All was quiet in the city below. In the east the sky was growing lighter. Dawn was not far off.

They hadn’t spoken for an hour. Both were wrapped up in thoughts of the battle at the gates. Both had lost friends in the attack. Both knew that more would be lost in the future. The Ghul would return. That was a fact.

‘What to do Pedaeus? What to do?’ Pylos sighed. He rarely called his friend by his first name, but a hard-fought battle and a fair amount of wine had removed the need for formality.

‘We do what we do best, Pylos. We fight back.’

Pylos leaned back, closed his eyes and fell asleep with a smile on his face.

Chapter Nine The Endless

‘Gerriod? Is it you?’
Gamelyn Blake twisted his head to better see his son. The vine that fixed him to his cross of bone tightened around his neck as if trying to restrain him.

Gerriod stared up at his father suspended on the strange crucifix before him. The ethereal glow of the shatterbugs hovering around his father revealed a face that was crevassed with wrinkles and lined with scars. Gamelyn looked so frail, it sickened his son to look upon him. ‘Who has done this to you?’ he gasped, each word like a stone in his throat.

‘Caliban. It was Caliban.’ Gamelyn’s dry, cracked voice reverberated around the grotto.

‘Caliban?’

‘Gerriod you remember. That day on *The Melody*. We had almost reached Sanctuary.’

‘*The Melody*? I... I don’t remember anything Dad. Not a thing.’

Gamelyn gazed down at his son. Gerriod had not moved. The concept of seeing his father after so long had temporarily immobilized him as his brain wrestled with the horrific situation. Gamelyn was less stunned, having long dreamt of the day his son would find him in his terrible prison. Within seconds, he could still recognise the boy in the man Gerriod had become. Gamelyn had played his son’s mannerisms, his demeanour, even the cadence of his speech over and over in his mind as a way to fend off the madness that threatened him in the sunless jail of the Endless. He had held countless conversations with the darkness pretending that his son was occupying the space in which he now stood. He had imagined this meeting – and countless variations of it – so many times, that the sight of Gerriod standing before him had a strange familiar quality to it – like *déjà vu*, only a lot more poignant.

Gerriod’s eyes were awash with the pain and heartache the occasion demanded. Gamelyn could see the silvery line of his son’s tears and an excruciating sadness swelled up within him. This was a precursor to a surge of memories that fell across the prow of Gamelyn’s mind with unexpected ferocity. He had seen those tears so many times before, like the time Gerriod had fallen from the yardarm of *The Melody*. And the time his son had caught his finger in a sloop knot whilst fastening the mizzen. And the time he had told him that his mother had fallen sick during the Long Winter and that she wouldn’t be getting better. It was almost too much for the old man to bear. His son shimmered like a

mirage upon a Kheperan desert. For a stomach-churning moment, Gamelyn thought that he had indeed gone mad and that his son was now dissolving, but when the salty, stinging sensation of fallen tears spread across his parched lips, the old man realised that he too was weeping and that Gerriod, though obscured by a watery veil, was still standing before him.

Then the significance of Gerriod's last comment fell upon him and he found himself confused and adrift.

'What?' Gamelyn croaked. 'You don't remember...'

Gerriod rubbed a tear-stained cheek with the leathery back of his hand. 'I'm sorry Dad, but I don't remember anything. The week you disappeared, they found me wandering the shoreline of the lake. I don't know how I got there. Some reckoned I must have hit my head on a rock or something. My mind was – is – blank.'

Gamelyn looked crushed as he realized that his son had no recollection of their last moments together, had no understanding of what had ripped them apart and that his appearance in the Endless was apparently by mistake and not by design. Gerriod had no memory of the desperate actions of the man who was prepared to risk almost certain death to avoid immurement upon Sanctuary. The grim visage of Caliban surfaced in Gamelyn's mind and suddenly an acute awareness of the danger his son was in, here in Caliban's realm, dispelled his sadness. 'Gerriod, you've got to leave. Now! Before the leper returns.'

Gerriod was still dazed. He lifted his head to face his father, but his gaze was unfocused. When he spoke, his voice was distant, almost toneless. 'Leper? I saw a man before. His skin... pale... broken. He only had one hand.'

'Did he see you Gerriod?' Gamelyn said with tremendous urgency.

The anxiety in Gamelyn's voice was such that it pulled Gerriod out of his stupor. He had to free his father. He erupted into action, closing the space between them in a second. His eyes darted about his father's strange prison, looking for a way to pull the old man down from his cross. There seemed to be no start nor end to the dark, green vine that bound Gamelyn to the huge bones. If he could somehow cut it...

'You must go Gerriod. Caliban – he's insane!' his father rasped.

This was too much for Gerriod to digest. There had been too much talk about things he did not remember or could not comprehend. Too much time wasted. All he understood was that his father – so old and changed, yet unmistakably the same man – had been tied to a cross and left to rot. But luck or fate had led Gerriod to Gamelyn and that was all that mattered. He reached up to pull the vine from his father's arms. As

he did so the cloud of shatterbugs scattered, leaving the two men in temporary darkness.

‘Gerriod! Don’t! It’s not that simple!’

‘Shhh! I’ll get you down,’ Gerriod scolded. As his fingers wrapped around the vine, he felt it respond to his touch. Under his fingertips he could feel movement inside the vine, like the flexing of a muscle under one’s skin. Suddenly in the cavern’s dim light he saw hundreds of eyes open all over the green coil. It was not a vine at all. It was a creature of some sort, an animal that was as old as the stones and just as tough. As far as Gerriod could tell, it had no head nor tail. Under every singular eye a small orifice widened to show sharp teeth, all of which began gnashing violently.

Gamelyn’s body became wracked with pain as the horrible creature writhed around his broken frame, crushing him and tearing at his flesh. Blood had spurted out from countless deep wounds and the sounds of his screams were almost enough to drown out the crashing sound of the waterfall in the nearby cavern.

Gerriod staggered back, horrified by the effects of his attempt to extricate his father from his unique prison.

When the pain had subsided, Gamelyn pleaded, ‘Son, please don’t do that again!’

‘I’m sorry’ Gerriod spluttered as he slowly moved away from the crucifix. ‘Perhaps I could find a sharp rock and kill that thing.’ His voice was quavering. He was clearly flustered by the situation.

‘No killing,’ his father responded softly. ‘You cut me down from here and I’ll die. This creature does more than just hold me here. My blood passes through it and its blood through me. If you kill it, you kill me. Until it releases me, I am trapped.’ He hung his head forlornly.

‘How do you know this?’ Gerriod was repulsed at the thought of his father’s blood mingling with that of the serpentine monster.

‘It has kept me alive all this time. Or so Caliban tells me.’

‘Caliban? You keep saying that name. Who is he?’

‘Oh, Caliban is many things, but above all, he is my host.’ It was clear he was being sarcastic. Although his voice was soft and controlled, Gamelyn could not hide his contempt when commenting upon his captor. ‘And quite the talkative host he is. He taunts me, tells me his great plans, tells me everything, safe in the knowledge that I am impotent to change anything.’

‘Hang on Dad. Caliban? As in *Caliban’s End*?’

‘Caliban’s End? What do you mean?’ Gamelyn asked.

‘It’s what the fishermen of Palia call the Worldpool. It’s been called that for as long as I can remember. Named after some crazy leper who

swore he would wreak vengeance upon the village for allowing him to be taken to Sanctuary. But he never made it. The ship was apparently swallowed by the Worldpool, taking Caliban and all aboard with it.'

Gamelyn was amazed by this information. In the blur of years he had spent upon the cross, he had played out many scenarios regarding what had transpired after he and Caliban had been pulled down into the Endless. In his most optimistic scenario, Gerriod had escaped in the ship, made his way to Palia and rallied a rescue team who found their way into the Endless and disposed of Caliban. In this daydream, father and son were reunited and the fanged, coiled creature binding him to the cross just withered and died. He and his son lived out the rest of their days in Palia fishing for carpu from the safety of the shores of the lake. But that was not the way of things. The reality was infinitely more unreal. His son had survived, but with no recollection of the event. The Worldpool had been renamed after the leper. There was no rescue team and no chance of living out his remaining days under an open sky. The coils of the creature tightened as if to remind Gamelyn of this bitter truth.

'Gerriod, the ship you speak of was *The Melody*! You were on board that day. We had been hired to take Caliban to Sanctuary. Someone must have known this! Why weren't you told?'

'Days after they found me, I was taken away to an orphanage in Murias and that was that. No-one told me anything.'

'I thought all this time you must have perished, or suffered some other fate at the hands of the leper's brother.'

Gerriod's brow furrowed as yet another puzzle piece was placed before him. 'Brother?' he said suspiciously.

'His name was Remiel Grayson. Caliban's twin. He had paid for the trip in advance and had been insistent on coming along. It was he who had his brother bound in chains on the deck of the ship.'

Gerriod tried to digest the details, as if dwelling upon them might spark an ember of memory. But he had nothing. 'Dad, this man, this Remiel Grayson, you say he had chained up the very man who has imprisoned you here. Why were you concerned that he would do anything bad to me?'

Gamelyn's eyes were downcast as he remembered with unforgiving clarity his final moments hanging on to *The Melody's* gunnels. '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.'

'I have no memory of this man.'

'Well Caliban hasn't forgotten him. He wants him. He has his minions searching for him but they can't find him. Caliban will tear the Myr apart until he finds his twin.'

Gerriod fell to his haunches. His head throbbed and he could feel nausea rising from the pit of his stomach. This was too much for him to cope with. Here he was, in a bizarre, subterranean realm he had never heard of, reunited with a father he had long thought dead, a father kept alive by a nightmarish creature that would not let him leave. A peaceful man by anyone's measure, Gerriod now found his brain was heating up with thoughts of vengeance. He could not think of a way to save his father, but he would find a means to exact the bloodiest of revenges upon these Grayson brothers.

A mournful groan stirred the mariner from his dark reveries.

'Gerriod. How long has it been? I have lost all track of time. I know it's been a long time. You have lived a life since I was first placed on my cross. I need to know how many years.'

'Dad, I am thirty-nine years old.'

'Then... I have been here... thirty years?' His voice could not have been more pitiful. An indescribable sorrow spread across Gamelyn's face as he realized the magnitude of the wasted years. Gerriod had grown up, matured, and become a man without his father. If Gamelyn could have reached out to hold his son, he would have crushed him with love.

Similarly, Gerriod's heart ached for the godforsaken figure on the cross. He instinctively stepped closer to Gamelyn but the coiled creature stiffened its hold, threatening another savage attack upon its prisoner. Gamelyn braced himself for the onslaught.

Gerriod jumped back and a few seconds later the creature relaxed its cruel embrace ever so slightly.

'Gerriod, tell me,' Gamelyn said through dry, split lips, 'how did you get here?'

'Through the Worldpool. My ship was attacked by lepers trying to escape Sanctuary. Somehow I survived the fall into this strange world, just as you did.'

A wry smile spread across Gamelyn's sunken face. 'So you've lost another boat! Gerriod, that's at least two in thirty years!' He laughed, a sickly, hacking cough of a laugh, but a laugh all the same. He eased himself out of his coughing fit and when his breath had returned, he tentatively asked his son, 'Gerriod, what do you remember? About us?'

Gerriod could hear the desperation in his father's question, Gamelyn's longing to be told that he was still significant, that he had played a part in his son's life. It was the saddest moment Gerriod had ever experienced. 'Why everything Dad!' he exclaimed, rushing his

words out to reassure his father as quickly as possible. 'Everything you taught me about boats, fishing, the lake. As soon as I was old enough to leave the orphanage I returned to Palia because that was where I was closest to you. I remember the time you first let me help navigate. I got us lost, but you weren't bothered at all. You told me that a good sailor will always find his way home.'

Gerriod walked away from the crucifix and circled around behind it, keeping a reasonable distance from his father so as not to upset the green creature. 'A good sailor always finds a way.' His voice had hardened. There was a hint of steely resolve about it.

It was clear Gerriod had not given up on the thought of freeing his father from his torment. Gamelyn could not see him at the back of the crucifix so he craned his head back so that Gerriod could hear him. 'No Gerriod!' he cried hoarsely. 'There is nothing that can be done for me. You must survive. I have much to tell you. Of Caliban and what he intends to do.'

Gerriod shook his head furiously and tried to alter the course of the conversation. 'I won't leave you here. Perhaps I could dig the cross out.'

'And haul it to the world above?' Gamelyn scoffed, trying to kill his son's futile thoughts. 'Gerriod, there is more at stake than just me. You need to listen. We have little time. It won't be long before he finds you here. Nothing happens down here without Caliban's knowledge.'

'Then he will know my anger!' Gerriod snarled though gritted teeth, pacing like a wild animal before the cross.

'Gerriod, stop it now!' Gamelyn barked, drawing on his remaining vestiges of strength as he chided his son. 'I must tell you what Caliban has planned.'

Gerriod ceased all movement and looked guiltily at his father. 'I'm sorry,' he murmured so quietly, Gamelyn barely heard him.

The old man on the cross breathed deeply and began his story. 'Long ago, so long ago it is beyond reckoning, hideous creatures called the Cabal crawled out of this realm and gouged their mark upon our world. They were aided by the Ghul who infest this place like rattu on a barge, a race so filled with hatred and spite, they make this *thing* look like a family pet.' Gamelyn nodded his head at the coiled creature that was entwined around his body. It lay dormant, but Gerriod was fearful it would erupt into a gnashing fury at any given moment.

Gamelyn continued. 'After a long, bloody period, the Ghul and the Cabal were cast back into the darkness and sealed here by old stones and even older magick. The Cabal, deemed the more dangerous of the two, were locked away in the deepest parts in the earth. For many centuries the peoples of the Myr were left alone and forgot about the terrors lurking

below their feet. The Cabal and the Ghul disappeared from all knowledge.'

Gamelyn paused to draw breath and to rest. Gerriod said nothing, patiently waiting for his father to continue this most unexpected story. When Gamelyn had enough energy to proceed, he corrected himself. 'Almost all knowledge. Caliban knew about them. Knew about them before he found himself in their desolate world. Ever since our arrival, the leper has been obsessed with two things: finding the Cabal and reopening the breaches that once gave these monsters passage to our fair world.' He paused again, exhausted by the effort it took to get so many words out at one time.

Gerriod took a small step towards his father. 'Dad, the Cabal – what are they?'

'A collection of creatures as old and as dangerous as time.' Gamelyn sounded as if he were quoting someone and Gerriod quickly realised that his information would have been given to him by Caliban, his jailer. 'Somewhere, in the darkest parts of the Endless they lie scattered, waiting to be freed.'

'The Endless?'

'This realm beneath the Myr is called the Endless. It was named that long before Caliban and I were marooned down here. Long before the Ghul found us.'

'Why did the Ghul not kill you when they found you? What happened that day you first came here?'

Gamelyn smiled at his son's interest in the small details. Gerriod had always been focused upon the details. But Gamelyn had a larger story to convey and was worried he was running out of time for the telling of it. 'We had washed up on the shores of the great lake beneath the Worldpool,' he said as quickly as he could, responding to Gerriod's question. 'The Ghul surrounded us before we had any idea where we were. In their hands they held crude blades made of jagged bone and their intention to use them was all too plain to see. I was tethered to Caliban, wrapped in the iron chain he had slung around my neck seconds before we were hurtled over *The Melody's* starboard gunnel. The Ghul pulled back their weapons to strike and suddenly Caliban started speaking gibberish. He spoke quickly and passionately, occasionally gesticulating to me with a sneer fixed across his face. It soon dawned on me that the Ghul understood him. He managed to bring about an uneasy truce. Caliban not only knew of the Ghul before we came here, but knew their language, their ways. There was one Ghul – Lucetious – who seemed to respond to Caliban more than the others and fortunately for the leper, this Ghul seemed to hold sway over the rest. At first I hoped that Caliban's

linguistic talents had saved us from a terrible fate. Within an hour, I found myself lashed to this crucifix.'

Gamelyn panted as he gulped in deep breaths. It had been decades since he had spoken so much and his husk of a body was heavily taxed by the exertion.

Gerriod knew his father's energy was flagging but he wanted to know everything before Caliban discovered him and dragged him off to a similar fate. 'What happened to Caliban?'

'Years passed before I saw Caliban again. For a while, I thought he must have perished. But he was very much alive and wasted no time in exploiting the opportunity he was given when the Ghul spared his life. He taught the Ghul our language, our ways. He made terrible promises to them in return for their fealty. Then one day, he returned to me. He wanted to share his triumph with someone other than the Ghul.'

'Triumph? What triumph?'

'It was the day he unearthed Succellos.'

'Succellos?'

'One of the Cabal. Ugly, like the ugliest whore in Palia combined with the most monstrous beast you could imagine.'

'With legs like needles?'

Gamelyn nodded. 'Then you've seen her.'

'Yes,' Gerriod replied. 'When I first —'

'Shhh, my son! I must finish this tale and you must go.' There was great urgency in his voice. He knew that it was only a matter of time before Caliban was aware of Gerriod's presence. Somehow, over the years Caliban had achieved a form of omniscience. He heard and saw things from the most distant of places. Gamelyn was amazed that he and his son had spoken for so long without being caught. Down in the Endless good luck had a habit of turning bad and Gamelyn knew that this chance meeting between father and son was fated to end in disaster if Gerriod did not leave quickly. 'A year ago — or maybe it was more — the Kobolds were brought down here, into the Endless. They had inadvertently breached the rock separating the city of Sarras from the Endless. Within hours of doing so Caliban's troops had rounded up thousands of them.'

'Caliban was waiting for the Kobolds?'

'Yes. He had received reports of the sounds of their mining and moved his entire army under Sarras and waited. He didn't have to wait long before he had gained access to the world above. The Kobolds were forced to accompany him back here. I imagine any that did not oblige him were slain where they stood. By the time they arrived here, after

weeks of marching through the labyrinth of the Endless, they were so wretched they were almost unrecognisable.'

Gerriod was shocked and momentarily forgot his father's request to stay silent. 'You saw them?'

'Yes. Caliban felt it was such a momentous event that it needed an audience. The Kobolds were brought before Succellos and she had her way with them.'

Gerriod's face went ashen. Images of the two Myrran men he had seen earlier flashed across his mind. He could still hear the fat man's screams as Succellos impaled him upon her sting.

'Gerriod, once stung by Succellos a person becomes a mere puppet.'

'A puppet?'

'Succellos seems to draw out her victim's will, their sense of self. Perhaps their very soul. The Kobolds are now little more than mindless slaves doing Succellos' bidding, which of course is the bidding of Caliban now he has promised to deliver to her all the races of the Myr. If she has her way, it will not be long before she has all in her thrall. She is insatiable. Now she holds dominion over the entire race of Kobolds, she seeks more.'

It was the most extraordinary thing Gerriod had ever heard. Caliban's willingness to abandon fellow Myrrans to this sickening fate was beyond comprehension. 'I don't understand. Why does Succellos need Caliban? Why does she stay in this netherworld?' Gerriod asked. 'She could make her way through one of the breaches and...'

'No. She never leaves the lake. There's something in that cavern she protects but I don't know what it is. But other Cabal have made it through,' Gamelyn said ominously.

'But you said the breaches were protected by magick of some kind.'

'According to Caliban, it has faded over the centuries. The Morgai, the ones who first made the sealing spells, have dwindled in number and none maintain the breaches. Only the physical barriers have kept the Ghul from entering our world. And now, with the enslavement of the Kobolds, those barriers are coming down.'

'Of course!' exclaimed Gerriod. 'The miners. Caliban is using the Kobolds to open up the other breaches!'

Gamelyn gave a wry smile acknowledging his son's deduction. 'You are correct. And that is why you must return to the surface, to warn the world of what lies beneath it.'

'Dad, the other breaches – do you know where they are?'

'They are all over the Myr. I know there is one deep in the forests of Morae, another in the desert near Sulis and one hidden amongst the reefs

in the Sea of Telamon. I think Caliban mentioned a breach near the top of the Skyfall. Every few weeks another is opened up.'

Suddenly distant voices floated in from an adjacent cavern. A soft *tap tap* could be heard and it was slowly coming closer.

'What is it?' Gerriod asked his father whose face was frozen in fear.

'It's Caliban,' Gamelyn whispered. His sense of dread clamped down on his throat like the jaws of a marrok. 'Now listen. Don't argue. Just listen. Find the wharf. Follow the Ghul to one of the breaches. The currents down here are swift and strong. You can cover great distances in a short space of time. Make your way to the world above and head for Cessair. The Chamberlain will know what to do. He will find a way to locate Caliban's twin and deliver him to the leper.'

Gerriod shook his head in horror. 'I... can't.'

The *tap tap* grew closer.

'Son, one more thing before you go.'

Gerriod glanced over at the grotto's entrance. 'Yes?' he said nervously, half-expecting to see the gigantic creature with the dreadful sting squeezing her way through the opening.

'Caliban is also searching for the Ghaddar.'

'The what?'

'The Ghaddar. I don't know what it is but he had sent many of his soldiers to find it. This isn't something he told me. I overheard it one day when -'

The voices in the neighbouring cavern were much louder now. Whoever was coming was near the entrance to Gamelyn's grotto. In a panic-stricken voice Gamelyn commanded his son to go. 'Come back for me once you have returned to the Myr. I have survived for thirty years. I think I can manage one more.'

Gerriod got to safety, just in time. It was remarkable that no-one in Caliban's guard noticed the mariner scurrying off behind an outcrop of rocks at the far end of the grotto. He lay there for a second, up to his waist in the cold, subterranean water that encircled the small cavern. He could hear the *tap tap* sound getting louder and clearer, but did not dare to look lest he gave away his hiding spot.

Around him the rocks glowed with a soft yellow light and he realised to his horror that three or four shatterbugs had followed him. 'Damn shatterbugs!' he snarled as he tried to swat them unsuccessfully. They dispersed momentarily but a second later they were back hovering over his head. Gerriod tried to swat them again but his more vigorous attempt resulted in the mariner falling back on his rear causing a splash

that echoed across the grotto. If he were not in such mortal danger he would have laughed.

Instead he drew a lungful of air that made his broken ribs scream and dived under the black surface of the waters. He could feel the tug of a current so he allowed his body to be swept up in it. He was spun around, caught up in the dark water's flow like detritus. Occasionally he bumped against rocks and the hard bed of the river. Gerriod held his breath until, minutes later, a burning sensation in his lungs pushed him back to the surface.

With considerable luck, he had escaped the grotto. Gerriod had unwittingly swum through a culvert at the edge of the cavern and emerged in a long, flat passageway down the centre of which flowed the dark stream. There was no sign of the Ghul or of any other denizen of the Endless.

Gamelyn could hear Caliban closing in from behind, the tapping of his bone staff announcing his approach as it had done numerous times before. Usually Gamelyn would close his eyes and ignore Caliban's presence, but on this occasion knew it would be better to grab his jailer's attention immediately, giving Gerriod a chance to escape.

Caliban's leering face came into view as he hobbled around the crucifix, flanked by his lieutenant Lucetious.

'Caliban, it's so nice to see you,' Gamelyn sneered with the sarcasm that characterised his conversations with the leper. He tried to sound nonchalant, but his voice shook, his concern for his son in the forefront of his mind.

If Caliban was suspicious, he didn't show it. 'Dear Gamelyn, I'm sorry I have not visited for some time but things have been hectic around here.' The leper was equally sarcastic, but his voice was calm.

'I don't care for your visits you madman,' Gamelyn snarled.

Suddenly a splash echoed around the chamber and Gamelyn's heart sank. With all his energy, he coughed up what saliva he could and shot it out at Caliban. Despite his wretched physical state, Gamelyn's aim was good. The globule of spit landed square on the leper's forehead. Before Caliban had a chance to react, Lucetious was at his side and with a swipe of his tongue removed the spit from his master's face.

Then, without any fear of the beast wrapped around Gamelyn, the lieutenant leapt forward grabbing Gamelyn's left hand and pulling it free from the thick coils binding him. Lucetious looked expectantly to Caliban for a nod to break Gamelyn's fingers. Suddenly, the coiled creature's eyes and fangs broke out across its green skin and Gamelyn

and Lucetious were consumed in a paroxysm of teeth. Whilst Gamelyn howled, Lucetious just winced. It was clear he was in pain too, but he considered his welfare secondary to the pain that was being inflicted upon the old mariner. His eyes remained on Caliban, hoping for permission to break Gamelyn's fingers.

'Lucetious, step away,' Caliban said quietly.

Although the lieutenant could not disguise his disappointment, he obeyed without hesitation. The serpent's eyes and fangs closed, and the only thing that moved was Gamelyn's body, heaving and shaking as a result of the trauma that had been brought upon it. But one corner of his mouth lifted, hinting at a smile that he could not hide. The distraction had worked. Gerriod had not been discovered.

Caliban noticed the grin. 'Captain, does something amuse you?'

Gamelyn said nothing.

'Perhaps you smile from the knowledge that your fingers are still intact, much to my officer's disappointment.'

'*Officer!*' Gamelyn scoffed, clearly believing Caliban's bestowing of military rank upon the Ghul to be a farce.

'Or perhaps you are just smiling because you've had a pleasant day.'

A chill shot though Gamelyn's broken body. Caliban was not in the habit of making meaningless comments. 'What do you mean by 'a pleasant day'?' he asked tentatively.

'Oh, you know, the usual,' Caliban said in a taunting sing-song. 'Catching up with friends and family...'

Gamelyn was crushed. Caliban knew. He had known all along. Gerriod was far from safe. 'You knew,' Gamelyn whispered, defeated.

'After all these years, you still under-estimate me, just as you did that day on *The Melody*. How could I not hear your buffoon of a son tripping over his own feet and making a splash that could be heard back in Palia. And you, thinking you could use expectoration as a distraction. You're as transparent as you are stupid Gamelyn. You will be pleased to know your clumsy son has now escaped through a culvert at the far end of the grotto. But he is far from safe.'

'What do you want?' Gamelyn said as all energy, all hope faded from him.

It was Caliban's turn to give a wry smile. Between thin, lifeless lips, jagged, rotten teeth stood like tombstones. He took a few steps closer to his prisoner on the crucifix. His bone staff clattered on the hard rock of the grotto and echoed around the chamber.

'Captain Blake, I'm afraid you and I would need a lot more time if I were to communicate to you what I want.'

'I've got nothing better to do,' Gamelyn said with his last ounce of defiance. 'Come closer and tell me your aspirations.'

'Ah Captain, this is as close as I come. I trust the beast coiled around you as much as you should trust the one wrapped around my heart.'

Caliban paused, thinking about what he had just said. He turned back to Lucetious and raised what was left of his eyebrows. 'What think you, Lieutenant? *I trust the beast coiled around you as much as you should trust the one wrapped around my heart.* Spur of the moment. What did you think?'

Without smiling, or giving any indication of emotion, Lucetious replied, 'It was overwhelmingly eloquent, my lord. Poetry.'

Caliban turned back to Gamelyn and winked, whispering conspiratorially, 'Of course, they wouldn't know poetry if they were clobbered with it, but one must take compliments where one can find them.'

'Caliban, do what you will to me, but spare me your conversation.'

It was an effective insult. Caliban's eyes betrayed his indignation. After so many years of Ghul sycophancy, Gamelyn's insubordination was sometimes difficult to bear. Caliban composed himself before continuing. 'Captain, I ask your indulgence for only one minute more. You and I are old friends and I thought it only right that I should tell you what we have planned for your son.'

'You have no reason to harm him. He has done nothing to you.'

'Oh, I quite agree. In fact, I have every reason to thank him. If it wasn't for your son's incredible feat of stupidity on board *The Melody* a lifetime ago, I would be stuck on Sanctuary, decomposing away in that hellhole, with no hope of ever tasting the power I hold here in the Endless.'

'He pitied you and you abused his trust. Is that stupidity?'

Caliban waved his handleless arm to show his contempt of Gamelyn's statement. 'You of all people should know what I think of the notion of trust, Gamelyn. It was trust that had me shipped off to Sanctuary.' Gamelyn had clearly struck a nerve and Caliban, upset by the turn of the conversation hobbled away petulantly.

'Wait!' rasped Gamelyn from the crucifix. 'My son? You were going to tell me of my son!'

Caliban did not turn.

'Please. I must know! What will you do to my son?'

The *tap tap* sound of Caliban's staff faded as he made his way out of the grotto.

Gerriod moved slowly down the underground stream. His mind was awash with thoughts of things so unfamiliar and terrible, he doubted he would be able to remember them all. For now, he decided to concentrate on one thing alone – *find the wharf*. His father's instruction was clear enough, but finding anything in a place called the Endless seemed an impossible notion.

'Think Gerriod,' he whispered to himself in an attempt to calm his mind so he could tackle the problem rationally. 'You're in a river and there's every chance that it feeds into a larger body of water. He wouldn't have said to find the wharf, if it wasn't nearby.'

Just hearing his own voice helped clarify things. In the absence of other options, he would stay on the stream and follow it. For all the evil and perverse things he had endured so far, it seemed a little bit of luck still hung around his neck.

'Gerriod Blake will eventually find the wharf. Do not kill him. Do not capture him.'

'Yes, my lord.' Lucetious stared blankly back at Caliban, despite struggling to see the sense in the orders he had just received.

Caliban entered his cottage and made his way to his throne. It was the same chair upon which he had sat when he had tortured Samuel Melkin and given Porenutious Windle to Succellos. Windle had since left the Endless, but Melkin had remained. In a small room at the back of the cottage, the proud bureaucrat lay tethered to the floor, contemplating his next move in a game of Siege.

Caliban sighed contentedly. The appearance of Gamelyn's son was a surprising but extremely welcome turn of events. Caliban knew that good things came to those who waited – and he was above all things a patient man – but the opportunities presented by Gerriod's arrival in the Endless were almost too good to be true. Gerriod would help sow the seeds of panic more than any incursion of the Ghul and the Cabal. Gerriod would travel to Cessair and give the Chamberlain a name to attach to the attacks taking place across the Myr. The mariner would make sure that actions were taken. Spurred on by the knowledge that his father's incomparable torment in the Endless, Gerriod would not stop until Gamelyn's parting wishes were met and the Chamberlain himself addressed the issue.

'I can sense unrest in you Lucetious. You are concerned that you have not been given orders to capture the mariner.'

Lucetious stood before the throne in a rigid pose. Even in the privacy of Caliban's dwelling, he remained at attention. Caliban liked him. He was more astute than any other Ghul, more subtle but just as ruthless as the most mean-spirited among them. He always phrased his responses to Caliban with a certain amount of delicacy. Lucetious knew that Caliban was perfectly capable of drawing inferences from the plainest comments. 'It did cross my mind, my lord.'

'Lucetious, there are bigger carpu to fry here. Gerriod Blake presents us with a chance to accelerate our plans a little.'

'You are frustrated in the Cabal attempts to find your brother?' Lucetious suggested.

'No. I never really expected them to find him. He is far too wily. But Myrrans are gradually realizing that the Cabal do seek someone and they will associate the miseries befalling them with that person. They will want to blame someone and Gerriod will give them a name – Remiel Grayson. And that will drive my dear twin to me.'

Lucetious' smooth brow wrinkled slightly.

'You are wondering how Gerriod would know my brother's name. How would he know I am seeking him?'

Lucetious nodded deferentially. 'Yes, my lord.'

'Gamelyn told him. In fact, he could not have done better had I given him a script. Everything Gerriod knows works to our advantage. He will draw Remiel out.'

Caliban reclined back in his chair and gazed around his domicile. For someone of his stature, it was a humble abode. The *cottage* as he called it was made entirely of the debris that had been swallowed by the Worldpool. Windows made from portholes looked out into the dull caverns beyond. The polished floor resembled the deck of a fine Tuathan yacht and upon the walls hung fishing nets from a range of vessels that had met their ends in the crushing embrace of the Myr's most frightening natural phenomena.

Caliban thought of the Worldpool and grinned. 'Do you know they call it Caliban's End?' he said conversationally.

Lucetious, not being privy to Caliban's thoughts was at a loss to understand him. 'I'm sorry, my lord. They call what Caliban's End?'

Caliban shrugged as if the topic no longer interested him. Ignoring Lucetious' question, his voice dropped in tone, becoming serious and authoritative. 'Lucetious, I want you to make sure Gamelyn's son follows you to the Sessymir breach. Leave a boat behind. Do not leave until you are sure he is with you. Make sure he arrives safely at Nilfheim. He must survive the assault on the mines. Gerriod has become a most important piece on the board.'

Lucetious thought about this for a second. ‘My lord, there are other breaches much closer to Cessair. If you want to expedite –’

‘No Lucetious. Let us not be too hasty. Whilst this new development may hasten us to our goals, there is no need to be reckless. We want Gerriod’s escape from the Endless to have the ring of truth about it. It makes sense that he would follow you to Sessymir. It makes sense that your approaching battle with the Sessymirians would afford him the opportunity to escape. Furthermore, he will have to wait for the Sessymir breach to open and this will give us time to attack on other fronts.’

Lucetious had long learned that Caliban was the consummate strategist – methodical, meticulous and focused. ‘Yes, my lord. I see your logic.’

This response pleased Caliban. It was more than sycophancy. Lucetious was able to recognise the value of strategy, more so than any other Ghul. Although he was loath to trust anyone, Caliban was prepared to rely upon Lucetious – the Ghul commander had not let him down. ‘Lucetious, there is one other matter. When the Sessymir breach is established, you may do what you will to the Sessymirians, but there is one who must not be harmed. She is...’ – he paused – ‘important to me.’

‘Does she have a name, my lord?’

It was a dark, wet day in Pelinore the day Caliban’s daughter came into the world. The rain pounded the cobblestone street outside, competing against Annika’s screams as her long labour drew to a close. The window by Annika’s bed rattled, the brutal northern wind hammering it incessantly. Low-lying, deep grey clouds jostled in the skies above the harbour city and it looked as if the deluge would last for days. However, the moment Lokasenna was born there was a break in the rain. The sun splashed down across rain-soaked streets and her first cries mingled with the sounds of children playing in the puddles outside.

Caliban would keep the birth of his daughter a secret, just as he had kept private his relationship with the Sessymirian Annika Hagen. For all their industrialisation, the Sessymirians were as barbarous a race as could be found in the Myr and both Annika and Caliban knew that discovery of their illegitimate child would result in catastrophe. Caliban had even managed to hide the situation from his father and brother. There was no need to tell them; he only divulged information when there was a need – his need.

The Acoran Maeldune Canna was the only person who had known of the relationship and the child it had spawned. He had proven to be a

most invaluable asset to the couple, often acting as an intermediary between them, helping the pair keep their risk-filled liaisons a secret.

Maeldune stood by the window of Caliban's sitting room, looking out into the heavy rain that cascaded over eaves and gutters, sending people running for the cover of shops and houses. He was pleased the brief respite of sunshine had passed. The thunderous downpour helped drown out the insistent cries of the child that had just been born in the adjacent room.

Maeldune smiled to himself as his hand brushed an envelope in his pocket. His fingers toyed with the wax seal of the Chamberlain upon the envelope. He had just received news of his appointment to the position of junior clerk in the Ministry of Justice.

'It's a girl,' Caliban said to the Acoran as he slowly closed the door to the bedroom behind him. 'Her name's Lokasenna.'

Maeldune turned from the window and extended a hand to Caliban. 'I believe congratulations are in order.'

Caliban returned the smile. 'For all of us, Maeldune!' he said, alluding to Maeldune's new appointment. 'Thank-you for staying, but now I believe you should leave for Cessair to take up your new position.' The Acoran had delayed his journey south to provide whatever support he could to Caliban. It was a strange show of friendship in one as cool, dispassionate and self-serving as Maeldune Canna.

It was on the day his daughter was born that Caliban realised Maeldune would be the one he would call upon should he ever need assistance. In the year following the opening of the Sarras breach, Maeldune had proven to be an invaluable ally. It was Maeldune who had retrieved ancient texts outlining the specific location of every known breach, it was Maeldune who had found the scrolls describing the Cabal's whereabouts and it was Maeldune who had found Lokasenna in the remote city of Nilfheim.

'Lokasenna,' Caliban said finally. 'Her mother named her Lokasenna.'

Lucetious nodded. 'My lord, if the Sessymirians are in the mine when we burst through, I imagine it will be chaos. The Kaggen is not the most intelligent creature in the Cabal. I cannot safeguard this woman's safety.'

Caliban thrust his staff angrily upon the timber floor. 'You can and you will. My daughter must be delivered safely to me.'

Lucetious cocked his head to one side when he heard this. 'Your daughter?' he said softly. It was not a question meant for Caliban. It was

an expression of surprise. Caliban had not mentioned the fact he had a daughter in all the years he had spent in the Endless. The revelation was a reminder to Lucetious of how guarded his master was, and how carefully he stepped. The Ghul commander lowered his head and clasped his hands together in a gesture of acquiescence. 'I will find her and bring her safely to you, Lord Caliban.'

'Good,' Caliban said, pleased with his lieutenant's tone.

Lucetious thought more on this mission. He knew how critical it was to Caliban. He decided to ask one more question. 'How will I recognise her?'

'She has a distinctive birthmark,' Caliban replied. 'Across her left eye. But worry not. I do not think you will have to look hard to find her. I imagine she will make herself known to you.'

A knock sounded from the thick, oaken cabin door at the far end of the room. Lucetious strode up to the door, opened it slightly and looked into the cavern beyond. He promptly slid outside, shutting the door quietly behind him. Moments later, he returned into the room and opened his mouth to speak.

Caliban cut him off before he had the chance to utter a syllable. 'The Pryderi witch Meggan is here to see me,' he said plainly, preempting the announcement.

'Yes Lord. She is.'

'Let her in, Lieutenant,' Caliban commanded, his eyes twinkling in anticipation of what his guest would bring him.

'Do you want me to leave, my lord?' Lucetious asked.

'Would it embarrass you to stay, Lucetious?' Caliban asked curiously.

Lucetious was slightly puzzled. 'My lord, the Ghul have no concept of embarrassment. It is a distinctly... Myrran notion.'

Caliban smiled at the answer. 'Then you will stay. I have more to say to you.'

Lucetious bowed respectfully and said, 'I will admit the witch.'

Meggan Galley looked pale, her manner subdued. She slithered across the wooden floor and when she reached the throne, she prostrated herself before Caliban. 'Lord Caliban, do you require my services?'

Caliban was totally dismissive about this servile display. 'Meggan, get up!' he said coldly. 'You know why you're here.'

She arose immediately. She knew exactly what to do. It was all she had done since the Ghul had coaxed her down into the Endless with the promise of being reunited with her daughter, Agatha. This had not yet

occurred, but Meggan clung to the hope that agreeing to all Caliban's demands would keep her child safe until such time that mother and daughter were brought together.

She rose to her full height, almost touching the thick dark beams crossing the cottage's ceiling, and slithered behind the throne. Caliban slowly closed his eyes, waiting for her, his fingers anxiously tapping his left knee.

A low hum filled the room as Meggan began the incantation. Strange words flowed from her lips and the air became heavy. Caliban's jaw relaxed as the spell began to take effect. A warm orange glow emanated from the witch's palms. Caliban let his head fall back into Meggan's hands and he gave a small cry of pleasure as the magick took away all the discomfort of his skin condition. The glow spilled over Caliban's leprous face which radiated with vitality. Although the pockmarks and scabs of the affliction remained, his skin was considerably less obscene to look upon. He looked many years younger. Healthier. A broad smile of satisfaction spread across his face as Meggan's magicks coursed through his body.

Caliban opened his eyes like a child coming out of a deep sleep and for a second it seemed as if he did not know where he was. 'Lucetious?' he said absently.

The Ghul commander stood sharply to attention. 'Yes, Lord?'

'I have more to say,' Caliban said, slurring his word as the magick continued to pulse through his veins, an anaesthetic to the disease that had been inflicted upon him three decades earlier. 'I sense you still have qualms regarding the release of Gerriod Blake.'

Lucetious knew that the only response he should ever give his master was an honest one.

'I am confused as to why you did not let Succellos have her way with him.'

'Succellos is not the answer to all our problems, Lucetious. Free will is a commodity you should not undervalue.'

Lucetious just stared back at Caliban who knew that he had not understood and was waiting patiently for elaboration.

'Take this Pryderi witch for example, Lucetious. As you know, the Pryderi do not respond well to being enslaved to Succellos' will. For some reason, it impacts upon their magick.'

'But we found other ways,' Lucetious offered.

'Yes, stealing their children was a master stroke of yours. Such is the bond between mother and daughter that these witches will do what we ask without Succellos' intervention. It was good advice,' Caliban said magnanimously.

‘Thank-you, my lord,’ Lucetious said humbly. ‘But what of the mariner? He has no magick that would be spoilt by Succellos’ touch.’

Caliban stretched out in his chair as Meggan’s restorative spell continued to soothe his body. He had absolute trust in her. Although she could probably release an incantation that would turn his head to pulp, he was certain of her compliance – Agatha, Meggan’s one year old daughter, lay chained to a post in the Nursery, safe whilst the Pryderi witch obeyed him. Caliban groaned in delight as his dead and dying cells were reanimated. His skin tingled under the incantation and the temporary return of such sensation was like a drug. The spell would fade, but Meggan would return again and again, kept loyal by the maternal bond all Pryderi felt.

‘Gerriod’s free will must remain intact, Lucetious,’ said Caliban returning to the matter. ‘His news will draw my brother out. Remiel will feel the truth of Gerriod’s tale and that will drive him to me.’

‘But...’

‘No. My brother is not easily deceived. If Gerriod were under Succellos’ thrall, Remiel would feel it. It is –’

A rapping at the door broke his train of thought. Strange sounds could be heard coming from outside: the sound of hooves upon rock and the swishing of tails. Caliban sat up and brushed away the witch’s hands. ‘Enough Meggan. Enough. I will see you tomorrow.’

Silence swallowed up the cottage as she stopped her incantation. The orange glow surrounding Caliban’s face faded and his skin slowly returned to its unwholesome state. She slithered towards the door. Before she reached it, she paused and looked expectantly back at Caliban.

He nodded, knowing her mind. ‘Meggan, I am in a benevolent mood. Lucetious will take you to the Nursery.’ Caliban looked over at the Ghul. ‘She may have an hour with her child. Watch her closely. Then head to the wharf and lead your troops to the Sessymir breach.’

Lucetious bowed. ‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Now admit the good professor and his assistants. I am looking forward to hearing about their progress.’

Gerriod continued to wade down the lonely stream. Hours had passed since he had fled the grotto; how many hours, he did not know. He yearned for the open sky where the sun marked his passage through the day. The water around him was cold and Gerriod found he was beginning to shake uncontrollably from its chill. He would have left the water course behind and headed up one of the many paths that climbed up from the river’s banks, but doing so would not help him find the wharf.

He rounded a bend to find a broad expanse of water littered with boats and a warm feeling rose up from his stomach – he had not let down his father.

Gerriod stayed in the shadows in the middle of the stream. He felt the rocky riverbed fall away quickly, indicating the harbour before him was deep. The wide curving shore to his left was ablaze with activity. Hundreds of Ghul soldiers were loading long boats with weapons and what looked like leather sacks containing supplies. They swarmed all over the wharf like insects on the carcass of a grizzum. In all their industry, they seemed totally oblivious to his presence and he hoped they would remain so.

Gerriod slowly swam to a rocky outcrop to his left. He would feel less vulnerable behind the rocks and would be in a better position to stow away in one of the small vessels should an opportunity arise.

The wharf was comprised of thirty-three piers carved out of the luminescent rock that ran throughout the Endless. The light of the piers shimmered on the water so that where shadows would usually lie under docks were flickering ribbons of soft red light. The wharf ran in a massive arc spanning almost half a league from end to end.

From his vantage point behind the rocks Gerriod could hear the coarse conversations of the Ghul as they prepared for the journey to the breach under Nilfheim. Suddenly, the soldiers went rigid, standing to attention as a commanding officer appeared at the land's end of the nearest pier. He strode purposefully down the pier.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Gerriod quietly swam through the waters to the stern of a small boat that was tethered to the end of the pier. Fearful that someone would notice his approach, he looked up but he had nothing to fear – all the cadaverous beings on the pier above him had fixed their eyes on the face of the newly arrived officer. It was the one who had snapped the fingers of the dark-skinned man Gerriod had seen earlier.

Gerriod saw his opportunity to board the small boat before him. It was a supplies boat of some description, containing what smelt like bags of rotting meat. At the rear of the boat some animal hides lay in a pile. They were not particularly large but they would be enough to cover the mariner if he curled up into a ball.

He dragged himself up the boat's hull. It felt strange. The boat was not made of wood. The entire hull seemed to be crafted from a massive skeleton and over this bony cage had been pulled a smooth, dark green hide that resembled something reptilian. Ignoring the pain in his ribs,

Gerriod grabbed the knobbly rail and hauled his torso up over the side followed by his legs. He fell to the soft deck with the grace of a stone. A groan escaped his dry lips as his head hit one of the boat's thick futtocks.

As he pulled the animal hides over his body and curled up into a foetal position, Gerriod heard the crack of a whip. It was an unmistakable sound. He had heard it many times in his youth. Tuathan ranchers would drive huge herds of grizzums past the orphanage in Murias, cracking their whips as they steered the beasts towards the grassy pastures above the town. But he wasn't familiar with the prolonged gurgling noise that followed. So intrigued by the sound was he, Gerriod risked peeking out from under the hides to see what had made the strange noise.

The Ghul officer he had seen earlier now held the handle of a long, leather whip. The far end of the knotted strand that ran out from the handle was wound tightly around the throat of a small, lean Ghul who stood almost directly above Gerriod's boat.

'I do not remember giving you permission to take your eyes from me!' snarled Lucetious.

'Lieutenant, I am sorry,' gasped the small Ghul who was finding breathing to be almost as difficult as talking in his current predicament. 'I thought I heard –'

'You are not here to think, Private!' snapped Lucetious who made his way up the whip so that he was only inches away from his subordinate. Then, in a movement so fast Gerriod was unsure what had happened, the blade of Lucetious' sword swept across the soldier's neck, simultaneously freeing the neck from the coils of the whip as well as the soldier's head from his body.

Lucetious bent down and picked up the head. Holding it aloft, his voice rang out across the wharf: 'Such will be the fate of all Ghul whose gaze drifts from our goal.' Lucetious spun the head in a bloody circle and lobbed it out across the open water. It landed with a sad *plop* twenty yards from the end of the pier. 'Listen to your orders. The advance party will take the Kobolds to the Sessymir breach and replace the team that is currently there. I will accompany the second fleet which will be comprised solely of infantry and weapon smiths. The third fleet will drop off supplies and return here to ferry more infantry to the breach. Are there any questions?'

Gerriod was not surprised when none dared to ask a question. Horns rang out across the wharf signalling to the three fleets that it was time to move. He scrunched down under the animal skins and tried not to retch from the foul-smelling stores surrounding him in the boat.

The air quickly became thick and heavy under the weighty hides. Gerriod felt dizzy in the confines of the skins and if it were not for the

exhaustion creeping across his body, and his father's decree that he make his way back to the surface of the Myr, he would have slunk out of the boat and found somewhere safe to lie down and sleep.

Suddenly the boat jolted and Gerriod could feel it swivelling on its axis. For a moment, he thought he was gently floating away from the piers, as if the boat were adrift, left to docilely wander across the waters of the Endless without a care in the dark world. But that was not the case, and when forward momentum gripped the boat, like an iron ball being loosed from a Tuirrenian catapult, Gerriod spilled back across the aft of the vessel, rolling out from the covers to find himself in a sprawled heap against the smooth skin of the transom.

Fortunately, and inexplicably, there were no Ghul aboard his boat. His tiny vessel was at the back of the third fleet which spread out before him like dull green clouds. Consternation overruled any thoughts of fear as Gerriod tried to work out what was steering his boat and thrusting it forward. He thought for a second that the vessel was being towed but no line ran out from the unusually-shaped prow. An explosion of spray to his left caught his attention and Gerriod almost screamed in shock when he saw a massive, green-skinned arm lift from the hull on the port side and sweep through the air in a loping arc. On the starboard side, another arm repeated the action. At the end of both arms, huge splayed claws raked through the water, like nightmarish paddles.

A wave of nausea crashed down upon Gerriod as he realised what he was sitting in was not a boat at all. It was alive. For the second time in the space of a day, he felt the world around him spinning. His dizziness took over and he fell back into the animal hides and bags of meat. Fighting the desire to faint, Gerriod lay back and stared at the roof of the cavern flying past.

Chapter Ten Garlot Abbey, Nessa

A small churchwren had made its nest under the eaves of Garlot Abbey. The wren was in distress. It had caught its claw in a crack where the masonry had fallen away. Far above the steps to the grand building, it mewd a plaintive cry. The wren had spent days trying to extricate itself but every time it pulled its thin, knobbly leg, her nest would wobble and her five young chicks would topple and roll across the twigs and dry grass of their small home. Unaware of their precarious position, the offspring cawed and squealed for food and water. For weeks the chicks had been happily dining on the shatterbugs their mother had brought them. Despite the prodigious numbers of shatterbugs that had swept over the Myr, it was uncommon to find them near holy buildings, as churchwrens had taken a liking to the crunchy, delicate creatures. The birds' voracious appetite had kept the shatterbugs at bay, but the last few days had seen a cloud of the glowing bugs appear over Garlot Abbey, darting about the steeple like shooting stars.

The abbey was one of countless places of worship spread throughout the world, but none commanded a more breathtaking view. It was perched upon the edge of a high cliff that cut into the Nessian Sea like the prow of a ship. Far below lay tranquil waters across which sailed ships of all shapes and sizes, bound for the cosmopolitan city of Gobnet to the north and the highly disreputable port of Brigantia to the south.

At the front of the old abbey lay a broad courtyard framed by wide marble steps on three sides. In the centre of this courtyard stood a tall, marble statue of an old man, his hands open wide in a benevolent gesture. Around one of these hands a leather rope had been wound, the other end of which was tethered to a black female snorse which chewed on the rich grass sneaking out between cracks in the paving stones at the base of the statue. Next to the snorse two figures draped in tunics of indigo and gold waited patiently, looking expectantly at the door to Garlot Abbey.

One of the figures, a young red-headed Acoran girl, looked up at the statue and smiled. A golden plaque at the base of the statue simply read: *Cephalus Silenus*. She looked over to her similarly young and red-headed sibling. 'It's like him, don't you think Tomas?'

The man looked up at the face of the statue whose gentle eastward gaze fell upon a cliff-top meadow where herds of shelp were bleating in the morning light. 'Yes, Cate,' Tomas replied, 'there's definitely a

resemblance, although I have never seen Cephalus holding onto the reigns of a snorse!’

Cate giggled. ‘I’ve never seen Cephalus with quawk faeces all over him.’

Tomas walked away from the soiled statue and cast a fleeting glance up at the sky. There was no sign of the quawks. ‘You know Cate, I really hate those birds.’

‘Yes, me too. Someone should shoot them all out of the sky.’

‘I heard of a Tuirrenian who once shot a quawk. Apparently the rest of the flock pursued him for weeks, dropping their... waste upon him wherever he went.’

‘What happened to him?’ Cate asked.

‘Apparently he slipped on all the excrement and split his head open on a rock.’

‘What happened to the birds?’

‘They just flew away and no-one in the entire realm of Tuirren ever shot a quawk again.’

Cate nodded, soaking in the story, unsure whether her brother was making it up. She gazed up at the statue and felt more than a little dismay at the fetid mess that desecrated her holy master in the most demeaning of ways. ‘You know Tomas, this is really your fault,’ she said pointing up at the statue. ‘You should have left the birds something at lunch. Then they would have left us alone.’

‘I was starving and it was my last leg of roast shelp. I’m not going to share it with nasty avian scavengers.’

She giggled again. ‘I don’t think Father Gideon is going to be too impressed when he sees what has become of his statue.’

To the right of the statue, a series of engraved tablets had been set amongst the paving stones. Cate had visited the abbey many times in the past and knew the text upon the stones by heart. They told the story of the modern church and Cephalus Silenus’ pivotal part in its development. It was common to find the tale inscribed in the brickwork of the Myr’s holy places.

Five centuries ago, the countries of Helyas and Tuirren went to war over a holy dispute. A priest from a church in Tuirren had travelled to the Helyan city of Palomides to beg the Helyans to put an end to the bloody games known as the Festival of the Forging. Distressed after witnessing the bloodshed of the competition, the priest sought comfort in a Helyan temple and knelt down to pray. Appalled to see a member of a monotheistic religious order defiling her temple, a Helyan priestess killed the man and left his body on the steps of the temple where other visitors to Palomides would see it and learn from the example she had provided.

Within two months of the incident, Tuirren launched a full naval assault upon the Helyan city of Terminus and captured it in the name of the priest who had been slain. War raged until the military forces of Tuirren, unable to maintain their supply lines, relinquished their hold upon Terminus and returned home. 16,000 men and women died in the three year war. What followed was an era of mistrust and terrifying religious parochialism. All over the Myr, armed guards stood watch over churches, temples, chapels and kirks. Irrespective of the religion, one thing the holy places had in common was a contingent of armed guards standing on the steps outside. This period of religious fervour was accompanied by similarly passionate persecution. In the name of God or gods, thousands more were killed and previously amicable relationships between many countries became strained or broken.

In Arnaksak, a secret mission was given to a sect of Arnakki warrior-priests to travel south across the Oshalla Ocean to the city of Pelinore where priests prayed to the Scorian ocean god. The Arnakki also had an ocean god and would not suffer the Scorians to have one too. On a cloud-filled night, the Arnakki priests secretly sailed into the harbour of Pelinore and before morning arrived, had killed every priest in the vast city. Over 300 holy men and women died that night.

The slaughter of the Pelinese clergy was an act that would not be tolerated. It polarized nations. The Myr stood on the brink of world war.

But one man changed it all, a humble Helyan apothecary who went by the name of Cephalus Silenus. This desert hermit took it upon himself to unite the religions of the world and did so in a way that few would have imagined – with the use of drugs. Silenus was a devout atheist and long held that religion was merely a spiritual narcotic, a way of dealing with the horribly transient nature of life upon the Myr. Silenus had little time for religion and had spent his life researching ways in which to prolong life beyond the short span given to most Myrrans. But when he heard about the slaughter of the Pelinese priests, he was outraged. It seemed to Silenus that – at the heart of it – many religions were fairly similar and the difference lay in the details. He spent years experimenting with drugs that would address this situation until one spring day, shortly after the Acora had burnt several Nessian bethels to the ground, he perfected his solution.

He had developed a powder of extraordinary properties. It was an hallucinogen with highly specific effects – it allowed a user to see, hear and smell exactly what they expected to experience. Upon entering a holy building, each member of a congregation was given a tablet to swallow. The effects were immediate and incredibly powerful. By the time a churchgoer took his or her seat, the environment would appear

exactly as it should appear. The sermon would be in strict accordance with whatever religion the drug-taker subscribed to. Religious statues and icons would appear exactly as they should, despite the fact that in reality nothing adorned a single pedestal or table inside the church. To those sitting in the pews, a holy place would be accoutred with all appropriate ornaments and displays. Even the most ardent zealot would be satisfied as the drug manifested all they needed to see.

In Silenus' arrangement, an Acoran could look across a pew and see a Helyan listening to scriptures based on the teachings of Levander, the father of all life. In the Helyan's mind, he was hearing a sermon exploring the tales of his pantheon of gods, but the Acoran would not see it that way. Creation stories that contradicted one another, religious messages that were diametrically opposed and vastly different ethics all were explored under the one roof where the Myr's religions coexisted in a happy state of contradiction.

Although it was impossible to do so, anyone entering the church without taking the drug would have seen chaos as some Myrrans stood whilst others knelt, some sang whilst others prayed in silence. During some parts of the service, the Spriggans in the congregation would give everyone kisses on the cheek oblivious to the Tethrans who flagellated themselves periodically throughout the mass. It was madness, but it worked. All religions retained their independence but the petty religious rivalries and small-minded conflicts became a thing of the past.

Despite the widespread condemnation of the concept when it was initially proposed and the steadfast objection to it over many decades, Cephalus Silenus persevered. It was an impossible idea that should have failed, but didn't, and as a result the world seemed less dogmatic. Although critics of the drug-induced cohesiveness remained, the fact was that the world was a more peaceful place than it had been for many years.

There was one other significant change that was instituted – the giving of alms. It was the one thing Silenus had mandated from the beginning. As the drugs were dispensed at the start of each service, every member of the congregation was expected to donate a single coin. The coins were not payment for the drugs, nor were they intended for the poor. Into each coin was distilled the sins of the giver. To give a coin was to hand over one's transgressions. It was a strange practice and many thought it to be a symbolic gesture, but Silenus argued otherwise. He believed this simple act of contrition to be crucial to the spiritual advancement of all Myrrans. He had met with every religious leader in the Myr and delicately convinced them to accept the practice. At first his critics cited the collection of alms to be an overt act of exploitation, but they were unable to explain the incredible feeling of release experienced

by all who turned over a coin. There was not a single person who did not feel a weight lift from their shoulders as they placed their coin in the almoner's box at the entrance to a church.

For many years, some claimed Cephalus Silenus to be Morgai, skilled in the arts of healing and persuasion, but most accepted that he was much greater. He was a holy man who had changed the world for the better. The job done, it was inevitable that Silenus would retreat from public life. He lived a private existence in a hidden grove called the Nemetona, in the south-western corner of Nessa, surrounded by his loyal acolytes, the Almoners who travelled the world collecting the coins that had amassed at each church.

'Here he comes!' said Cate when she heard the lowing creak of the abbey's door.

The priest was tall and walked with long purposeful strides. He carried before him the wide, wooden almoner's box that usually stood inside the church doors. He wore the traditional attire of Nessian holy men and women. A thick, black cowl was drawn over the man's head, keeping his eyes and forehead in shadow. A similarly dark mask obscured the lower part of his face. The mask was little more than a heavy cloth veil that ran from ear to ear across the bridge of the priest's nose. Despite the warm wind that accompanied late afternoons in Nessian spring-times, the priests of Garlot wore dense, dark woollen robes that flowed all the way to the paving stones at their feet. Only the priest's hands were visible and they were unadorned. Individuality was not a pursuit of the Nessian priests and they did much to deny the expression of it within their order. In matters of spirituality, one's gender, age and race were irrelevant.

'Here are the alms,' said the priest, his voice deep and rich but lacking in warmth. Although he had met Cate and Tomas Audrey countless times before, he spoke to them with a formality that suggested otherwise.

The pair nodded graciously and smiled. A light breeze took the indigo material of Cate's robe and rippled it across the air, revealing light pink skin above her breasts. She did not seem to be any older than eighteen years of age and, for all her spiritual devotion, exuded a potent sexual presence that made the priest look elsewhere whenever he spoke to her. Like all other Almoners, Cate did not wear a priest's veil, cowl and cassock nor did she wear shoes. Her hand brushed the priest's as she took the large wooden box from him. Oblivious to the effect she had on him, and on all males with whom she came into contact, Cate turned and

skipped over to the snorse tethered to the statue at the centre of the courtyard. The coins made a clinking sound as they were carefully poured into the saddle-pack lying across the snorse's hind quarter.

Cate returned to the priest, smiling broadly as she handed back the empty wooden box. 'Thank-you Father Gideon,' she said, her voice playful and young. She liked the priest – she liked everyone – and always displayed this naïve affection.

The priest gave a small bow and started walking back to the abbey doors.

Suddenly he stopped and spun around quickly, nervous that the two Almoners had left. They were still in the middle of the courtyard. Tomas was untying the snorse's reins from Silenus' marble hand and Cate was tightening the saddlebags in preparation for the two day trek back to the Nemetona grove.

'I almost forgot!' exclaimed the priest as he strode hastily back to the pair, rummaging in his robes as he came. From the depths of an inner pocket he extracted a gold coin. 'Please take care of this, Cate,' he said softly as he placed it in her hand. 'It is mine.'

She nodded respectfully to him and took the coin, a little confused and uncertain. 'I will, Father, but surely...'

'Thank-you Cate,' he said with unmistakable humility and soon disappeared through the abbey doors.

The afternoon light squeezed through the shutters of the bedroom window, forming bars of light upon the tatty, grey rugs that lay across the uneven floorboards of the priest's small quarters. His chamber was located near the top of the abbey's western tower. It was cluttered with papers and books. A long, narrow, unmade cot lay alongside one wall. Against the adjacent wall an old desk had been placed under the thin slit of a window. In the centre of the desk sat a small easel upon which lay a half-finished water-colour painting of sugar-elms hanging above a lush garden. In the centre of the garden a fountain sprayed water high into the air. On the left hand side of the painting, thick black clouds had gathered over the long colourless strokes of the sea. Crisp white triangles hinted at the sails of distant ships upon the grey water. In a jar beside the painting, three paint brushes stood like fingers rising up from a black pond.

The door to the room opened and the priest entered, carefully carrying a lit taper before him. He lit a candle on the desk, then blew out the fragile flame dancing at the end of the taper. He sat down on an incredibly ornate but dangerously rickety, old chair and leaned forward on the desk. One hand pulled down the cloth mask on his face, revealing

a proud countenance that was not so much aged as fatigued. Although he looked about twenty years of age, his sad eyes suggested he had seen many more years than that. The priest stared at the candle on the desk, but failed to see its light. His mind was somewhere else, many years ago...

The streets of Pelinore were soaked in the rain as heavy clouds continued to wander in from the Oshalla Ocean. The downpour sent everyone scurrying from the streets of the bustling harbour city, except one man who ignored the elements and strode purposefully towards the wharf. When he reached the promenade overlooking the port, he paused and scanned the houses lining the street. Hanging over the door of one of them was a large brass eye – the marketplace symbol for a fortune-teller's shop. Thoroughly drenched, the man cut across the cobblestone street, ignoring its puddles, his eyes fixed on the shop. A lamp was lit within and a small sign which read 'Open' hung in the window.

As he opened the door, a gust of wind exploded behind him, ripping the handle from his grasp. His cloak billowed around him and rain continued to hammer the back of his head.

'You're here! About time!' a crackly voice sang out from the behind the curtains at the rear of the shop. The man then heard the crashing of some glass upon wooden floorboards, which was followed by a curse in a strange language. This outburst continued for a while whilst whoever was behind the curtains struggled to find the opening between them. 'Don't just stand there like a lost shelp,' the voice snapped. 'Shut the door, Remiel!'

He was unnerved to hear his own name from a stranger, but should not have been surprised – this particular seer's talents were renowned throughout Scoriath. Indeed, he had heard of people who had travelled from across the sea to have their future read by the woman. He shut the door and noticed with a smile that there was no bell that shopkeepers usually used to alert them to the entrance of a customer. 'You know my name?' he mumbled.

'Remiel Grayson, son of Gideon, brother and twin to Caliban,' the voice stated proudly. 'Yes, sweet boy, I have been expecting you for a long time!'

He looked up from the pool of water he had brought into the shop, perplexed by the voice. It had softened and seemed much younger than the shrill speech he had heard only moments before. A woman clad in purple and gold stood in front of him, gazing contentedly at the

bedraggled figure before her. Black hair fell onto lily-white shoulders and he was at once captivated by her beauty.

'Remiel?' she asked, bemused by his transfixed gaze.

'I'm sorry,' Remiel responded, 'I was expecting someone much older.'

'And perhaps, not quite so attractive, yes?' she suggested.

'Um... yes,' he offered, mortified by his own honesty.

'Oh, don't be embarrassed Remiel. This is a place of truth.' She approached him slowly, almost seductively, and when they stood inches apart, he felt her hand wrap around his. A tingle of electricity shot through him, and he was astonished by how arousing he found her presence to be.

She led him across the room and sat him down on a luxurious leather couch, bedecked in cushions and soft covers made of white fur. He thought she would take the chair facing the couch but instead she sat down next to him, her closeness momentarily making him forget his reason for being there. She dropped the purple shawl from her shoulders. Her golden dress clung to her like sun on skin and Remiel trembled from the potent sensuality radiating from her body. He was nineteen and the seer seemed the same age.

Trying to tear himself from the spell he was under, Remiel straightened up and looked her in the eye. 'You are no mere soothsayer. You are Morgai. I have heard the whispers.'

She placed a hand on his lap, teasing him and leaned closely, her voice a gentle breeze in his ear. 'You should be careful about listening to whispers!' she murmured ironically.

'I need –'

'Yes, I know why you are here Remiel. Your father has revealed to you what he is and has been for centuries.'

'So it is true?' he asked, seeking confirmation of something so incredible that he had not slept for two days since being told.

The seer nodded her head. 'Surely, you know it is.'

'He is dying.'

She nodded again. 'His gifts are great but he is not so powerful that he can evade time forever.'

Remiel clasped his hands together and rested his elbows on his knees. He was still in shock. He struggled to appreciate how something of such magnitude was kept secret. 'Why did he not reveal this to us earlier? How did he keep it quiet all this time?'

She laughed and placed an arm around his shoulders. Although she was still a beguiling, brash, young woman in his eyes, she now took on a maternal aspect. It was a strange feeling to one who had never known

his mother. *'Remiel, your father did great things in his time but he put aside his Morgai ways when you and your brother were laid on his doorstep. I think he found his time as your father to be more fulfilling than the 200 years preceding it.'*

'Then you knew him?' he asked softly.

'Long, long ago, yes, I knew him. There were more of us around then. Gideon and I were close friends although he was older than I was. Decades ago I noticed a detachment in him, a reluctance to use the gifts he has – it was as if he had exhausted himself as one of the most active Morgai the Myr has known. Your father changed more lives than you could imagine, Remiel.' The young man looked into the seer's eyes and saw nothing but sincere admiration for Gideon Grayson. She obviously revered the man and it was in that moment he realized that he hardly knew his father at all.

'I had no idea,' Remiel sighed.

She patted his hand. 'He preferred it that way. A man of tremendous humility, your father. It was only at the end of his days that he found something, he always lacked – a simple life. I came to Pelinore twenty years ago seeking his assistance on a small matter concerning some visions I had at the time. I quickly realized that he did not want to take part in any more adventures, and so I have kept my distance, waiting patiently.'

Her voice seemed much older, tinged with sorrow and her gaze had drifted from him to a moment in the past. Or perhaps the future.

'Waiting? Waiting for what?' Remiel queried, asking the question for which her last comment begged.

Her eyes refocused and the young woman was back in her voice. 'Why, for you, sweet boy. I've been waiting for you.'

Remiel needed to clear his head. He thought he had come to the seer by his own volition but now he felt as if he were part of a scripted play, speaking the lines others knew, but he had not rehearsed. He walked over to the window. Rain was striking it horizontally, blurring the familiar docks outside. He needed to ask why she was waiting for him, but he wanted to kick against expectation, defy fate in the most trivial of ways. And so he asked the second question that sprang into his head, disposing of the other question triumphantly.

'What were his... talents?'

She smiled, unsurprised by the question. 'Your father had many. Gideon Grayson was perhaps the most gifted Morgai of our era. He casually ignored most laws of physics. He could command the movement of objects with a thought. He could manipulate matter in a fashion that would shame the gods. His power was both wonderful and terrifying. I

once saw him pluck a drowning child from the Mymidon Rapids with a small gesture of the hand. I have also seen him stop a man's heart just by thinking it. Fifty years ago, your father and I protected the city of Ceres from Arion pirates. He also repelled the Dark Seraph assault upon Bregon and stopped the Sessymirian foray into Amasis. It is rumoured that he stopped the collapse of an entire mine in Camulos, saving hundreds of Kobolds from certain death.'

Remiel stood transfixed by these tales of his father's exploits. He had been living with a hero all his life and never knew it. Or rather, he knew it, but never realized it. The seer's words were less of an epiphany and more like the confirmation of a thought on the edge of his mind.

'But,' she continued, 'these weren't his most notable deeds, at least not in my eyes. Gideon's greatest power was far less conspicuous. He could see through to the truth in others, and seeing things for what they were, he could avoid the traps of dissimulation so many of us set to ensnare others. Untouched by pretence and deceit, he could exert influence in the most subtle ways, achieving outcomes that were always in the common good, and so served society in a way few Morgai ever could. He was given trust readily and in receiving it, he never abused it. Gideon Grayson became the most adept of public servants. For almost fifty years he served the Assembly of Nations. There your father did his greatest work, not as a Morgai saviour, but as a simple advisor to the Chamberlain. In the Cloud Chamber, high above the fields of flowerfall encircling Cessair, his advice averted wars and set up relationships between nations that still stand today.

'On the Grand Avenue leading to the steps of Cessair Tower, a monument stands in his honour. Every day hundreds pass the statue, and yet there are very few Myrrans today who would know the name Gideon Grayson. Another statue stands in the great statuary in Sarras, but I doubt there would be a Kobold alive who knows what your father has done for the people of Camulos.'

Remiel sniffed as he became aware of the tears that had surreptitiously made their way to the rim of his eyelids. The seer smiled, touched by the pride that had welled up in the young man's eyes.

'Remiel,' she said, her voice less lyrical than it had been during her speech extolling his father's triumphs, 'your father will be dead before winter has passed. His body is old and cannot contain the Morgai energies for much longer.'

The young man nodded. 'He told me that his powers may pass to me. Or my brother. That is the way of things.'

She paused before replying, giving him a look he could not define. 'No, not exactly. His powers as I have described them will dissipate into

the ether when he passes over. It is true that the Gift of the Morgai is inherited by the child, but it is never the same gift, or gifts. Each individual is endowed in a unique way. There are no family traits. My mother could pass through any object at will. I can't even walk across a room without bumping into something. Apparently my grandfather could heal the sick with a touch of his hand, but I have no such skill. I couldn't even keep my little Brutus alive!'

With notable sadness, she nodded at a rather large bowl of slate-coloured water that stood atop an ornate pedestal at the rear of the room. Though the glass was dirty with pond-slime, Remiel could make out the thick, orange lump of a praga fish floating near the top of the bowl. Its sharp teeth were fixed in a defiantly vicious smile but its bulbous eyes had clouded in death. Remiel had heard of the much-despised fish and could not bring himself to feel anything for the deceased pet. It had talons the size of a predatory bird's and teeth lined its jaws like bent nails. Praga fish had been known to shave a victim's flesh from his bones and were among the most feared species throughout the lands. The seer however seemed deeply affected by the passing of her pet. 'I had him imported all the way from the Naiyeni River deep in Acoran. I fed him fresh skorpya every day which cost me a pretty penny, believe me. But he clearly wanted more.' Her voice faded away.

'Shouldn't you throw it out?' Remiel suggested meekly.

'I can't bring myself to do it.'

Remiel suddenly felt a little uncertain about the seer's state of mind. 'If you don't mind, could we possibly return to the matter at hand?' he said cautiously, hoping not to offend her.

She turned back to him and clasped his hands in hers. She was so near he could smell numerous fragrances floating up from the folds of her gowns. Her perfumes and her nearness clouded his head a little, but he managed to hold on to his reason for being there and articulated as plainly as he could: 'Morgai, I need to know – can you see my future?'

She grinned knowingly. 'Is it your future you seek Remiel, or that of your twin brother?'

'In knowing one, I will know the other. Please tell me, which of us is to inherit our father's power?'

She held his gaze, looking deep into his questioning eyes. 'Do you think it's you?'

Remiel looked from the carpet to the fish bowl to the wet world outside as he tried to find an answer to this provocative question. 'I... I truly do not know.'

'But you would like the power, wouldn't you?' she said softly. There was something behind those words. It was as if the seer were testing him. Or tempting him.

'My father has not told Caliban yet,' he said blankly.

'Do you believe that to be significant?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. I think that he... fears Caliban.'

'There are very few things in this world Gideon Grayson fears, Remiel.'

He said nothing. He could feel her eyes upon him, scrutinizing him and he found the silence to be discomforting. His eyes continued to roam the floor, not wanting to connect with hers. She leaned closer and he felt her soft, sweet breath upon his face. She spoke, her words delicately reaching out like tiny ripples across a tranquil pond. 'Remiel, do you desire power so much that you are driven here to acquire it?'

Now he knew she was testing him and he felt a little insulted by the inference. 'No, you don't understand. It's not that I seek power. But I...' He sat back in the couch unwilling to articulate what he was thinking, his hands breaking away from her long fingers which had been stroking his skin seditiously.

'You fear what your brother would do with it.'

Remiel nodded. 'Yes,' he whispered, ashamed by the admission.

'And you are here to discover if that fear is justified.'

Again he nodded.

'And if we find that your concerns are merited, what will you do? Would you deny your brother the chance for greatness? Would you take from him these special gifts and bestow them upon yourself? Does he not have just as much right to possess these talents as you?'

He swallowed before speaking. 'For years now I have had dreams. Bloody dreams through which Caliban hobbles, and everything he touches becomes diseased and rotten. These dreams show sunless places I have never seen, where vile things lurk and sitting amongst it all, I see my brother, smiling a broken smile as all around him dies. There must be a reason for these nightmares.'

'You haven't answered my question. At the moment of his fading, your father will pass on his Morgai talents to one of his two children. Are you prepared to take from him that which may be Caliban's to claim?'

Remiel leant forward. 'But why would one child have greater claim to such powers? Are there rules?'

The seer laughed. 'Rules! If there is one thing that these magicks ignore, it is the notion of rules. The Morgai gift is above the very concept of regulation. It is the absence of rules, of natural laws, that makes the Morgai what they are.'

'I just thought that perhaps the powers were passed to the first born, or something like that.'

'Perhaps that would be the way of it if this were a fairy story Remiel. But this is reality and I must warn you of the road you walk upon. It is paved in contradictions and ironies. You seek the future and that is hidden from you for a reason.'

'But something brought me to you. If the future holds something dreadful in store for the Myr, I could not live with myself knowing I could have changed that future but chose to sit on my hands instead.'

'If you could influence the future, what are you prepared to do?'

'Anything... for the greater good.'

The seer stood up and stretched. As she stretched, she closed her eyes, enjoying the increase of physical tension and its subsequent release. Remiel noticed how the silks of her gown hugged the Morgai's taut, youthful body. She was – without question – the most bewitching woman he had ever seen. He knew she was much older than she looked, but strangely, it didn't seem to matter. 'The greater good,' she mused as she threw her long, black hair back and massaged her scalp. 'Now there's an interesting... meaningless phrase. I wonder what Caliban would make of it.'

The mention of his brother's name sent pangs of guilt ricocheting through Remiel's brain. 'Seer, I love my brother and would spare him from becoming the thing in my dreams.'

'They are only dreams at the moment, Remiel.'

'Please... show me my future.'

She was a gifted seer. She had even anticipated this very conversation and had already seen much of the future Remiel Grayson feared – he had good reason to be concerned. What he had found in his dreams was not unlike that which she had discovered in her own visions, but where he had seen single threads, the seer had discerned entire tapestries, intricate, ornate and terrifying.

For years Caliban Grayson's image had appeared in her mind's eye and there was no doubt that he had a pivotal part to play in irrefutably violent times ahead. Two images repeated themselves to her. She could see Caliban standing before a massive hanging crystal, laughing maniacally over what he saw. A crimson light surrounded him giving her

the impression that both he and the crystal were enveloped in blood. This image would invariably fade only to be replaced by one more startling and inexplicable. A diseased severed hand clawed across the landscape, toppling over tall towers and church steeples like pieces on a gameboard. She had never understood the visions but realized their significance. Over recent years, the frequency and clarity of her imaginings increased and rarely had a week passed that she did not experience a variation upon these two visions.

Caliban Grayson was her reason for staying in Pelinore. Her visions of chaos began shortly after he and Remiel came into the world. She had watched him from afar, but he was a secretive child and as he grew older he became even more private. Respecting Gideon's desire to be left alone, the seer had few opportunities to get close to Caliban, but there was no doubting her prescience was at its most potent when she was near him.

After ten years in Pelinore, the seer travelled abroad, seeking respite from the increasingly perturbing things she had seen, but the images did not stop. Caliban had figured prominently in her visions in other cities. She had read the future of a seamstress in Sulis and seen the woman's son poking the fallen body of a hideous female creature wearing a suit of armour made of bone. This creature, seemingly dead, exploded into a fury of teeth and claws, ripping the man to shreds. She ate of his flesh and upon finishing gave praise to Caliban.

In the incredible city of Ganesa, she had read the future of a woman whose daughter would become a famous dancer. At first the girl's future seemed more promising than most. The seer foretold of a magical night at the Scarlet Rock Theatre where the dancer was presented with a bouquet of eternal roses by Chamberlain Llyr himself. Similarly wonderful occasions followed and the Tethran woman had beamed to hear of her daughter's success. But the images darkened and the seer foretold of a great vortex of water that swirled around the girl as her hand was torn from that of a man who was struggling to hold on to her. The last image involving the woman's daughter was the most disturbing. She had been washed up on the shore of a dark lake, her body battered and lifeless. A foot nudged the body, and a long staff made of bone prodded it. Numerous pairs of thin, pale hands rolled the body over to reveal the dancer's face, ravaged by leprosy. Standing above the body, silhouetted against a luminescent cavern wall was Caliban's similarly diseased figure.

In her foretellings, the seer saw many other images she could not explain, horrible simulacra of things yet to take place, but on the edge of all of them was the depraved visage of Caliban Grayson.

She drew herself out of her thoughts and spoke to Remiel. 'There is one who lives nearby, an apothecary by the name of Garnett Shaw, who is somehow entwined in this complex tapestry involving your brother. Seven days ago he came to me seeking answers. Like you, he has been plagued by dreams of a most troubling kind. I read Shaw and know what lies in store for him. He will leave Pelinore any day now and travel far across the sea. Over the next few years, a growing number of apothecaries will join him in the fog-shrouded swamp of Mag Mel and he will rise to prominence within the community. For a time, he shall live a fulfilled life, exploring his craft, enjoying the company of like-minded artisans. But this will change. Heralded by the arrival of a Pelinese knight by the name of Sir Edgar Worseley, a day will come when Shaw's happy world will be ripped asunder by bone-covered warriors who fight for one called Caliban Grayson. I understand your worries, Remiel. I know your fear.'

She took his hand and led him back to the couch. She placed her hands upon his shoulders and pulled him towards her lap, indicating to him to lie down. 'Try to relax as much as you can,' she said to him as he laid his head across her thighs. She placed her soft fingertips on his temples and started rubbing them in delicate, circular movements. He was not finding it difficult to relax.

'I would like to know everything you see,' he murmured as her fingers continued to massage his temples.

The seer stopped and adopted a tone that was surprisingly stern. 'Remiel, that is not something I recommend. I do not always see the future in a literal sense. I see portents, symbols, images that may represent reality metaphorically. I can interpret these but interpretation is a dangerous thing, even for one who is well-practised in the art. For you to hear all I see is perilous. It is true that sometimes what I see transpires exactly as I see it, but don't forget, I lack context.'

He opened his eyes, a little disappointed that she had stopped rubbing his head as she made her point. 'Context?'

'I once looked into the future of a nobleman across the sea. In my vision I saw a man standing over the badly beaten body of the nobleman's son. He held a knife to the boy's throat and raised it to kill the boy. In response to my vision, the nobleman immediately sent his soldiers to find the man I had described and they discovered him in the very act I had foreseen. The man was disarmed before he could kill the boy and summarily executed for his crime. A month after the dramatic rescue of the nobleman's son, it was discovered that the boy had actually

slaughtered the family of the man the soldiers had executed, and was responsible for the deaths of countless more innocents in the period that followed, including his own mother and father.'

'You're talking about Lord Essar of Tuirren aren't you? The boy was Kingsley Essar. He was finally caught stealing into his baby sister's room with the very knife that was on his throat when the soldiers rescued him.'

The seer nodded. 'Yes. Had I said nothing, Kingsley Essar would have been killed by the man whose family he had slaughtered and the lives of many more would have been saved. We must be careful Remiel. It is a serious business in which we are involved.'

'But I must know. There is too much at stake here. I must know if my brother is to be corrupted by the Morgai powers he stands to inherit.'

'It is not the powers of the Morgai that will corrupt your brother Remiel. He already walks upon dark roads. You are aware of his indulgence in black arts?'

'I am. I also see the visitors he admits to his house in the middle of the night. Strange men and women from faraway lands. Acora. Caquikki. Cephalonians. I have watched them come and go, hiding their presence from the light of day. I want to trust my brother but I am not a fool.'

The seer contemplated this point of view and after long moments acquiesced to Remiel's request – she would tell him everything she saw. He closed his eyes and felt his mind cut loose of its moorings. The seer's voice floated to him across the empty space.

'I'm in a cavern of some sort. It's a grotto. I can hear water lapping against the walls around me. There's a mound with a strange crucifix in the middle of it. Fixed on the cross is an old man with grey hair. He's barely alive. Someone else is here. I hear tapping... It's your brother. Much older. He looks pale. His skin is torn. He is holding a staff. He's... he's torturing this man, but asks no questions of him. Your brother, he's smiling. Wait, the grotto is fading.

'We're in a room. All the curtains are pulled. A candle is being lit. There are others in the room. An Acoran. He's tall. Handsome. He is looking at the pages of a book. Another man stands beside him pointing at some text. He wears glasses. The sides of his head are shaved. Yes, he's one of the Caquikki. Caliban is there, listening intently to all the Caquikki is saying. A baby cries. It's gone now. I'm somewhere else.

'I can feel light on my face. It's very bright. I'm on the edge of a cliff. You are there. So is the tall Acoran but he is different. One side of

his face is burnt. There is another man there. He has a long scar running down his face. The scarred man swiftly stabs the Acoran with a black sword. His body slides off the blade and topples over the cliff.

'The light is changing. It's now full of colour. I'm in a church. The sun is streaming through the windows. It's beautiful. A man is kneeling before the altar. I think he's a priest. He has his cowl drawn over his head. The priest – it's you Remiel. You have a black veil across your face, but I can tell, it's you. Now we're in a small room, a bedroom of sorts. You are sitting at a desk. You're staring at a candle but you're mind is elsewhere. There's a knock at the door. You stand and turn. Someone has entered the room. It's... it's the Acoran again. He puts out a hand to greet you but it is coated in blood.

'Now you're fading but the Acoran remains. He sits with a young woman. She's Sessymirian. She has a birthmark over her left eye. Wait. Everything is twisting. I can see the Sessymirian but now she's just a little girl. Just an infant. A man holds up a wide blade with a serrated edge. Others hold the girl's arm down on a table. They're going to cut off her hand!'

The seer's voice had risen – the brutality of the visions was taking a toll upon her.

'It's night-time. A desert. You're running. There are others with you. You're all exhausted but you continue to run.

'Wait... it's still night-time but you're somewhere else now. A stadium of some sort. You're walking through the stands. Ugh... it's terrible! I've never seen so many dead bodies all at once. There are thousands of them, lying in pools of dark blood. Their chests have been torn open. Most of them have their eyes still open. There's a big man huddled over a small boy. The man – he's Tethran. He has metal plates grafted to his skin. He's upset. You're standing beside him. You're telling him you're sorry for what has happened. He tells you that it's not you're fault. Says he's going to be the one to kill Caliban.

'Now, it's changing. The wind is blowing. Everything is moving. I'm on a ship. It's a wreck. The sails are torn, the masts broken. There are bodies everywhere, most of them dead. There's a great crimson beast attacking the ship. A Caquikki male is trapped under a beam on the shattered deck. The beast clamps its jaws down upon this man. No-one can stop it.

'Everything's changed again. I can see you. You're captive. Your arms are bound. You're saying something. You're telling someone he's sick. It's Caliban. He pulls out a knife and slashes you across the cheek. Blood pours from the wound. Now you're curled up on the floor, screaming. You're in agony. You're clutching at your skin as if the flesh

were being cut from your bones. Caliban is watching, delighted by your pain.'

The seer paused, but only to draw breath. The barrage of visions continued to assault her. Her eyes darted around in her head, trying to keep up with the maelstrom of images that enveloped her.

'I'm in Cessair, I think. Yes, I'm standing upon the fields of flowerfall before the city. The tower. It's being ripped apart. The city is crumbling.

'Now it's freezing cold. I'm on an island. A frozen island. The sun is shining high above in a brilliant blue sky...

'No, now it's early evening. The stars are just coming out. I'm standing at the base of a pit. Something is rolling towards me. It's a head. A Kobold head. Someone is picking it up. It's Caliban. He's holding the bloody head aloft, threatening hundreds upon hundreds of Kobolds and Spriggans who watch on in horror. Dear gods. They're slaughtering them. Caliban has set an army upon the people in the pit. I can see Spriggan bodies everywhere. The Kobolds. They've gone. They're all gone.

'It's changed. I can see you. You're on your knees. You look shocked. You gaze down. A long, black sword covered in blood protrudes from your stomach. Someone has stabbed you from behind, right through your spine. It's growing dark again. It's finished. That's it.

'No. Not yet. There's something else. It's, it's... me. I'm lying on my back. I'm wounded. I can taste the blood in my mouth. A woman approaches me. An Acoran. She's beautiful. Dark hair and eyes. She's laughing at me. She's holding a glaive. She's going to kill me. She pulls the glaive back and —'

The seer jumped up from her position on the couch and Remiel's head fell back into the cushions. He felt groggy and his head ached. He shook his head to dispel the fog that had overtaken him.

By contrast, the seer was ashen-faced and extremely agitated. She gulped trying to regain her breath. 'In... in all my years of peering into the future,' she said struggling to get each word out, 'it's the first time I've witnessed my own death.'

Remiel sat up, rubbing the back of his head as if he'd been struck there. 'I know what you mean. I'm not looking forward to having a sword rammed through my back.'

The seer was clearly unnerved by the onslaught of images. She collapsed back into the couch, her head falling into Remiel's lap. His

arm wrapped around her to cradle her exhausted body. He held her forearm and could feel her excited blood charging through her veins. Remiel decided not to say anything more until the seer was ready. She had shut her eyes. Her breasts rose and fell as she struggled to get her breath back. The foretelling had clearly taken a toll upon her.

He looked down at her face. She was striking. High, rounded cheekbones accentuated the sublime symmetry of her face. Her nose was thin and elegant as were her eyebrows. Her silky hair fell across his lap like a dark wine spilling from her perfectly shaped head. Her thick, red lips lay like ripe, red gorseberries upon a satin cloth.

'Remiel, I don't mind you staring at me – in fact, I quite enjoy it – but I know you have questions you would like to ask.'

He blushed. He had just been told of the most brutal and bleak future imaginable and all he could think of was the seer's beauty.

'Don't be embarrassed Remiel,' she said softly without opening her eyes. 'It's one of my Morgai talents. Men struggle to concentrate upon other things when in my presence. You've done very well to stay as focused as you have.'

Remiel shrugged. 'I'll take that as a compliment, I guess.'

'Your questions Remiel?'

'You mentioned many things that had nothing to do with me. Why?'

She smiled. It was a logical question to ask. 'Sweet boy, I cannot pick and choose what I see. I cannot control the visions that come to me. It seems you have a pivotal role to play in all this.'

'The girl. The Sessymirian with the birthmark. Who is she?'

'I do not know.'

Remiel dwelt upon the fate of this girl. Of all the atrocities he had witnessed, this one stood out. Perhaps it was her youth, her innocence. Perhaps, more than anything, the girl's plight epitomised the obscene cruelty of the future the seer had laid out before him. 'Can it be avoided? Is this future set?'

It was the question they all asked. It was the inevitable quandary that surrounded stirring the waters of Time. 'I cannot answer that for you Remiel. What you have seen is simply the future that unravels from here.'

He frowned. The answer was unsatisfying. 'Then tell me this – have you ever been wrong?'

'Not to my knowledge.'

'So there is nothing I can do to stop my brother from committing the atrocities we have witnessed here.'

'I did not say that. You must realise, in all my years of foretelling, I have never been presented with such an array of intricately-connected images.'

'But can I change it?' She opened her eyes. His voice was suffused with the desperation that the situation would evoke in even the most stoic of individuals.

'I don't know Remiel. As I said before, a Morgai's skills defy laws and patterns. It is not absolutely certain that you brother will triumph.'

This did little to allay his fears. 'But what do I do?'

'Perhaps nothing. Difficult to say. I cannot give counsel to you Remiel.'

'What counsel do you give yourself? You've seen your own death. Will you just accept it when it comes?'

The seer thought about this. It was an excellent question and she had not expected it. She sat up. 'I do not believe I will. I'm not sure anyone can resign themselves to death so easily.' She looked at his innocent face – he was too young to be embroiled in such a difficult situation. The seer could see so much of his father in him. She could sense he had his father's heart. *'I assume Gideon has spoken to you about the Passing,' she asked.*

'A little. He said that at the moment of his death, he would hold his hands with his heir and the Morgai gift would be exchanged.'

'Yes, the Passing is crucial. It explains why the Morgai have all but departed the Myr. Should there be no heir to receive the gift, the Morgai power simply fades from this realm and joins the mystical fabric of the universe.'

He ran a hand through his tousled black hair as he tried to digest what she had just said. 'I'm not sure I understand you. Are you saying that neither of us will receive the gift should we not be present at the moment of our father's death?'

'Yes,' she replied. 'That is correct. At the moment of death the Morgai power seeks a vessel, it cannot survive without a host. The power is transferred to whomever it can reach. It has nothing to do with blood-right or mystical rules.'

'So if I possess it, my brother does not. That is a simple choice, isn't it? Black. White.'

'Look outside Remiel. Someone who has grown up on the rain-soaked streets of Pelinore should know there is always grey. And once something is grey, there is nothing that will make it white again.'

He gave her a disgruntled look. 'I don't need riddles, Morgai. I need advice. What am I to do?'

She placed a hand on his cheek. 'Sweet boy, I cannot choose for you.'

'It's hopeless,' he muttered to himself.

The seer smiled. She stood up, moved to the window and drew back the curtain. The rain had stopped momentarily and the streets of Pelinore glistened. Although, inevitably, the clouds would move in again, for a brief moment the beacon tower on the harbour stood a proud, brilliant white against the dark rain clouds that had drifted out to sea. 'There is always hope, Remiel. There is always a way.'

Remiel stood up and prepared to leave. 'Then I must try to defy fate. I cannot do nothing. You have just shown me a vision of things to come that requires me to act. I have been told of a future far worse than anything I could have imagined. Caliban is destined to inherit the power of the Morgai and I must do what I can to thwart such an eventuality.'

Although the seer seemed preoccupied with a flock of gillygulls that darted about the waves in the harbour beyond, she was listening to him. 'Are you certain of that Remiel?' she remarked, her eyes continuing to peer out the shop window. 'Unfortunately, the visions did not present the moment of the Passing. We cannot say with absolute certainty that Caliban is Gideon's heir.'

'You ask me whether I am certain?' he challenged her, his voice tinged with anger. 'I don't have that luxury! You alluded to the power he wielded over the creatures in your visions, his part in all that is to befall the Myr, the torture he inflicted upon me. I have to assume he is the one who takes the inheritance. Everything you described would not be so if I were Morgai and he a mere human.'

Remiel made his way to stand beside the seer. On the other side of the glass, silvery rivers of rainwater found their way through the cobblestones. A group of children had come outside to play on the street, splashing one another in the puddles on the roadside. A man stood in the doorway of a shop smoking a pipe. A number of boats in the harbour had used the break in the rain to set sail, the familiar, creamy white triangles of their canvasses lifting Remiel's spirits a little. He gazed upon the scene entranced by its familiarity. A minute passed before he spoke. 'It's such a beautiful world, Morgai. I'd hate to lose it.'

He placed a bag of coins upon a small table near the door and left the shop.

'Lilith. My name is Lilith,' she said proudly as the door clattered shut.

But Remiel did not hear her. His mind had moved on as soon as he stepped outside. He was staring thoughtfully at a sign hanging above a shop down the way: 'Dr Garnett Shaw, Apothecary'. His eyes narrowed a little as an idea slithered into his head. It was not a pleasant idea, nor was it something he would have entertained an hour before. But a lot had changed in the past hour and with a purposeful step, he made his way down the footpath to the shop. Giving a quick glance up and down the street before entering, Remiel opened the door and disappeared inside just as the first few drops of another deluge began to break upon the cobblestones.

The candle had exhausted itself and all was dark and silent in the small room. Sleep had taken Father Gideon. His head lay in his arms, as still as the stub of melted wax on the table beside him.

The murder of Captain Gramercy made no sense. He was respected by friends, loved by family and disliked by no-one. But he was dead with an ornate Acoran knife deep in his belly. Jolon Bligh, the man who would be apprehended for his murder, usually spent his days doing odd jobs for the villagers in return for a meal and a smile and was the last person anyone in Garlot would have thought capable of such a heinous crime.

The local Magistrate hovered over the body as he tried to make sense of the situation. He was a burly man, stoic in disposition and a stickler for the law. He wore long, flowing black robes trimmed with red velvet. Upon his round shoulders distinctive talon-shaped epaulets signified his great office as did the pair of golden bandoliers that lay across his chest.

The Magistrate was unperturbed by the gruesome scene having seen far worse when he worked as a guard on the Hulks, the Myr's infamous fleet of prison ships. His deputies stood to one side watching their boss examine the dead man's wound.

'I think you'll find that the cause of death will be that rather large knife protruding from his stomach,' Maeldune Canna said with a soft voice heavily laden with sarcasm. He paced back and forth, occasionally stepping over the unconscious figure of Jolon Bligh lying in the gutter of the alleyway. Clearly annoyed that he had been detained from leaving the scene, he looked up and down the narrow alley and growled, 'How much longer is this going to take? I have matters of great import awaiting my attention.'

The Magistrate, a broad-faced Nessian with ruddy cheeks, looked up at the tall Acoran and apologised. 'Minister Canna, I am sorry but we can't release you from a crime scene until we get all the facts straight.'

Maeldune sneered at him. As Minister for Justice, Maeldune Canna was the man's superior, the only person other than the Chamberlain to whom the Myr's Magistrates had to answer. This fact was not lost on the Magistrate who wanted nothing more than to be somewhere else, such as the middle of a tavern brawl or quelling a riot in the local jail.

Maeldune cleared his throat, his way of suggesting to the Magistrate that he should pay careful attention to what was to follow. 'You want the facts, do you? Then let me reiterate them for you in language simple enough for you to understand.'

The deputies risked a look at one another, wondering whether their boss would respond to this deliberately provocative taunt. The Magistrate's ruddy face gained even more colour but he said nothing, waiting for Maeldune to continue.

The Acoran walked around the dead body and stood above the Magistrate, his stance doing much to suggest who was really in charge. 'On my way to the abbey at the top of the bluff, I heard the sounds of raised voices coming from this alley. I investigated to find this man' – he paused to glance down at the somewhat pathetic figure of Jolon Bligh lying in the gutter – 'hunched over the body of the victim. He had his right-hand on the pommel of the dagger and his left hand was searching through the victim's coat pockets. Enraged by what I saw, I picked up a rock and struck the perpetrator across the head with it. Shortly afterwards, you and your men, no doubt informed of a disturbance by a local resident, arrived to find that I already had the situation in hand. Such a brave act of civic duty would be applauded in most towns, but clearly not in Garlot.'

'Minister,' the Magistrate whispered gently, clearly apprehensive of saying anything more that could upset Maeldune, 'this man can only be considered a suspect at this point in time. We cannot assume any more until we have heard his side to the story and in order to do that, we must wait for him to regain consciousness.'

Maeldune's eyes flared. 'Do not patronise me with your prattling explanations, Magistrate. I am insulted by your comment. It smacks of insubordination.'

The Magistrate rose with his head lowered and his hands held open in a gesture meant to placate the Acoran. 'Minister, I assure you that is not the case. I was merely explaining the regulations that govern my actions in a situation such as this.'

'You do not need to lecture me about such regulations,' Maeldune scoffed. 'I had a hand in writing them, or perhaps I need to remind you of who I am.'

'No sir, that won't be necessary.'

Maeldune leant down and to the amazement of all who were conscious in the alleyway, he plucked the dagger from the stomach of the deceased and proceeded to wipe the blade clean on the dead man's sleeve. 'Please, Magistrate, indulge me. Who am I?'

The Magistrate swallowed hard. All moisture had vanished from his mouth and he found it difficult to find the words to speak. 'You are Maeldune Canna, Minister for Justice.'

'That is correct. Let us explore that further shall we?' Although his words were formal and his manner polite, there was no mistaking the sinister intent of Maeldune's comments. 'I am the Minister for Justice and you are a Magistrate. As Magistrate, you enjoy a privileged position, do you not? Answerable to no-one?'

'I am answerable to you and the Chamberlain.'

'Ah yes, yes you are,' Maeldune mused, the wry smile on his lips more dangerous than the weapon he held in his hand. He looked at the dagger and held it up admiringly. 'It's beautiful don't you think? Look at the exquisite craftsmanship of the blade. This is a magnificent piece of steel.'

'Yes Minister,' the Magistrate sighed, unsure and fearful of where this exchange was headed.

'Do you recognize the design Magistrate?' Maeldune asked with more threatening familiarity.

Unsettled by his query and unwilling to answer, the Magistrate looked away from the dagger, but he could feel Maeldune waiting patiently for his reply. 'The blade was probably forged in Sarras, but the design is clearly Acoran. There's no mistaking it,' he mumbled.

Maeldune laughed and clapped the Magistrate on the back. 'You know your weapons, sir!'

A silence fell upon the scene. The deputies stared at Maeldune and he stared at the Magistrate who kept his eyes fixed on the late Carl Gramercy who in turn stared blankly at the slit of blue sky high above the alleyway.

Finally Maeldune spoke. 'What's on your mind, Magistrate?'

Maeldune was testing him and the Magistrate knew it. He had to give an answer but he had lost any desire to pursue the case. Reluctantly, he articulated a point so obvious, he knew Maeldune wanted it made just so he could dismiss it. 'I guess I'm wondering,' he sighed, 'how someone like Bligh came to be in possession of such an exotic weapon.'

Maeldune beamed. The Magistrate's answer was perfect. He strutted around the Magistrate who kept his head low and his manner suppliant. 'Foolish man! You overplay the knife's significance.' Maeldune cast a glance at the deputies who quickly averted their eyes, unwilling to be brought into the discussion. 'Your amazing powers of observation may have picked up on the fact that I too am Acoran, Magistrate. Do you consider me to be an exotic thing? Perhaps you think that because this dagger is Acoran and I am Acoran, that I am the murderer here, and this vagabond, a poor victim of circumstance. Is that it? Is that the conclusion your exhaustive analysis has led you to?'

The Magistrate gritted his teeth trying to restrain his fury. Maeldune was pushing him, baiting him. No other man in the Myr would have been able to bully him in such a way and keep his head attached to his neck, but no other man in the Myr had such power over him. Maeldune could ruin him with a word, destroy his career and have him thrown into the Hulks for treason. 'No Minister. Of course not. Just trying to get the matter sorted before I write up a report.'

'Yes, I shall look forward to reading it.'

The Magistrate was ashamed of his willingness to abandon his principles before his deputies. He hoped Maeldune would grant him the opportunity to save face, to cling to some pretence of justice. He turned to face the Acoran, his face redder than ever. 'Minister, this man, Jolon Bligh, he's never done a bad thing before in his life. He's the most gentle man I have ever met.'

'Yes?' said Maeldune coldly.

'He's a bit slow, you see, and getting on in years. He –'

Suddenly a long, low groan sounded from the gutter. It was Bligh gaining consciousness. He raised a shaking hand to his head before he opened his eyes. When his hand came across the tender spot where Maeldune had slammed the flat of a rock upon his skull, it recoiled as if he had touched hot coals. The few hairs he had left on his wrinkled head were wet with blood. He opened his eyes but struggled to focus on the strange scene before him. He was momentarily disoriented, unsure of where he was and how he got there. A tall man clad in black stood behind the familiar figure of Garlot's Magistrate who was kneeling on the dirty stones of the alleyway. The body of a man lay before the Magistrate and with terrifying suddenness it all came back to him. Captain Gramercy had been stabbed and the tall man in black – he had done it.

Without warning, Bligh was hauled to his feet and brought before the Magistrate.

'Jolon,' the Magistrate said, 'you're in a lot of trouble.'

Bligh's face was a muddy blend of shock, fear and incredulity. His large, bulbous eyes flicked around apprehensively before resting upon the face of the Magistrate. He opened his mouth to say something but was too dumbstruck by the occasion to find the words to speak.

The Magistrate looked at the old man piteously. 'Boys, take him down to the cells.'

Bligh's wet eyes widened. 'Magistrate, please!' he begged, as an image of Garlot's rattu-infested jail wrapped around his brain. 'Let me speak, sir!'

Everyone in the alley knew the truth. There was no doubting the man's innocence. There was no way this docile, aged man could have killed Gramercy. The Minister for Justice had committed the crime. The Magistrate could feel Maeldune's eyes boring into the back of his skull, applying pressure.

'Perhaps I need to remind you of who I am.'

The Magistrate understood the precariousness of his position. A step in the wrong direction would end his career and that was no small matter. The appointment to a role of Magistrate was one of the greatest honours that could be bestowed upon a Myrran. Thousands applied but few were chosen. Acting as judge, jury and jailer, the Magistrates were feared and admired throughout the Myr. They were above influence and recrimination, answerable to two men only, one of whom was standing right behind him. Among the most powerful people in the Myr, the Magistrates had free reign to do whatever was required to make sure justice was done. Although justice took on many shades of meaning and there had been many times when the Magistrate of Garlot had enjoyed the ambiguities surrounding his role, this was not one of those times. He was about to send a man to his death for a murder he did not commit. Justice meant nothing now.

The Magistrate could feel a small part of him rebel against this course of action and it was this part, despite the presence of Minister Canna that gave Jolon Bligh the opportunity to speak. It was a small concession and no consolation for the fate that awaited the poor old man, but under the circumstances, it was the best the Magistrate could do.

'Alright Jolon. Quickly.'

Although Jolon Bligh was not endowed with a great intellect, he knew enough to realize that what he was about to say was more important than anything he had uttered in his seventy-three years. 'It was like this sir,' he began nervously. 'I was making my way down to the market when I heard a ruckus coming from the alley. It was Captain Gramercy and this man here.' Bligh swallowed hard and nodded at Maeldune. He did not look at him directly. He then cast a look at the bloody body of

Carl Gramercy that lay between him and the Magistrate. 'I never seen Captain Gramercy so riled in all my life,' he said sadly.

'What was he riled about Jolon?' As soon as he asked the question, the Magistrate could feel the Minister's sharp eyes stab into the back of his skull. He knew that Maeldune would be incensed by the indulgence he was granting the wretch before him, but he felt bound to go through the motions, assume some show of justice, even though the end result was preordained.

Bligh took a deep breath before committing his thoughts to speech. 'You see sir, well, it seems this man here had seen the Captain's daughter and was a bit taken by her and wanted to take it further, if you know what I mean.'

'No, Jolon,' said the Magistrate sternly, 'I don't know what you mean. And you have ten seconds to explain yourself.'

Bligh blushed but raced ahead, all too aware of his tenuous situation. 'When I came on the scene, the tall man here was saying, "You're lucky I offered you anything at all!" and the Captain, well, his face was redder than a bogcrab and he was saying, "My daughter ain't no whore to be bartered with!" and then he smacked this man across the face.'

The two deputies risked a quick glance at one another, stunned at what they had just heard. If it had been any other man, the deputies would have added a smirk but – just like the Magistrate – they knew their careers hung in the balance.

Maeldune stepped closer to the Magistrate but stayed behind him, keeping Jolon Bligh fixed in his gaze. The Acoran's voice was cool and controlled. 'Magistrate, in order to divert attention from his despicable crime, this felonious fool is asserting that I was engaged in some act of solicitation. I am married to one of the Royal House of Carrucan. I cannot stand here and have my name, and my wife's name, tarnished by Garlot's village idiot.'

Understanding enough of Maeldune's comment to be infuriated by it, Bligh exploded. 'It's true sir! I swear it! Then I saw him pull out that there dagger and stick it in Captain Gramercy's guts. I never seen such a bad thing before. I just stood there watching. Then he turned around and seeing me standing there, he came at me. I made to run but he was too quick. That's the last thing I saw. I guess I'm lucky he didn't knife me too.'

But Bligh's luck had long since left him. Maeldune stepped forward. He was smiling. He walked past the Magistrate and stood directly in front of the old man who seemed to shrink in the Acoran's presence. Maeldune still held the knife he had pulled from the body and played with it absent-mindedly, twisting it around in his hands. He gazed down

at Bligh and whispered, 'Poor soul,' but there was no pity to be found in his voice. Without taking his eyes off Bligh, Maeldune addressed the Magistrate. 'Tell me, how long have you served in this post?'

At first the Magistrate did not reply, unsure whether the question was directed at him. But in the silence to follow, he realised not only to whom the question was aimed, but also why it was asked. 'Almost five years, sir,' he said sombrely, acutely aware of the position his answer placed him in.

'Almost five years, you say?' Maeldune mused, his voice slightly higher. 'So your tenure is almost done. You will be up for review soon.' It was a threatening statement and even Bligh recognised the meaning behind it.

The Magistrate lowered his eyes and said, 'In two months, sir.'

Maeldune whirled around. 'Then I suggest you stay the course Magistrate. It is not a time to equivocate.'

The Magistrate nodded. He had gone too far, allowed Bligh to say too much. He had to quickly repair the damage done. 'Tassoni! Vaiano! Take Mr Bligh down to the docks. We will set sail for Brigantia tonight.'

At the mention of Brigantia, Bligh started bucking and screaming. 'You're sending me to the Hulks? But I haven't done anything! I haven't done anything!' He kicked and twisted to break the deputies' hold upon him, but they were much younger and stronger than he.

Bligh was unceremoniously dragged back down the alleyway and hauled through the town to Garlot's small, rarely-used prison to await the boat that would take him to Brigantia.

The Magistrate, fearful of the Minister's wrath, knelt down before him and fawned. 'Minister Canna, you have my humblest apologies for this terrible misunderstanding. I won't keep you a moment longer.'

'You have done well, Magistrate,' Maeldune said magnanimously. 'These are troubling times. Steadfast leadership is what the Myr needs right now.'

There was nothing in the Magistrate's demeanour that suggested he agreed with the Minister, that he had *done well*. He hung his head to avoid Maeldune's gaze. Before him lay the blood-soaked body of Carl Gramercy. Had Gramercy breath to give life to words, what a tale of injustice he could tell. This was something the Magistrate would wrestle with long after Maeldune had departed from Garlot.

Content that the matter had been resolved to his satisfaction, the Minister strolled back down the alleyway. When he got to the far end he

stopped and turned to face the Magistrate one last time. 'What is your name Magistrate?' he called.

'Tarquinio, sir.'

'You'll go a long way Mr Tarquinio. I can see a prosperous future ahead for you!' Maeldune said with sinister joviality. He placed the dagger in the empty scabbard hanging from his belt and made his way up the road leading to the abbey in the distance.

The Archbishop knocked lightly on the priest's door. Hearing no answer, he rapped a little louder and opened the door slightly to catch a glimpse of a robed figure slumped over a desk, his head nestled in the crook of one of his arms. The sound of light snoring could be heard. The Archbishop smiled warmly and entered the room. He placed a hand on the priest's broad shoulders and shook him a little. 'Excuse me Father Gideon, but you have a visitor.'

Remiel Grayson, wandering through dreams of yesteryear, could hear a distant voice calling him back to the present. The rainy streets of Pelinore faded to be replaced by a small, shadowy room.

Remiel was momentarily disoriented. His hand instinctively lifted his cloth veil over his face as he lifted his head to find two men standing on the tattered mat in the centre of the room, gazing patiently upon him. Remiel's mind and vision came into focus simultaneously – he was in his room in the abbey, the place he had called home for thirty years. He wiped his eyes and looked up at the Archbishop who continued to gaze gently back at him.

Remiel quickly stood, smoothed his robes and bowed reverently to the Archbishop. 'I'm sorry, Your Excellency, I must have dozed off.'

The Archbishop's smile widened to reveal long, white shining teeth. 'That's quite alright Father Gideon,' his husky voice replied. 'Even holy men must rest from time to time. Do not apologise for succumbing to slumber.'

Remiel shook his head, trying to throw off the last vestiges of sleep. The Archbishop stepped forward holding a much taller man by the elbow. 'Father Gideon, I'd like to introduce you to a very special guest. This is the Minister for Justice, Maeldune Canna. Minister Canna has travelled all the way from Cessair to visit you.'

Unconsciously, Remiel lifted his hands to the veil that lay across his face and pulled it a little higher. 'To see me?' he said quizzically. 'Whatever for?'

Without any further comment, the Archbishop left the room, leaving Maeldune to answer Remiel Grayson's question. The tall Acoran

extended a hand to the priest and said apologetically, 'Father Gideon, you must forgive my unannounced appearance.'

Remiel stared at the hand, overwhelmed with a sense of déjà vu. He had experienced this moment before, but the details of it eluded him. After an uncomfortable pause, took the Minister's hand, shook it quickly and said dryly, 'Forgive your appearance? I'm a priest Minister. I'm in the business of forgiveness.'

Unsure of whether this comment was meant as an attempt at humour or a sincere statement of fact, Maeldune paused before continuing. He scanned the small room and seeing an old oaken chair gestured towards it. 'May I?'

'By all means.'

Once Maeldune had taken his seat, Remiel sat down opposite him and waited for his guest to speak.

'I have been looking forward to meeting you Father Gideon.'

Having spent the last thirty years of his life in relative solitude, Remiel was surprised to hear that anyone would look forward to meeting him, much less travel all the way from Cessair to do so. 'Meet with me?' he said clumsily. 'I'm not sure why.'

'I have heard great things about you Father Gideon. The people of Nessa speak highly of you. They say you can perform miracles. I have heard tales. Your incredible powers of healing –'

'Have been greatly exaggerated,' Remiel interrupted with a sharpness that raised Maeldune's eyebrows. Noting this effect, Remiel softened his voice, adding, 'I am but a humble man doing the will of our gods.'

'But reports of your divine talents...'

'I have administered to the sick, it is true, but I would not dare lay claim to any talents, divine or otherwise.'

Maeldune frowned and sat back in his chair. Remiel leant forward, curious. 'Is there something wrong, Minister?' he asked tentatively.

'No. Not at all,' Maeldune replied, his voice suggesting everything to the contrary. 'I'm sorry Father. I'm unaccustomed to speaking to someone when I can see so little of their face. Could I ask that you drop your cowl and remove your veil?'

'It is not the way of our order, Minister. Only the Archbishop has that right.' He did not disguise his annoyance.

The Acoran clasped his bejewelled hands together. 'My apologies, Father. Forgive my ignorance. I am not a religious man and the ways of the church are not well known to me.'

‘Perhaps we can correct that when we celebrate mass tomorrow. We only ask that you contribute a coin, as a gesture of atonement for your sins.’

‘How do you know I have sins, Father?’

‘We all have sins, Minister. Even me.’

‘Really Father? I wonder what sins a priest would confess?’

An uncomfortable silence grew. It became clear to Maeldune that he would not receive an answer to his question, rhetorical or not. From deep beneath the priest’s cowl, cool, grey eyes stared at him. The priest was guarded, if not suspicious, and Maeldune knew that he would have to step carefully if he were to garner more information for Caliban.

Remiel stood up and looked out through the slits in the shutters. Far below he could see the statue of Cephalus Silenus in the courtyard, gilded in orange light as the sun wheeled towards the western horizon. ‘Minister, you have not come here to discuss theological concepts. May I inquire as to the purpose of this visit?’

Maeldune stood and approached Remiel who continued to look down into the courtyard below. ‘Father Gideon, you must know terrible things are happening in the world outside. Reports are coming in from countries such as Morae and Helyas of attacks by demonic armies. To the north, Skyfall Town has been besieged by an unholy creature from the skies. This same creature slaughtered every citizen of the town of Palia weeks ago.’

Remiel turned, his interest clearly piqued. ‘Palia?’

‘Yes, perhaps you know the place. It’s on the northern shore of Lake Erras. It was the transit station for the leper colony of Sanctuary.’ It was not a subtle comment, but Maeldune could feel that he had little time left with the priest. He would soon be encouraged to leave.

‘Why would I know such a place?’

Maeldune ignored this question. ‘Father Gideon, the Assembly of Nations will be convened on the summer solstice. The Chamberlain expects representatives from all across the Myr to discuss the perturbing events that are shaking our world. He would like to hear from people like yourself who may be able to offer insight into these strange goings-on.’

Remiel moved away from the window and in three large strides was beside the door to the passageway beyond. He placed a hand upon the unadorned iron handle. ‘Nessa has its own envoy. I am a priest. Church and state do not mix, Minister Canna.’ He opened the door.

‘I came here especially to see you Father. To ask you to add your counsel to our Assembly. We seek a spiritual perspective upon these terrible events.’

'There are others better qualified to provide you with what you seek. The Archbishop for example.'

'It is your name that has been put forward.'

Remiel opened the door even wider. 'Your trip has been in vain Minister. I have nothing to offer.'

It was clear to Maeldune that he would not be able to convince the priest to decide otherwise there and then. He had to soften his approach. He stepped out through the door into the passageway beyond. 'Father Gideon,' he said as graciously as he could, 'we only ask that you consider our invitation. With our collective wisdom, we may find a way to stop the evil that is beginning to spread across our beautiful world. Please, will you do just that? Just consider it?'

After a long, awkward moment, Remiel said, 'I will consider it.'

Maeldune smiled. He had planted a seed that would grow in time. Deep in his shrewd mind he knew he would see the priest again – in Cessair, at the Assembly of Nations. It would be enough. Caliban would be pleased. He bowed before the priest and left.

Remiel shut the door and leaned against it, relieved by Maeldune's departure. There had been something oddly familiar about the man but he could not put his finger on it. He had seen him before, but not in Garlot. Concentrating hard, Remiel rifled through memories but could not find one that hinted at where he had seen the man. Perhaps, many years ago, he had been an associate of his father's. Or maybe even Caliban's.

Maeldune stood on the steps outside the abbey with the Archbishop. 'He is not from Nessa?'

'No Minister,' the Archbishop replied, his teeth filling up his face. 'He arrived many years ago to join the order. He has been an exemplary addition to our fellowship.'

'When did he arrive Archbishop?' Maeldune asked casually.

'Why, almost thirty years ago, but –'

'And his homeland?'

His tone was not so casual and the Archbishop noted the sense of urgency in Maeldune's voice.

'He is from Scoriath, Minister,' he said slowly. 'His accent is clearly northern. From Pelinore, I'd imagine. Why do you ask?'

Maeldune smiled and knelt before the Archbishop, indicating his intention to leave. 'Oh, just for my own satisfaction, Your Excellency. I'm a bureaucrat. The devil's in the detail, as they say.'

The Archbishop presented a hand to Maeldune who kissed it without hesitation. The Acoran made his way down the steps and across the

courtyard, past the stained statue of Cephalus Silenus who continued to stare out to the west where the sun now embraced the land. Curious about his interest in the priest, the Archbishop's eyes remained on the Minister for Justice until he disappeared down the path towards Garlot.

The Archbishop turned to enter the abbey, but paused before doing so, catching sight of a small object at the base of the church's wide steps. A small nest lay upturned, and nearby three small birds lay dead on the courtyard's ornate paving stones. High above, a solitary churchwren could be heard, its mournful cries spilling across the air as it lamented the loss of its chicks.

Chapter Eleven Mag Mel, Tuatha

Sir Edgar Worseley had no way of knowing what time it was. The mists surrounding the endless bog were so thick that the sun was completely cloaked. His piebald snorse Juliet looked up at the sky and grunted, disappointed by the complete absence of sky. The knight had been travelling for many hours but time seemed to slow down on the boardwalks through the swamp. He had passed through the village of Shysie earlier that day but he wasn't sure if it had been one hour ago or six.

Occasionally Edgar heard yaffle-birds' forlorn cries emerging out of the fog. The sorrowful sounds of the yaffle were not something a heavily-armoured soldier liked to hear as they were always a prelude to rain. The birds had an astounding sensitivity to meteorological change. The call of the yaffle was inevitably followed by a downpour and the louder and more insistent the cry, the more heavily the rains came down. The knight's golden armour felt twice as heavy when it was wet, and he quickly developed a deep dislike for the birds as if they were directly responsible for the inclement weather. The once proud red plume atop his helmet, ironically crafted from feathers from the yaffle, still sagged a little from the last cloudburst and his matching red cape looked like a sodden blanket hanging over the dripping golden spaulders across his shoulders.

Although his surroundings were bleak and the damp fingers of the fog and rain had pried their way under his armour, it had not been an altogether unpleasant journey. Edgar was enjoying the respite from the bustling barracks of Pelinore where he was responsible for the training of young squires who yearned for the glory that supposedly accompanied the knights of Scoriath. It had been three weeks since he had left the crowded streets of Pelinore and sailed across the sea to the land of Tuatha. He was growing accustomed to being on his own and felt at peace as his tall snorse trotted along the damp boardwalks.

Despite the emptiness of the vast swamp, one rarely felt alone in the dank expanse of Mag Mel, for travellers through the mists were always closely followed by their memories. Although the vapours rising out of the uliginous bog beneath the boards were generally noisome, the smells were endlessly changing and every now and then the swamp's odours were characterized by one wonderfully peculiar aspect – they evoked memories of the most vivid kind. The swirling mists were in a constant state of coalescence and although it was unclear whether the reactions in the air were chemical or mystical, one thing was certain – the intensity of

the memories they educed was more powerful than any other known stimulant. The smells produced by the swamp were the most provocative scents in the Myr.

Juliet grunted again as Edgar pulled hard on her reins. It had been the third such stop that morning and she was growing increasingly annoyed with her master's erratic behaviour. The knight sat up in the saddle and craned his head in the direction of the smell he had just picked up. Closing his grey-green eyes, Edgar savoured the fragrance that wafted over his bushy moustache and up his nostrils. It was the smell of autumn, more specifically, of burning oakaen leaves on a cold still day.

The blacksmith Christian Worseley was raking up the large, star-shaped leaves that dropped from the 1,000 year old oaka trees lining the broad avenue outside his house. A little further down the arching street, his sons Edgar and Dominic played in the gutter where they had made a leafy mound of their own. Dominic, the younger of the two boys, snuggled down in the orange pile of leaves and shot his brother an impish grin. Edgar smiled back then snatched up handfuls of surrounding leaves and covered his younger brother's head until he was completely obscured.

Content with Dominic's autumnal disguise, Edgar ran off down the footpath to a tall, decrepit house surrounded by sprawling weeds and dead flowers. The occupant of the house, an ornery, retired public official known as Taxman Tomkins, was seated in a rocking chair ready to hurl abuse at anyone unfortunate enough to come within earshot. Taxman was renowned for his cantankerous disposition and spent most of his day scowling at passers-by, insulting any who had the misfortune to look his way. The old man's jaw dropped when he saw young Edgar Worseley kick open his gate and come running down his garden path hollering at him to get up and follow. Ignoring all Taxman's protestations, Edgar spun a tremendous story explaining how the Mayor had summoned the old man to his chambers, requiring fiduciary advice on a complicated taxation issue.

Grumbling as he came, Taxman hobbled down the broken footpath, trying to keep up with Edgar. Upon reaching an unusually large pile of leaves outside the Worseley house, Taxman Tomkins stopped to regain his breath. It was at that moment the mound of leaves exploded and Dominic Worseley leapt out of his foliaceous crypt with a groan that would chill the bravest heart. He then danced around the old man like some crazed beast before running off down the street to join his brother who was rolling on the ground, his entire body wracked with crazed

laughter. Taxman's face went ashen and a withered hand rose up to his chest, clutching at the tattered fabric of his tunic.

Moments later, the initial surprise had worn off and Taxman's hand left his chest and was raised above his head in a fist. He shook it at the boys whose laughter drowned out all the abuse the old man could spew at them. Livid with rage, Taxman hobbled back down to his verandah where he continued an hour-long tirade decrying the aimlessness of today's youth until fatigue overcame him and he nodded off to sleep in his rocking chair.

When the coast was clear, the Worseley boys made their way back to their mound of leaves and started rebuilding it in preparation for their next victim. Their father smiled wryly. 'One day, that old man will have a heart attack and you two will be sent away to the Hulks for a very long time,' he teased, but they were too absorbed in their next plot to care.

Edgar sighed. It was a nice memory but its poignancy brought a tear to his eye. It had been a year since he had seen his brother Dominic and he missed him terribly. It had been even longer since his father had passed away.

Suddenly a fetid aroma filled his nose and Edgar's eyes thrust themselves open as the smell of his mother's boiling cabbage stew sent his mind reeling. He had despised the stew as a boy, and did not want to dwell upon the long hours he had spent trapped in the kitchen, unable to leave the table until every last drop had made its greasy way down his throat. Before any more of Mag Mel's exhalations could take effect, the knight clambered back onto his mount and galloped away down the boardwalk.

Edgar could make out the tortured shapes of leafless trees on either side of the boardwalk. The ground at the base of the trees was hidden under a thick carpet of mist. The knight wondered if there was any solid ground in Mag Mel. As far as he could tell, the entire swamp was just a bubbling cauldron of cold, mucilaginous mud. He squinted as he peered into the grey miasma before him, hoping for some sign of the town of Marshmead, his destination and the largest of the settlements inside the swamp. The boardwalk stretched on before him, occasionally lit up by lanterns that illuminated the dank tendrils of fog that curled about in the air, carrying countless olfactory surprises and disappointments. The lanterns provided illumination at all hours, even at the height of day, when the pale orb of the sun floated above like a lonely, listless ghost.

The lamps were not lit by flame nor were they fuelled by oil. Inside each, a solitary shatterbug buzzed unhappily, occasionally thumping against the glass prison in which it found itself. When the shatterbugs first appeared in the Myr a handful of months earlier, the people of Mag Mel wasted no time in finding a use for them. Once caught and contained, a shatterbug could be expected to illuminate a lamp for at least a month before its light faded. In a few places along the boardwalk, Edgar noted patches of darkness, where lightless lanterns hung uselessly, each cradling the small, dead body of a shatterbug.

Before long, Edgar found himself at a crossroads of sorts. The path on his left curled away to the north-east. Although there was no sign, Edgar was sure this way led to the distant fortress city of Tir Thuinn on the ice-clad coast of Tuirren. The southbound path would inevitably lead to the small fishing villages that clung to the northern shores of Lake Erras. Edgar assumed the road ahead (if such a ramshackle assemblage of boards and posts could be called a road) led on to Marshmead.

Although locating it on a map was nigh on impossible, Marshmead was a bordertown, lying on the north-south line that separated Tuatha from Tuirren. Just like the fog that spread across the land, the border separating these countries was indistinct – Tuatha and Tuirren were as indistinguishable as identical twins. Similarly, the peoples of the two nations were so closely related, it was almost impossible to differentiate them. Many, many centuries ago, like so many other Myrran territories, Tuatha and Tuirren were at war. As a resolution to the conflict, the kings of the countries divorced their spouses and remarried the queen of the opposing nation. Every man in each country was commanded to follow suit with his own spouse. Loyalties became so confused that the separate identities of the countries soon became lost. Despite a period of intense personal jealousies and familial bitterness, the cultural exchange that soon took place was to the betterment of both societies and the twin states of Tuatha and Tuirren lived in harmony ever since.

Edgar paused momentarily at the junction. The mists removed him from reality. The knight's thoughts spread out in all directions and suddenly the smell of sea filled his nostrils. Although he was hundreds of leagues from the ocean, in his mind Edgar was home.

Sitting on the promenade lining Pelinore Harbour, Edgar could feel the crowds pressing at his back. Before him a flotilla of tall ships sailed into the broad harbour. He was young, just a boy, and his heart raced with anticipation as he awaited the arrival of one of the Myr's greatest heroes...

‘Ouch!’ he yelped and took a glove off to examine the hand his snorse had just bitten. Juliet shuffled from foot to foot, clearly unhappy about yet another delay. ‘You didn’t have to bite me, Juliet!’ Edgar sulked. ‘A simple nudge would have sufficed.’

The snorse was unrepentant and rocked forward, waiting for the gentle kick behind her ribs that would grant her permission to trot away from the junction and the mephitic smells that worked their way into her head. Not all creatures enjoyed the same olfactions, and the mist that bore the salty smell of the sea to Edgar brought something decidedly less pleasant to the snorse.

Edgar could see his mount was annoyed, but he was not going to let the beast get her way so easily. He pulled a pristine handkerchief from a pocket on his belt and quietly blew his nose. The snorse glowered as her master took his time slowly folding up the handkerchief into perfect squares. She opened her mouth to bite him again.

‘Don’t even think about it, you temperamental nag!’ he chided her with a smile, his affection for the beast not hidden by his words. Her eyes rose up on their stalks as she reconsidered whether biting him was in her best interests.

Edgar put his glove back on his hand. Underneath the leather it throbbed and he knew the next time he looked upon it, it would have a bruise in the shape of the snorse’s mouth upon it. He prodded the beast with his heels and they set off again.

‘I promise, no more stops until we reach Marshmead,’ he said softly, leaning forward in the saddle, tenderly patting Juliet’s neck, hoping to placate her a little. She purred a long, resonant grunt in response which Edgar took to signify he was temporarily forgiven but would not remain so, should he stop again.

He sat back in the saddle and scanned the blurry landscape. ‘If you’re wondering what we’re doing here, Juliet,’ he said softly, ‘I’m beginning to wonder myself.’ His manner and speech were characterized by great gentility. Although Sir Edgar Worsley was one of the most feared and highly regarded knights in the Royal Guard and a terrifying adversary on the battlefield, he was also chivalrous to a fault, and would not dare break his promise to his steed. They would now ride onward and not stop until the village at the centre of the swamp came into view.

Despite the numerous delays, Edgar shared Juliet’s sense of urgency. He had not journeyed all the way to Mag Mel just to smell the air. He had taken leave of the King’s court to embark upon a personal quest – to seek out an apothecary who could cure his brother Dominic of an

affliction he contracted almost a year to the very day Edgar entered Mag Mel. It was the twenty-first day of spring – Dominic’s birthday.

When questioned about the details of the leave of absence, Edgar humbly begged his liege’s indulgence. The King, respectful of his great knight’s wishes, asked no more questions and gave him a considerably weighty bag of gold to assist him in his quest. Having chartered a boat bound for Findias, Edgar departed the great city of Pelinore telling no-one of his destination, not even his own brigade of soldiers who – though they did not know it at the time – would never see their captain again.

It was said that many apothecaries dwelt in the village of Marshmead. The swamp was believed to be a haven for the enigmatic potion makers who were apparently drawn to the bog for its unique chemical properties. It was rumoured that these properties were more pure and potent in the centre of the swamp which by no coincidence was the location of Marshmead. Edgar had heard tales of how the inhabitants of Marshmead traversed Mag Mel’s surface astride bogcrabs, huge crustaceans that were able to move across the quagmire without sinking into it.

The stories were true, and unknown to most of the outside world, Marshmead had become a thriving metropolis, home to thousands of scientists. The pharmacology industry kept all of the inhabitants of Marshmead employed, either as apothecaries, or in support areas, such as transport, research and trade.

The apothecaries of Mag Mel were no mere chemists. From the glutinous depths of the swamp, the apothecaries had extracted an astounding range of cures for all manner of ills. They had remedied carbuncles and stopped plagues. It was said that they even had developed drugs possessing properties that slowed the onset of age.

But it was also said that they had created countless potions that brought about contagion, sickness and death. Whilst the apothecaries were revered in parts of Tuatha and Tuirren, there were many countries across the Myr that feared the existence of these mysterious makers of strange potables and powders. Over the centuries there were many kings, emperors and lords who had been assassinated via means provided by apothecaries; there were lands where crops had withered and livestock killed by diseases manufactured by some of the profession’s less honourable individuals.

When Tiberius Llyr assumed the position of Chamberlain after his predecessor Marcus Regis was poisoned, he pushed through the Assembly of Nations an international law that not only prohibited the act of creating, selling, or distributing unnatural potions but also stipulated that all such offences were punishable by death. The Myr’s apothecaries

either fled to Mag Mel or gave up their livelihoods for less risky employment.

Not long after the bans were placed upon *medica materia* – the science of drugs and medicine – the abductions began. Even apothecaries who had publicly renounced their activities and packed up shop went missing. It was no mystery; the cause of these disappearances was common knowledge – Sessymir. These cruel people of the north realized the opportunities created by the laws that banned the practice of potion-making and they quickly sought out to monopolise the black market that would inevitably follow as a result. In Oshalla and Skirnir, the Sessymirians had clandestinely built chemical factories to capitalize on the demand that swiftly followed the prohibition. Although the Sessymirians were primarily motivated by greed – and certainly not by an altruistic notion to ensure there was a cure for all the maladies of the world – there was another motive for their interest in the apothecaries. Never a race to forget their warlike ways, the Sessymirians wanted to take full advantage of the edge the apothecaries could give them on the battlefield.

The Sessymirians had displayed their preparedness to engage in biological warfare in the past. Laying siege to the city of Hel in neighbouring Arnaksak, Sessymirians catapulted the diseased carcasses of grizzums over the walls of the city from assault ships floating offshore. Fortunately for the Arnakki inhabitants of Hel, the temperature was so cold that the disease did not spread and the worst damage the frozen corpses did was a few broken roof tiles and chimney stacks. The siege ended terribly for the Sessymirians whose ships became trapped in ice as a gripping six month cold spell froze the very water under their hulls. A high number of the Sessymirians died of hunger. A few desperate individuals decided to cook the remaining grizzums. Ironically, this was enough to release the disease across the ice-locked ships and within a week, the remaining Sessymirians all died of the very malady they were trying to use against the Arnakki.

Although the world outside described the Sessymirians' acquisition of some renowned apothecaries to be a criminal act, the word abduction was not entirely accurate. Quite a few amoral apothecaries sought out the Sessymirians and were paid most handsomely for their work.

The majority of the apothecaries, good men and women who had spent their lives devoted to the betterment of Myrran society, fled to Tuirren where under the white veil of the swamp they felt secure. The apothecaries placed sentinels on the entrances to the massive swamp. These watchmen would keep vigil upon Mag Mel's borders, and at the first sign of trouble, sections of the boardwalk would be dropped into the bog, preventing access to the villages where the apothecaries lived. The

few bounty hunters that came into the region quickly realised the futility of their quest to find the apothecaries.

Over time, the community of Marshmead grew as did the skills the apothecaries possessed. They regulated their own behaviour and the vast majority of potions they created were born out of altruism. The production of malicious potions that induced plague, disease and other ill effects soon became an historical blemish, relegated to another time, and the people of Mag Mel quietly dedicated themselves to the betterment of all societies. Over time, even Chamberlain Llyr softened his approach to the apothecaries, and although it was still regarded an illegal practice in the cities of the Myr, he turned a blind eye to the communities living deep within Mag Mel.

Juliet hurtled down the boardwalk but the colourless lands through which they raced made Edgar wonder whether they were actually moving at all. The foggy shrouds surrounding them parted like an endless succession of thin, white curtains. Lantern after lantern drifted by, floating in the misty air like ghostly, severed heads. Suddenly, the white drapes before the pair were broken by a black shape standing in the middle of the boardwalk. Juliet yelped with fright and skidded to a halt.

Before them stood a man taller than any Edgar had ever seen before. He was at least eight foot tall, even taller if one counted the massive horn that grew from the man's forehead. The distinctive keratin projection rising two feet from the man's skull marked him as a Kheperan, a race that lived in the deserts to the south of Lake Erras. Edgar had never met a Kheperan before, but he knew of them – their reputation for having short tempers and an endless supply of stubbornness preceded them.

'You are not welcome here, Sir Knight.'

The Kheperan's deep, resonant voice rolled across the boardwalks. He held one hand aloft. Edgar could see his long, thick brown fingers gripping a glass phial. Without warning, the man pitched the small bottle across the space between them. As the sound of shattering glass splintered in the still air, a dense wall of fire erupted from the boardwalk. Juliet whinnied in terror and jumped backwards, almost dismounting Edgar in the process.

The knight calmed his steed down and dismounted. He pulled off his glove and stepping forward, put out a hand towards the flames. Intense heat radiated from the wall of fire. Edgar knew at once that he could not leap through it without searing the flesh from his bones. 'Citizen of the swamp,' he shouted through the burning wall that

separated him from the Kheperan, 'I come peaceably. You have naught to fear from me.'

From across the fire, Edgar could hear the approach of footsteps, heavy and dull on the damp timbers that made up the boardwalk. They stopped and Edgar could make out the hulking shape of the Kheperan through the shifting palisade of flame before him. 'My name is Adzoba Aethelflaed,' a heavy voice boomed through the wall. 'I am the mayor of this village and we have much to fear from you, Edgar, son of Christian.'

'You know my name?'

A long pause preceded Adzoba's reply. 'I have known it for many years.'

'How can this be? We have never met.'

'Long ago, a Morgai seer by the name of Lilith Cortese foretold of your coming. Your arrival here heralds the destruction of Marshmead.'

Edgar was stunned. It had been many years since he had heard any mention of the Morgai. As far as he knew, the seers were but a fiction from his childhood. 'Mayor Aethelflaed,' he said, flawlessly repeating the Kheperan's surname, 'I am a soldier in the service of King Pius of Pelinore, here on personal business. I pose no threat to you. I ask that you do not turn me away based on the vague predictions of someone claiming to be –'

'There was nothing vague about the prediction,' Adzoba snapped with surprising intensity. 'It has been revealed in frightening detail what awaits us on the day of your arrival – you are the harbinger of our doom,' the Mayor said plainly. 'Whether you intend it or not, your appearance here this day marks the beginning of our end. You will respect our wishes and turn around.'

Edgar could hear the inflexibility of the man's position in his voice. But there had to be some kind of misunderstanding. 'I realize that you have concerns,' the knight said respectfully, 'but I seek someone well-versed in the art of *medica materia*. I represent someone who desperately needs your help. And I have come so far. It has taken me weeks to find you.'

'Then the sooner you turn around, the sooner you will be back home,' Adzoba responded unequivocally.

Edgar stared through the flames, unsure of what to do. Juliet gave a quizzical grunt but the knight was too deep in thought to hear it. He strutted from one side of the boardwalk to the other, contemplating his position, trying to work out the best course of action. The Kheperan stood his ground watching the knight's silhouette pacing back and forth across the timbers. 'I have many more phials of angelfire,' Adzoba added, his voice cool but menacing.

Respectful of the Mayor's position but unwilling to compromise his own, Edgar stopped his pacing and proudly conveyed his stance upon the situation. 'Mayor Aethelflaed, I do not wish to defy you but I will not be turned around so easily. You could pour your angelfire upon my skin, and though my flesh be seared from my bones, yet I would stand my ground and request admittance to your village.'

'I would dismiss these words as arrogant banter, Sir Knight, had not your reputation preceded you. I know you are true to your word.'

'If you know anything of me you would not hesitate to welcome me to Marshmead. Think on it Mayor! Perhaps the destruction of which you were warned was not brought about by me. Perhaps, just perhaps, the ruin foretold was brought about by others and it is only coincidence that connects my arrival to this day you have feared for so long. I am willing to walk through this wall of fire to complete my mission here.'

On the other side of flames dividing them, Adzoba Aethelflaed was considering Edgar's words. 'You would defy fate, Sir Knight?' His voice was softer; it has lost its combative aspect.

Edgar realized that the Kheperan's tone had altered slightly. Encouraged by the subtle change, the knight chose his words carefully. 'What is fate?' he said rhetorically. 'If you are so resolved to accept a preordained outcome, then it does not matter whether I enter Marshmead or not. Its destruction will come to pass irrespective of what I do and where I go. But if you are such souls willing to challenge destiny, prepared to write your own tomorrows, then not only will you admit me, but you will fall upon bended knee to beg me to lead the fight against whatever stands to destroy you.'

There was silence. Edgar had spoken from the heart and hoped that it would be enough. But changing a Kheperan's mind was not something that happened every day, and he prepared for the rejection that surely awaited his insolence.

Suddenly a horn sounded far across the swamp. Seconds later a much closer horn belched the same note into the still air. Through the flames, Edgar heard the Kheperan grunt three ominous words: 'It has begun.'

Edgar assumed correctly that some part of the area was under attack. 'Mayor, you are besieged. I am not your nemesis. Whatever has set off your sirens, it was not me. Will you not give me leave to enter your village?'

'You will aid us in our defence?'

'As a knight of Scoriath I could not withhold my assistance even if I wanted to.'

A shattering sound followed as a second phial was smashed upon the boardwalk. A cold, blue smoke arose and enveloped the flames, consuming them within seconds, revealing the stony-faced Mayor of Marshmead. Although he had lowered the firewall to admit Edgar Worseley, his face extended no hospitality. He scrutinized the Scorian, his eyes narrowing at the sight of the knight's pristine golden armour and helm. The bright red plume that ran down the centre of Sir Edgar's helm received a particularly scornful look. 'You look too pretty to be much good to us,' he said gruffly as Edgar made his way towards him, leading his timorous snorse gently by the reins as he came. 'Are they all so clean and shiny back in Pelinore?'

'I beg your pardon?' Edgar exclaimed, quite surprised by the mayor's overly personal observations. He opened his mouth to rebuke the Kheperan but a third horn sounded, thickening the air with its dense sound. Adzoba motioned to Edgar to follow him. 'This way,' he said.

On both sides of the boardwalk smaller paths branched off. One led to a landing where Edgar was introduced to his first bogcrab. He was stunned by the size of it. The body of the intimidating-looking crustacean was as large as a small ship, and resembled one tethered to a bollard at the end of the landing, waiting to be boarded and piloted out across the white sea of fog that lay beyond. The creature's dark red and purple shell was speckled with mud and grime. Its legs and claws rested in the ooze, hidden under the layer of mist. Upon its flat back Edgar could see a small man sitting cross-legged on a mat. At the sign of the knight and the Mayor, the small man lifted a thin cane and rapped it on the bogcrab's shell. Two stalks suddenly protruded from large round holes in the shell on either side of the mat.

Adzoba glanced up to the man and muttered to Edgar: 'That's Joshuu, my personal rider, the most sarcastic man alive. He's a bit on in years and, to be brutally honest, extremely annoying.'

Edgar did not respond. He was staring up at the two gigantic orbs at the end of the stalks that had risen out of the bogcrab's shell. The eyes were larger than his snorse, a fact not lost on Juliet who had dug her feet into the boardwalk, refusing to go any closer to the daunting crustacean. Noticing the snorse's reaction, Adzoba said, 'Leave your steed here. She cannot follow where we are going.'

'Thank-you. I think that would be best.'

Edgar walked Juliet back down the boardwalk until he came to a wide area outside an empty house. He tethered her to the boardwalk rail and ran a gloved hand through the tousled mane atop her long, thin head.

‘You will be safe here, Juliet,’ he said softly. The snorse nuzzled its head affectionately into Edgar’s chest. As she did so she retracted and closed her eyes.

The knight gave her an affectionate scratch under the chin and whispered. ‘I will be back ere long.’

A long, low purring sound reverberated from Juliet’s thick mouth.

When Edgar returned to the landing where the bogcrab was moored, he found Adzoba waiting unhappily, demonstrably tapping his foot in a crude show of impatience. ‘Have you ridden one of these before?’ he asked as the knight approached.

‘Not that I can remember.’

‘Oh, you would remember, Sir Edgar,’ he said with a slightly roguish grin.

‘Mayor, will we be going or would you like me to set up camp for the night?’ called the man perched on the bogcrab’s shell.

‘Sir Edgar, we haven’t much time,’ grumbled the Mayor, unwilling to respond directly to his rider’s impertinent question.

‘Of course,’ responded Edgar apologetically. ‘Let us depart. Is there a technique for mounting this behemoth?’

‘Yes. Try to be still when it picks you up in its claws. I have seen a man lose his head when he moved at the wrong time.’

Edgar looked up to see a claw ten times his own size bearing down upon him. He gasped as it snapped around his midriff but it was not fear that motivated his exhalation – it was disgust. The claw was dripping with the thick, syrupy gloop of the swamp. Edgar grimaced as he watched the mud stain the red cape that hung down from his shoulders to his calves. When he felt the muck seep between the links in his chain mail, he felt like vomiting.

From the other claw, Adzoba noticed Edgar’s discontent and once both men were placed in atop the bogcrab he asked, ‘Is there something wrong, Sir Knight?’

‘I am a tad perturbed by the mess this beast has made,’ he said sadly as he looked forlornly at his stained robes. ‘This crimson mantle is no mere travelling cloak,’ he said, holding up a muddied section of his cape. ‘This is part of the uniform of the Royal Guard!’

Hearing this from his cockpit slightly forward of the two passengers, Joshuu raised his eyebrows and an overly dramatic show of incredulity spread across his face. ‘Perhaps,’ he said, turning to face the knight, ‘I could arrange a hot bath for you,’ he said revelling in the opportunity to ridicule the objectionably clean visitor to his realm. ‘I know a few

apothecaries who have some really nice bath salts you could use – aromatic stuff that'll relax you good and proper. And I'm sure the Mayor could arrange for a team of our best washerwomen to wash your tunic as soon as we return to town.'

Edgar's face brightened with the prospect of a hot bath. 'That is very generous of you,' he said appreciatively, totally oblivious to Joshuu's sarcasm. 'However, I wash my own clothes. I don't really like the thought of other people touching my garments.'

The Mayor wasn't sure what to respond to first – Joshuu's caustic remarks or Edgar's concerns over who would wash his clothes. Deciding to ignore both, the Kheperan spoke to his rider about more pressing matters. 'The sirens, Joshuu. Do you know their origin?'

'Mr Mayor, I thought you would never ask. A rider arrived only minutes ago with a message for you. We're under attack.'

'That much I guessed Joshuu. Under attack by whom? And where specifically?'

Joshuu rolled his eyes and Adzoba wanted to hit him. 'Well sir, about the messenger, I wanted to have a chat with 'im, perhaps a slice of cake and a beverage, but he seemed in a bit of a hurry. Muttered something about spreading the word to others. Had I known you would want a dissertation on the subject, I would have asked the fellow to stay.'

Adzoba stared coldly back at Joshuu. 'So you don't know anything.'

'But that's still more than you, isn't it sir?' Joshuu quipped back smugly.

Edgar stood up from his position on the bogcrab's back. 'Mayor,' he said quietly. 'This varlet upbraids you in a most unwarranted and disrespectful fashion. I request your permission to beat him accordingly.'

Adzoba couldn't help but be pleased by Edgar's show of support. Although the Mayor was amused by the thought of the knight giving Joshuu his just desserts, now was not the time. 'Thank-you Sir Edgar. I appreciate the offer,' he responded calmly. He looked across to his rider who had turned noticeably pale. 'Maybe later.'

In a show of contrition the like of which Adzoba had never seen before, Joshuu cleared his throat and said, 'The messenger did not say who or what attacks us.'

'Thank-you Joshuu,' the Mayor said congenially. 'Now did he say where we are attacked? Do you have a destination?'

'That I do,' he replied.

Edgar quickly sat back down as Joshuu rapped his stick upon the shell. The bogcrab rose 200 feet into the air. A long squelching noise draped itself over Edgar's ears. He winced as he thought of all the mire

running down the creature's back and limbs as it lifted itself high above the swamp.

Although he had ridden many beasts in many strange circumstances, Edgar never imagined he would ever be roosting on the back of the Myr's largest crustacean as it made its way across a caliginous quagmire en route to battle a mysterious enemy.

The bogcrab lurched crazily as it walked through the mists. It was remarkable that the three people it bore on its back did not topple from it and fall headlong to the unseen surface below. The bogcrab's ungainly gait was enough to unsettle the staunchest constitutions. The last foreigner to ride with Joshuu vomited continuously until placed back down on the relatively firm footing of Marshmead's boardwalks. Joshuu turned slightly on his mat, hoping to catch sight of a look of terror upon Edgar's face, but the vertiginous movement of the bogcrab did not seem to bother the knight. In fact, he seemed far more concerned about the muddy stains upon his garments.

'It will wash out, sir,' Adzoba said tersely, clearly annoyed with Edgar's preoccupation with cleanliness, wondering how such a man could possibly hope to triumph over whatever vile creature had risen out of the swamp. He turned to his rider and said, 'Where do you take me now, Joshuu? Perhaps you could share our destination with our guest.'

'We go to Simeon's Reef,' he answered quickly, keen to please Edgar despite secretly hating him. 'It isn't far – just two leagues north of Marshmead. It is where we have found some of the richest deposits of certain minerals essential –'

'We can save the history lesson for another day, Joshuu,' the Mayor sighed and sat back to stare out at the wall of mist before them.

'Dr Shaw, give me a report.'

The Mayor strode across the platform like a sergeant-at-arms. Despite the absolute chaos around him, he maintained his composure. The man to whom he spoke, Dr Garnett Shaw, was an older man with long, grey hair falling down upon drab, grey robes. His skin was cracked and broken and if it wasn't for Adzoba's seeming lack of concern about the man's close proximity, Edgar would have concluded that the doctor was a leper.

'Over the past twenty minutes, we have lost almost fifty people, mainly apothecaries,' Shaw replied in a similarly controlled fashion. 'Mayor, we are ill-equipped for warfare.'

Upon hearing the man speak, Edgar stepped forward and grasped him firmly by the shoulders. 'It is so wonderful to hear your voice!' he exclaimed. The knight then brought Shaw into his chest in an embrace that knocked the wind out of the man's lungs. He could see that Adzoba was not fearful of catching Shaw's affliction, and he wanted to demonstrate that it was not a problem for him either.

When Edgar finally released him, Shaw wiped a long strand of matted hair from his face and stared into the knight's eyes. 'Do I know you, sir?' he said with considerable trepidation.

Edgar smiled warmly. 'Dr Shaw, you're Pelinese! I can tell by your accent,' he remarked as if bestowing the greatest honour upon the man.

The doctor nodded meekly. Shaw had recognised the distinctive uniform of the Pelinese Royal Guard that Edgar wore so proudly, but showed no indication that he thought meeting a fellow countryman was a felicitous event. 'It has been many years since I stood in Pelinore,' Shaw said sombrely.

Fortunately Adzoba Aethelflaed was in no mood to allow the conversation to proceed further. He could see spread out across the platform before him numerous villagers who were either dead or dying. Long white shafts of arrows littered the platform, some embedded in wooden beams, other standing upright in the bloodied flesh of unfortunate apothecaries whose eyes lay open wide in the shock of their own passing.

There was no sign of the enemy. Simeon's Reef was little more than a series of wide wooden platforms spread out across a bug-infested bog. The swamp here was almost impossible to traverse; the thick mud sucked viciously at the feet of anyone foolish enough to walk through it. Adzoba could see a wall of fire had spread across the moor and realised immediately why more of his people had not been killed – the villagers had laid down a defensive line of angelfire across the bog. He bent down so that his face was level with Shaw's. 'Garnett, give me the details about the enemy,' he said urgently. 'What are we facing here?'

Shaw nodded towards all the arrows shafts around them. 'Their ranks are mainly made up of archers as far as I can tell. We incurred most of our casualties in the first volley. At least twenty men and women fell before we even knew we were under attack. I'd guess at least ten more fell upon the second volley.'

'Have they engaged you directly?' Adzoba asked.

'No sir. The swamp out there is extremely difficult to cross. Fortunately, we managed to set up a defensive perimeter before they got too close. I have ordered our people back to the storehouses where they are out of the range of the archers. I have a bogcrab about to be loaded

up with more angelfire to extend the lines before the invaders find a way around them.'

For an apothecary, Shaw seemed to be quite adept in responding to the surprise assault. He had clearly saved many apothecaries from an early demise that day. Edgar attributed this to Garnett Shaw's Pelinese heritage.

'It was your idea to lay down the angelfire?' he asked.

'Yes sir,' Shaw responded quickly, not showing any sign of curiosity regarding Edgar's arrival at Simeon's Reef. 'We were lucky to have a bogcrab laden with some barrels bound for Marshmead when the enemy revealed itself.'

The Mayor looked down upon the fallen apothecaries. He knew each and every one of them. He turned to the red glow out on the reef. 'Who are these attackers, Shaw? Inhabitants of the swamp?'

'No, Mayor. There is one by the name of Drabella who speaks for them. They call themselves the Ghul and they come from a realm beneath the swamp, a place they call the Endless.'

'And what do they want with us?'

Edgar expected Shaw to answer straight away in the responsive, dispassionate fashion that had characterized his speech to that point. But the doctor was silent. Underneath the flakes of dead skin, his face had gone white when the question was put to him. Edgar could see that he was biting his lip nervously, as if the answer were too dreadful to utter.

The Mayor also noticed Shaw's silence but was too busy staring out across the reef to see the strange expression that had accompanied it. He repeated his question: 'Garnett, what do the Ghul want with us?'

'Revenge,' he said with dramatic solemnity, then added, 'apparently.'

'Revenge?' Adzoba was incredulous. 'Revenge for what?'

'We... do not know.' Edgar knew there was more going on in Shaw's mind than his answers were revealing, but Adzoba seemed to be taking the doctor's words at face value.

'Is that it?' Adzoba asked, disappointment evident in his voice.

'No sir,' Shaw replied. 'Drabella said that Caliban wants us to redress the past. He seeks restitution.'

Adzoba swung around so quickly that had Edgar been three feet taller, the horn atop the Mayor's head would have skewered his eye. 'Who in the gods' names is Caliban?' Adzoba barked.

'We do not know,' Shaw replied quickly. 'It sounds as if he is their leader, but we have not seen any sign of him.'

Again, Edgar caught a glimmer of something other than truth in Shaw's response. He was hiding something. 'And you do not know why

he bears such ill-will towards the people of Mag Mel?' he asked with such force that Shaw took a step back. 'He must have been wronged terribly to want to hurt your people so grievously.'

Shaw peered up at Adzoba. 'Sir, there is something else,' he said apprehensively. 'The attackers have brought something with them, something unlike any creature I have ever seen before. Unlike the Ghul, it is impervious to angelfire.'

'Where is it?' the Mayor pressed. 'What does it look like?'

'It's kind of hard to explain. We saw it when we were laying down the perimeter. The creature... it's the biggest thing you could imagine.' Shaw had lost a little of his composure. His voice had risen and he could not maintain eye contact with the Mayor. 'It panicked the bogcrab and... sir, we lost Helobius. He fell as he was throwing a phial of angelfire at the creature. He plummeted into the swamp and the creature, it just rolled over him and... it consumed him.'

The Mayor frowned. 'Garnett, you're not making any sense to me. I want you to explain to me what it is we're up against here.'

Edgar's head cocked to one side, and he suddenly threw himself at the two men standing before him. He hit Adzoba first, and managed to snag Shaw on the way down. The knight did what he could to keep the bodies of the two men beneath him. In the same second the three of them hit the timbers of the landing, a torrent of arrows sliced through the air around them. One pierced Shaw's left hand, nailing it to the deck. Another embedded itself in Adzoba's left arm. Fortunately all the other arrows hit either the landing or bounced off Edgar's thick armour, the bone shafts failing to penetrate the golden steel, forged in the smithies of Camulos.

A large shape fell through the air above them and slammed into the platform only feet away. It was the Mayor's sarcastic rider, Joshuu, who had been sitting atop the bogcrab that had brought Edgar and Adzoba to the reef. Joshuu was dead before he even hit the platform – his body resembled a pin-cushion made of meat and bone.

Adzoba was winded and stunned by the sudden attack. He just lay under Edgar, staring at the blood-soaked beams beneath him. Shaw grunted in pain but had enough presence of mind to twist his head around to face Edgar. 'Thank-you,' he gasped, acutely aware of the fact that the knight had just saved his life.

Edgar whispered a cold reply. 'Don't thank me yet, Shaw. I smell skulduggery. I think you know a bit more about this predicament than you have articulated thus far. Understand this – once I sugillate the great beast that comes hither, you and I will be having serious words.'

Shaw's eyes widened but he said nothing.

‘Get to the storehouses and shelter with the others,’ Edgar instructed Adzoba and Shaw as they clambered to his feet.

By the time the pair had removed the arrows from their limbs and dragged themselves up on their feet, Edgar was gone. He had somehow managed to board the bogcrab from which Joshuu had fallen and was moving out across the muddy reef to meet the foe.

The creature’s name was Abaddon and it was one of the most unusual-looking members of the Cabal. It had no limbs, no head and no tail. It was simply a large gelatinous sphere with one distinctive feature – in the centre of the transparent blubber, a solitary eye twisted and turned frenetically, scanning the mire beneath it and the fog-filled sky above. It had been given simple instructions – kill all except one. Caliban Grayson had shown his face to Abaddon and made it clear that if it stumbled across someone with similar features it was to leave that man to the Ghul to apprehend. Although Caliban now believed his brother to be hiding in Garlot Abbey, he was yet to have his suspicions confirmed. He would not risk the Cabal accidentally killing his twin, robbing him of his rightful claim to revenge.

Edgar could feel the bogcrab’s anxiety rising up through its shell as they walked over the flaming perimeter the apothecaries had set up earlier. Despite its anxiousness, the beast seemed willing to respond to his directions. It was not a difficult task to steer the bogcrab; Edgar softly tapped his sword in the direction he wanted to go and the crab responded.

As soon as they had cleared the wall of angelfire, swarms of arrows crashed ineffectually against the crab’s chitin shell. The fog was thick out on the reef and for a moment Edgar thought he would not be able to find the creature Shaw had mentioned. His jaw dropped when he did.

Breaking through a bank of heavy mist, the crab almost collided with the monster’s amorphous body of mesoglea as it rolled slowly on the viscous surface of the swamp. Although Abaddon was massive, it was half the height of the bogcrab which became skittish when it laid eyes on the creature. Edgar instructed the crab to retreat slightly, partly to calm his mount, but also so he could observe Abaddon’s behaviour before he attacked it.

On the top of the bogcrab Edgar was out of the range of the Ghul archers. Peering over the crab’s head, he could see the eye at the centre of the jelly as it darted this way and that. The eye was scanning the crab and after a few seconds the entire sphere starting rolling slowly towards

them. As it moved, Edgar could make out a relatively small object within the bulk of the monster. It was a man and he was still moving.

'...sir, we lost Helobius.'

Shaw's companion had survived. He was clearly in pain but somehow, though enveloped in the jelly of the invertebrate monster's body, he was still alive. Edgar cringed at the thought of the man being covered in the slimy ectoplasm but this revulsion was not enough to perturb him. He would save this poor unfortunate and slay the beast.

Edgar stood perched on the lip of the bogcrab's shell trying to think of a way to get down to the surface other than falling. Suddenly the eye that had been focused upon the crab noticed him for the first time. Edgar could see its iris narrow and the brave knight felt a sharp splinter of fear prick his resolve.

As if to intimidate the knight, Abaddon swivelled its eye around to face the man writhing within its globular body. Helobius twisted his head about to avoid the creature's gaze but he could feel the gelatinous matter surrounding him push his head forward so that he was peering directly into the ten foot wide eye at the centre of the monster. Suddenly he felt absolute terror sweep over him, fear so pure his heart sped up, faster and faster until it exploded. Within the body of the beast, Helobius screamed a silent scream and died.

'Oh dear,' Edgar said to himself as he observed the horrific death, 'this is going to get messy.'

He thrust down the face plate of his helmet, raised his sword before him and dived off the edge of the bogcrab's shell.

As Edgar fell towards Abaddon, he could feel the creature trying to make eye contact with him. But the knight's faceplate was down and he fell at such a speed, Abaddon had no hope of averting the vengeance Edgar was about to mete out. The sword pierced the creature's transparent epidermis and sliced through the gelatinous bubble of its body with little resistance. By the time the Edgar's downward descent had stopped, his sword was buried up to the hilt in Abaddon's eyeball. The creature wobbled violently for a moment and then burst apart. Translucent ectoplasm splashed out in all directions. All that was left was Abaddon's pierced eyeball, bobbing on the swamp like a buoy.

Before Edgar knew what had happened, the bogcrab had scooped him up, placed him on his back and headed back across the perimeter bound for the relative safety of the landing.

It was late afternoon when the men and women sheltering in the storehouse at Simeon's Reef heard knocking at their door. They turned

uneasily to Adzoba who was lying on a cot, his arm bandaged and resting on a pillow.

‘I don’t think the Ghul are the types to knock,’ he said dryly, gesturing to those by the door to open it quickly. They turned the latch and there standing in the doorway was the slumped figure of a Scorian knight, coated from helmeted head to armoured foot in putrid-smelling ectoplasm. Edgar’s golden suit no longer glistened, the plume atop his helmet was broken and limp, and his cape was little more than a muck-encrusted rag, but he clutched his sword defiantly and said, ‘The creature didn’t stand a chance.’

Adzoba rose to his feet. ‘You survived!’

‘Yes. I did.’

‘And the Ghul?’

‘I don’t know. There’s no sign of them out there now. Perhaps they ran out of arrows, perhaps the perimeter of fire has deterred them. Perhaps now their monstrous pet is killed they have no stomach for more conflict. I just don’t know, Mayor.’

‘But you killed the beast!’ Adzoba did not hide his delight. He clasped Edgar’s glove and said, ‘Brave Sir Edgar, we are indebted to you. How can we ever repay you?’

Edgar took off his soiled helmet. His dark hair was coated in Abaddon’s gelatinous insides and hung in thick, moist clumps across his forehead. ‘Well,’ he said with a smirk on his face, ‘I believe you promised me a hot bath.’

The smell of meat cooking over the hearth was intoxicating. Edgar emerged from his bath to find his armour polished, his robes washed and a meal of roast shelp cooking in his honour. The Mayor had provided him with every comfort Marshmead could provide, including his private guesthouse which proved to be exquisitely-appointed accommodation. The deep round fire in the centre of his lodgings was tended to by Adzoba’s sister, Jendayi. Like all Kheperan females, she was bald and lacked the unique horn that distinguished the males of Khepera, but she was just as tall as Adzoba, and significantly more pleasant to look upon.

She smiled coyly as Edgar exited the bathroom, sporting nothing more than a towel wrapped around his waist.

‘I’m sorry, my lady,’ Edgar said clumsily. ‘I did not know you were there.’

Although her skin was dark, Edgar could see that she was blushing coquettishly. Despite her coyness, Edgar felt her eyes pause on his exposed flesh longer than was necessary.

Jendayi bowed slightly. 'My lord, I have placed a set of clean robes on your bed. Your own clothes are still drying so I took the liberty of borrowing some garments from the Mayor. I have also set a carafe of ale on the sideboard in the parlour.' The girl turned to the meal that was dripping hot fat into the fire and pierced it with a long knife. She peeled back the dark brown meat to reveal sweet, pink flesh inside. 'Your evening meal will be ready in half an hour.'

Edgar was still extremely sensitive to the fact that he was standing before her with almost nothing on and heard little of what she had said. He edged his way to the bedroom, holding the towel up before his body as if it were a shield. 'I will just go and get changed,' he said, his voice half an octave higher than usual.

Jendayi stepped towards him. She wore a light challis blouse that left nothing for even the most unimaginative mind to ponder. Her body glistened with small droplets of sweat brought out by the heat emanating from the centre of the room. 'Sir, if there is anything else you desire, you only have to ask.'

Edgar backed up against the door to his room, relieved to find it slightly ajar. He was not sure, but it almost seemed as if the girl was suggesting he could have more than a meal and clean clothes. Looking at her soft, gleaming body before him, he had never felt so intimidated in his life.

'Sir Edgar,' she said, her voice sweeter than syrup, 'if you want me, just say the word – Jendayi. That's my name.'

The ambiguity of this offer was more than the knight could take and he quickly ducked into his room and shut the door. His heart was racing and he had to take a moment to compose himself. He had sat around campfires with soldiers who had shared their fantasies of Kheperan women, but he was not cut from that cloth. He was a gentleman and would not abuse the gratitude of his hosts.

Edgar made his way over to the bed. A long, white, silk robe embroidered with fine gold filigree lay at the foot of the mattress. He picked up the beautiful garment. It was so smooth and soft to touch it felt as if he were cradling a gown woven from the very mists that surrounded the village. He quickly slipped on the robe, a little fearful that the girl would enter and find him still naked. The silk gown felt delightful on his skin but it was a good two feet too long. His sleeves flopped about like Mabbit ears and he did not move for fear of tripping over the folds of material that had cascaded around his feet.

A delicate knocking at his door accelerated his heart once more and with a voice characterized by much trepidation and a little bit of excitement, Edgar replied, 'Enter.' Before the door opened, he quickly

ran a preening hand across his mop of dark hair whilst smoothing out the robe with the other.

It was the girl. Jendayi. She stood in the doorway, the fire beyond making a silhouette of her perfect body. Edgar swallowed.

She smiled. Again the coquettish blush as she gazed at his body. 'You know,' she said, nodding at the silk garment he had just put on, 'You really should take that off.'

The provocative solicitation reverberated in Edgar's head. Time seemed to slow down and speed up at the same time. It had been a long while since he had been propositioned by a woman, and never by one as ravishing as the Kheperan who stood in his doorway. Edgar knew there were reasons why Pelinese knights did not give themselves to temptations such as the one before him, but he just couldn't think of them there and then. Part of his brain was screaming to seize the moment before it was lost forever. He knew that he would never find himself in a similar situation again.

In a flurry, Edgar discarded his robe, flinging it far across the room to indicate his abandonment to the opportunity he saw in front of him. He stood there completely unclothed, his body still radiating heat from the recent hot bath. He held his arms out to the tall beauty before him.

'What are you doing, Sir Knight?' Jendayi exclaimed, deeply shocked by the sudden display of nudity.

'Ah...' Edgar replied, nausea filling up his belly, 'you said that I should take my robe off.'

'Yes, but perhaps you should wait until I have left the room. That gown is far too long for you. I was planning to fetch you another.'

'Oh,' said Edgar, looking desperately at the silk robe lying in a pathetic white lump on the other side of the room. He stood there as naked as the moment he first entered the world, and waited for the wave of embarrassment to break upon his person; a moment later, just as a wry smile crept across Jendayi's face, it hit. He felt himself tumbling as shame, guilt and folly swirled around him. By the time he surfaced from the churning swell of emotions, his face was glowing red and his eyes were cast down towards his feet.

'I'm sorry, my lord, but I just came to tell you that you have a visitor. Shall I let him in?'

'No, no. I'll see him outside,' he said quickly as his eyes urged her to exit the room and shut the door.

Out on the landing outside his accommodation, Edgar found Dr Garnett Shaw waiting for him, resting his injured hand on the railing of the

boardwalk. It was late afternoon and the lambent glow of the shatterbug lanterns was beginning to take effect. Edgar made his way across the landing, painfully aware of the stares he was receiving from villagers passing by. He wanted to tell himself that the curious gazes were just a manifestation of hero-worship – he had saved the town after all – but he knew that the people of Marshmead were simply gawping at the sight of the visitor wearing the ridiculously long robes.

Shaw had lit a pipe. The potent smell of Gorian weed floated into the air and mingled with the myriad smells that rose out of the swamp. The doctor nodded a greeting as Edgar joined him by the railing, choosing not to comment on the knight's gown.

'You know why Caliban attacked, don't you?' Edgar said frankly. Although he had moved to the heart of the matter immediately, his voice was measured. There was nothing accusatory in his tone.

Shaw paused before replying. 'I knew your father, Sir Edgar,' he said unexpectedly. His voice was low and sombre, almost sad. 'It was a long time ago, back when I was a soldier at the Royal Barracks, before I pursued the art of *medica materia*. Christian would come down to the bellows once a week and repair our swords and shields.' He paused again as the memories of those days floated through his mind. 'He was highly regarded among the soldiers. How is he?'

Edgar wasn't sure how to answer at first. This was not the road upon which he had planned to take the discussion. Shaw knew something about Caliban, something important. Otherwise he would have denied it when asked. Edgar cleared his throat and said, 'My father died five years ago.'

Shaw raised his eyebrows, seemingly surprised by the news. As he did so, his forehead cracked like dry mud being trodden upon. In the steady glow of the shatterbug lantern, Edgar could see that the doctor's skin condition was severe. 'I am truly sorry. I am sure he is sorely missed.'

'Why did you leave the service?' It was an obvious question. It was uncommon for a soldier to leave the corps. Most boys in Pelinore, indeed all of Scoriath, dreamt of one day serving their king as a soldier. Some even dared to dream of becoming a knight in the Royal Guard.

'It was after a skirmish we had in the Nessian Sea. Sessymirian pirates were attacking traders up and down the coast. I was on a small vessel called *The Speculation*, en route for Gorias when a Sessymirian cruiser pulled alongside us. At first I thought we had nothing to fear, for the Sessymirian ship had women and children on board. The Sessymirians said they had gifts for the people of Pelinore and wanted

their children to present them. We let the children come on board. They would have been no older than ten years of age.'

Shaw stopped. Edgar could see tears had welled up in his eyes. The old man sniffed and a tear escaped, running down his face in a crooked line, the irregularities of his skin pushing the water droplet down towards the corner of his mouth where it sat until he opened his cracked lips to speak again. 'We had let down our guard. Before anyone had any idea of what was happening, one of the children pulled out a dagger and rammed it under the ribs of the ship's captain. Another shoved a knife into my gullet. We scrambled for our weapons but we had put ourselves into a vulnerable position, allowing the children to come on board. The young ones were terrifying in their assault. The Sessymrians must have trained them well for most of our crew were slain before I had a sword in my hand. It fell to me to defend the ship. I had no choice but to carry out my duty. Things were done. Dreadful things.'

He did not have to provide greater detail. Garnett Shaw had committed an act the specifics of which were best left unsaid. A thousand comments sat on Edgar's lips waiting to escape, some of them judgemental, some of them understanding. Summoning all his self-control, he merely uttered two words in response: 'Go on.'

Shaw wiped his face with the back of his sleeve and continued. 'We barely escaped. The ship hobbled back to port and I spent the rest of the day being sewn up by surgeons. I decided that I would never again take up arms against anyone so I left the corps the following day and sought out a simple, quiet life.'

After drifting through more jobs than I could name, I discovered I had certain skills with potions and powders. I travelled all the way to Caquix where I secretly studied *medica materia* for three years, far away from the bloody deck of a Pelinese ship. I graduated with honours and became an apothecary. After ten years away from Scoriath, I returned to Pelinore and opened a shop on the promenade. For a while, I carved out a happy life, preparing remedies for all manner of afflictions. It was therapeutic to find the means to maintain life rather than take it away. Amongst my potions and procurements, I found redemption for all the wrongs I had committed as a soldier.'

Under the scabs and flakes of skin covering Shaw's face, Edgar could see pain – recounting the tragic tale of *The Speculation* had been difficult for him. It seemed to Edgar that Shaw had kept this event to himself for many years. In a strange way, the knight felt touched that the apothecary had chosen to share the story with him, but struggled to see the relevance of it to what had transpired out on the swamp earlier that

day. 'I'm sorry Doctor,' he said genuinely, 'but I don't understand how your change in career relates to the attack of the Ghul at Simeon's Reef.'

Shaw drew back on his pipe before answering. The last of the tobacco filling the briar bowl of the pipe burned away. The pungent smell of the weed hung in the air, unwilling to depart though the pipe was empty. 'My involvement in *medica materia* is what brought about the attack upon the town. I am responsible for everything that happened today.'

'How?' It was a simple enough question to ask, but considerably more difficult for the doctor to answer. Having finished his pipe, Shaw reached down into the folds of his robes, produced a hip flask and opened it. Even with the mordacious odour of the Gorian weed competing with the multitudinous scents rising from the bog before them, Edgar's nostrils were assaulted with a smell of alcohol so potent, he was amazed Shaw could drink the contents of the flask without wincing.

'I left Pelinore not long after Chamberlain Llyr came to power,' the doctor answered, wiping from his cracked lips a few drops of the home-made brew he had just poured into his mouth. 'I escaped before the purge that drove so many other apothecaries into hiding. Eventually I found my way here.' He swivelled around so that the small of his back was supported by the railing. Slowly casting his eyes around the ochre-coloured collection of domed buildings and wooden landings surrounding them, Shaw reminisced. 'Most of this did not exist back then. Just a few huts strung together with a rickety walkway.'

'Why did you leave Pelinore when you did, especially if you were doing so much good?'

This was the heart of the matter and Shaw took another swig of his flask before committing himself to the explanation. 'I... I made a mistake,' he said as he hid the flask back amongst the folds of his robes. 'A rather serious error of judgement. I remember it more clearly than time should permit. It had been raining heavily and I had not seen a customer all day. Sometime after lunch, the sun had broken through the dense clouds and I was standing outside my shop, smoking my pipe, enjoying the respite from the rain. The cobblestones glistened in the warm light whilst children drove their mothers mad by playing in the puddles that had formed by the roadside.'

Shaw turned back to face the limited panorama of the swamp, leaning forward on the railing so he did not have to look at Edgar. His eyes were glazed as the images of that day long ago floated through his head. 'The rain did not stay away long and as the first few drops began to fall, I went back inside and sat down by my fireplace to enjoy an afternoon nap. My eyes had not been shut for more than a few seconds

when a tall, young man came into my shop. I knew who he was as soon as he entered. It was Gideon Grayson's son.'

Grayson. It was a name Edgar recalled from his childhood. 'I remember him. He was a politician, wasn't he?'

'Yes,' Shaw replied. 'A politician, a diplomat, a healer, a soldier and an explorer. Gideon Grayson was all these things and more. Grayson was one of the Morgai, perhaps the greatest Morgai of all.'

'Morgai? But –'

'I am well aware that most people have discounted the Morgai as mere fancy. But I can tell you Sir Edgar, they exist. Or rather, they existed. I don't know what has become of them. Here in the mire, we are far away from the news of the world.'

'I must admit, I have doubted the existence of the Morgai. I have never met one.'

Shaw scratched nervously at his face, then turned to face the knight. It was the first time he had looked at Edgar since beginning the conversation. His eyes, watery and red as if he had just been slapped in the face, were tightly focused upon the knight. 'I have, Sir Edgar. Her name was Lilith Cortese and she lived on the promenade back in Pelinore. She told me three decades ago of your coming.'

'Me?' Edgar was stunned. He was not expecting to be a part of the doctor's story.

'It was I who was foretold of the destruction that would accompany your arrival in Marshmead,' Shaw said emphatically as he pointed a gnarled finger at his own chest to highlight his role in the prediction Adzoba had cited earlier that day. 'We have been waiting for this day for nigh on thirty years.'

Edgar pulled a hand out of his excessively long sleeve and stroked his chin, a gesture he often returned to when trying to comprehend perplexing statements such as this one. 'But I am only twenty-nine years old. I probably wasn't even born when you were told!'

'Such is the power of the Morgai,' responded Shaw enigmatically.

Edgar did not like the reply and craved a better explanation. 'Doctor Shaw, you must elucidate further,' he said, his voice coloured slightly by his inability to comprehend. 'Am I the reason you left Pelinore? Did you come here decades ago to await my arrival because of what this fortune-teller told you?'

'Lilith Cortese played a role in my coming to Mag Mel, but not in the way you are suggesting. I understand, these are confusing matters, but indulge me and all will be made clear.'

Edgar nodded, encouraging the old man to continue.

Shaw returned his gaze to the swamp. 'I left Pelinore out of shame. I could not stay. A week after she had spoken to me, the same Morgai, Lilit Cortese, talked with Remiel Grayson, the man who came into my shop that rainy day a lifetime ago. Cortese had unfolded a future to him that was as bleak and terrifying a tomorrow as could be told and laid the blame for this future at the feet of his brother Caliban.'

Shaw let the dust settle on his comment, awaiting Edgar's inevitable reaction as the knight put the pieces of the puzzle together. 'Caliban? You mean the one behind the attack today?' Edgar's voice had risen in volume and a few passers-by looked his way.

'Yes.'

'And he is the brother of the man who entered your shop that day?'

'Yes. His twin, actually. At first, I refused to believe the predictions. It was difficult to imagine the sort of world Remiel described but it was consistent with the visions Cortese had conveyed to me days before. I was well aware of her abilities. She had never been proven wrong. The stakes were high and I acquiesced to a solution for which I am deeply ashamed.'

'What did you do?'

'I made a potion to incapacitate Caliban. Remiel did not want to kill his brother. He just wanted to stop him becoming the thing in Cortese's visions. We decided that he could not be allowed to influence society in any way, so we made him an outcast. I prepared a potion that would give Caliban all the symptoms of leprosy, the scaling and peeling of the skin, the appearance of lesions upon the body and the loss of specific physical sensations. And I did not stop there. We had to ensure against the unlikely event of Caliban escaping from the leprosarium in the middle of Lake Erras to which he would be sent. So I added to the potion a property that would make Caliban's skin burn in the sunlight. Daylight would be unendurable, so he would be confined to the dark.'

'That is unconscionable!' Edgar snapped. Despite all the remorse that Shaw had shown leading up to this point, the knight found he was appalled by the truth. He felt sickened by the thought that the apothecary would create such a dreadful affliction and administer it to someone based on a seer's visions. 'Caliban had done no wrong! You punished him for crimes he had not yet committed! And to base this punishment on the invention of someone's mind...'

'I am not proud of what I have done,' Shaw said meekly, his voice reflecting the ignominy of his heart. 'I have dwelt upon my sin for thirty long years.'

A cold peal of laughter broke from Edgar's mouth. 'And so you should! It would seem that Cortese was wrong! Your village still stands despite what the seer asserted would accompany my visit to Marshmead.'

Shaw ran his knobbed fingers through his greasy hair. 'Perhaps Cortese was wrong about other things. Perhaps Caliban would have done nothing had we... had I not -'

Edgar reluctantly placed his hands on Shaw's shoulders and turned the doctor so that their faces were only inches apart. '*Perhaps?* I tell you now Dr Shaw, there is no question about it - Caliban was innocent! Whilst I do not believe in revenge such as we have seen attempted here today, Caliban Grayson has every right to be aggrieved, and your soul stands sorely charged for the heinous act you have committed against his person. It is ironic to see that you have contracted the very disease that you dispensed so carelessly thirty years ago.'

Shaw tried to avert his eyes from the knight's steely gaze. 'Sir Edgar, it is not irony that has brought about my own afflictions. Disgusted by my part in the treatment of Caliban, I drank what little remained of the potion we administered to him and left Pelinore never to return again. My skin burns as his does. In the diffuse light of the swamp I can survive in the day, but I cannot leave. Just as the leper colony was meant to be Caliban's prison, Mag Mel is mine. Everyday I look in the mirror, my face reminds me of the corrosion of my soul.'

It was pointless for Edgar to pursue it further. Shaw couldn't be more penitent or more aware of the consequences of his actions. The mistake had been made, acknowledged and paid for. Edgar had to let it go. He had not come to Mag Mel to berate a countryman for sins of the past.

They said nothing for a while, each man brooding on his private thoughts. The mists beyond had darkened and the lights of the lanterns painted white circles on the air above the boardwalk.

At long last, Edgar spoke. 'How can it be that Caliban has assumed command over these creatures called the Ghul. Are they from Sanctuary?'

'I doubt it,' replied Shaw distantly. 'Apparently Caliban never made it to the leper colony.'

'Never made it?'

Shaw shook his head. 'There is a vortex of water at the centre of the great lake to the south. You may know it as the Worldpool. It is rumoured that the ship carrying Caliban to the colony, *The Melody*, perished in the crossing and the Worldpool has been known as Caliban's End ever since.'

‘But it was poorly named,’ said Edgar wryly. ‘As evidenced by today’s events, Caliban did not die.’

Shaw looked around, made sure no other villagers were within earshot and placed a hand upon Edgar’s sleeve. The knight felt uneasy about the doctor’s touch but – with considerable effort – stopped himself from looking down at the grisly hand upon his forearm and focused upon the man’s face. His eyes were so watery Edgar imagined he could see ripples in them. ‘Sir Edgar, there is more. Today was not the first time I had heard of the Ghul, nor is the creature you killed the only monster Caliban has in his menagerie. I have heard rumours from visitors to our realm – tales of terrible things in distant lands. They could not explain them, but these things seem not so inexplicable to me. I fear my mistake thirty years ago has set in motion a series of events for which all Myrrans will pay a price.’

Edgar’s brain was ablaze with all he had learned since stepping outside. What he had discovered in Marshmead was something that had to be shared with other nations. ‘This cannot be kept secret Doctor. We must head for Cessair and pass on this information to the Chamberlain. If what you say is true, then decisions must be made to secure the safety of all nations.’

Garnett Shaw was dumbstruck at the suggestion. ‘We?’ he said after great pause.

‘It would be best if you accompanied me to the capital.’

Shaw shook his head. ‘Sir Edgar, even if I could somehow survive the journey to Cessair travelling under the burning sun beyond Mag Mel, the Magistrates would hang me before I even saw the Chamberlain. I am the catalyst of the great chaos that is descending upon the Myr.’

‘But you must. You know things that may help us in our defence against this new enemy.’

‘I can’t,’ Shaw remonstrated. ‘I simply can’t.’

‘You can,’ Edgar hammered back. ‘I know you are scared but you were once a soldier –’

‘And ashamed of it,’ Shaw interrupted. ‘You cannot bully me into leaving.’

Shaw was not going to budge and Edgar knew it. The knight decided not to pursue the topic further. He would see the Chamberlain himself and relay what he had been told. There was another matter that remained unresolved. One a lot closer to his heart. ‘Garnett, I have a request. It’s about my brother.’

The doctor was taken off-guard, as much by the use of his first name as the change in focus, but was pleased that the conversation had taken a different tack. ‘What is it? He is afflicted by some malady?’

‘Yes, you could say that,’ Edgar replied.

‘The night air grows clammy and you must be hungry, Sir Edgar!’ Shaw said with a muted show of joviality. He slapped a greasy hand on the knight’s shoulder and Edgar instinctively inspected the patch of cloth for any marks. Oblivious to this reaction, Shaw proclaimed, ‘We will retreat to your parlour and you can tell me all about it.’

‘There is only one who can help you,’ Shaw said sombrely as he stuffed his pipe with a dry, dark-green weed he extracted from a pouch on his belt. ‘No remedy currently exists that will end your brother’s suffering, but there is someone in Marshmead who possesses the skill to find a way.’

Edgar dabbed at his mouth to wipe away any trace of the shelp meat he had just consumed, then neatly folded the napkin and placed it beside his empty plate. ‘Then you must take me to him immediately.’

‘You won’t have to travel far,’ Shaw responded, placing his pipe in his mouth. ‘I am the only one who can help you, but we do not have much time.’

Edgar sipped from a goblet that the beautiful Jendayi had placed before him when she laid out the meal. He was growing tired and – happy that the doctor had acquiesced to his request – was looking forward to his first sleep in a clean bed for many weeks. ‘It can wait until morning Doctor. I have taken up enough of your time tonight.’

‘No – it can’t I’m afraid,’ Garnett Shaw replied earnestly. ‘We have less than twelve hours.’ A shadow crossed his face. His brow was furrowed and his eyes flickered nervously as if hiding a terrible secret.

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Sir Edgar, forty-five people died at Simeon’s Reef today. There are many families grieving the loss of loved ones, whilst I survived to smoke a pipe and see another day. That is a weight upon my shoulders that I cannot bear.’ Despite the fact that they were alone in the room, he dropped his voice to a whisper. ‘I am dying.’

‘What?’

‘As you lay in your bath washing away the day’s events, I administered a poison to my inglorious self. I will be dead by morning. And before you waste your words on talking me out of this course I have taken, know this – there is no antidote for the *medica materia* that courses through my veins. Before the distant sun rises on this swamp, I shall be gone and a small part of my debt repaid. I do not have long to save your brother.’

'Oh Gods!' Edgar sighed, despair and amazement evident in his exhalation.

The doctor placed his unlit pipe down on the table and strode across to the door. 'Fear not, Sir Knight, I have books and I have compounds gathered from the deepest parts of Mag Mel. If there is a way to alter you brother's condition, I will find it. Your altruism will not go unrewarded. My house is the last one on the eastern edge of town. Come to me before dawn and I will have a cure for your brother.'

Edgar could not sleep and shortly after midnight made his way to Garnett Shaw's abode. He felt lost and alone. There were no stars above to remind him of where he was. The mist lay heavily upon the town and he found he yearned for clear skies and shadows. He could see a golden band of light under Shaw's front door. The occasional sound of glass phials being poured into beakers indicated that the doctor was good to his word and would not give himself to sleep until a curative potion was produced for Dominic Worseley.

Edgar did not want to intrude. Any distraction could have dire consequences, so he sat upon the landing outside Shaw's residence and waited.

'No Edgar. I don't think we should!'

'Oh come on Dominic. I've heard he's something to see.'

'But it seems... wrong.'

'He's a leper. There's no right or wrong about it. Let's get a look at him before he's shipped off to Sanctuary.'

The lifted their heads over the window sill. The curtains were open. The full moons hung in the sky like giant's lanterns. The moonlight fell upon a writhing figure in the bed before them. Although he was only a few feet away, he was totally oblivious to the presence of the boys. His entire body was wracked with pain as his young skin rusted away. Occasionally his back would arch and a scream would escape from his exhausted lungs. Strange names exploded from his mouth as desperation consumed him: 'Remiel...Annika...Maeldune... Help me!'

'I didn't think lepers felt pain,' Dominic said faintly, turning away from the unsettling scene.

Suddenly two figures emerged from a nearby doorway. The brothers ducked down behind a small hedge by the window. A man and a woman had exited the leper's house and were standing whispering on the porch

nearby. The woman was young and beautiful but her voice was anything but soft.

'Remiel, it would have been better to kill him.'

Edgar was ripped out of his reverie by a sudden noise. It was a dull sound, like a heavy object falling onto wood. The noise was accompanied by the thin, light sound of breaking glass. His body shot up and for a brief second he was disoriented.

He was still outside Shaw's house but the fog seemed lighter now – it was almost morning. The sound that had brought Edgar back from the swirling memories of his childhood came from within the doctor's home. Edgar leapt to his feet and ripped open the front door, revealing a cluttered study filled with bottles, books and strange instruments containing coloured liquids and powders. In the centre of the room, by a thick, blackwood desk, Garnett Shaw lay sprawled on the floor, face upwards. His eyes were open, fixed on the ceiling in a lifeless stare.

Edgar knelt down by the body and grabbing the doctor by the wrist futilely fumbled around for his pulse. Finding none, the knight tenderly placed Shaw's arm back upon the floor and examined the room. Amidst the broken glass and spilt liquids, Edgar's eyes searched for some sign of the cure for his brother, but he was no scientist and did not know where to start. He gazed once more upon the tragic figure of the doctor and noticed he held something in his hand. It was a small parchment with thin writing scrawled across it. Some of the spilt liquids had made the ink run, but the words were still readable.

Dear Edgar,

I believe I have succeeded but I feel my life fade from me as I write this. I have placed the cure on my desk. It is the blue liquid in the small glass phial. It should

That was all he wrote. In his dying moments, not knowing Edgar was outside his house, Shaw had hastily grabbed a quill and ink from the desk. As death embraced him, Shaw's only thoughts were of the knight and his brother.

Edgar jumped up and scanned the desk. There were papers and books upon it but no glass phial. He swivelled around, looking over the benches that lined the walls of the room, vainly searching for anything resembling the phial Shaw had described. A tiny crunching sound floated up from underneath his boot. He was standing on a small piece of glass, a sliver of many such pieces at his feet. Around the base of the desk lay

the shattered remains of a number of fallen beakers and phials. With stomach-wrenching horror, Edgar realised that the doctor must have knocked them over as he fell to the floor. And then he noticed the blue liquid that lay in a dirty puddle that was slowly being eaten up by the grooves in the floorboards.

Edgar tightened the last saddlebag and led Juliet down the boardwalk. Although his golden armour shone brightly in the light of the shatterbug lantern he held before him, everything about his aspect suggested defeat. It was only as he prepared to leave the town of Marshmead that he fully comprehended the enormity of the occasion – he had failed his brother absolutely. There would be no remedy delivered and Dominic would have no choice but to endure the illness that riddled his body and made him half the man he once was.

‘You are too harsh on yourself, Sir Edgar,’ Adzoba said softly, placing a huge hand on the armoured shoulder of the knight.

‘I return to Scoriath empty-handed,’ Edgar said blankly.

Adzoba said nothing. There wasn’t much he could say to ease the pain Edgar felt. The knight had come across the sea to find a cure for his brother, journeyed into the heart of the swamp to find the means to end his sibling’s suffering and now he was returning home with little more than the crushing reality that Dominic would stay as he was until the day he died.

They walked silently along the boardwalk. Before long, they reached the place where they had met the day before. Adzoba’s manner had changed considerably since that meeting. Upon the very spot where the Mayor had thrown a phial of angelfire at Edgar, they bade each other farewell.

‘I would not hang my head so low if I were you, Edgar, son of Christian. You defied fate yesterday and saved my town from ruin. Do not dwell upon your inability to find a cure for your kinsman. All is not lost. My apothecaries will work towards developing the *medica materia* you seek, but it will take time.’

Edgar did not lift his head and for a few long seconds Adzoba was not sure he had even heard him. But the Mayor’s assurances were heard. An ember of hope was kindled in Edgar’s chest. ‘Thank-you,’ he said demurely.

‘It is I who must thank you, Sir Edgar. Thanks to you, there are now 3,000 souls in Marshmead who tonight sleep in a bed and not in a grave. That should be some consolation, even for you.’

He lifted his head to face Adzoba. There was some truth to what the tall Kheperan said.

‘Here,’ Adzoba said fondly. ‘I can’t repay you for what you’ve done. This is just a token of my gratitude. A reminder of our first meeting.’ Into Edgar’s hands he placed a small phial of angelfire. ‘Let’s hope you never have to use it!’ he added with a laugh.

Edgar smiled and bowed before the Mayor who returned the gesture. The knight cast a last look at Marshmead. It was cloaked in a creamy fog. He could just make out the faint glow of the ring of angelfire that had become the town’s outer wall. It was reassuring to see the angelfire’s nitid, red light in the mist – he was comforted by the knowledge that the people of Marshmead were safe from the strange new threat that had arisen from the swamp.

Not long after he had departed Marshmead – and much to Juliet’s consternation – Edgar stopped to enjoy a singular scent that arose from the mist.

It was summer, one of those oppressively hot days when even the air seemed lethargic. Edgar had slept in and found that no-one else was home. He knew his father had gone to work at the barracks but was surprised not to find Dominic playing outside in the yard. He called out for his brother, but received no answer. After wandering around the house for a time, Edgar decided to search the neighbourhood for his sibling.

When he was passing Taxman Tomkins’ house, Edgar heard something for which he was totally unprepared. It was the sound of the cantankerous, old man laughing. It was not the cackling laugh he associated with Taxman, the kind of laugh Edgar had heard before when he tripped on a tree root outside Taxman’s house. There was genuine happiness expressed in this laugh. Edgar swung his head around to locate the source of the mirth and saw the last thing he expected to see – his brother sitting on the steps of Taxman’s porch, sharing a joke with the old man.

Later that day, when Edgar questioned his Dominic about it – ‘fraternising with the enemy’ Edgar had called it – his sibling was completely unapologetic about it.

‘I often chat to him,’ he responded. ‘I figure he isn’t long for this world and it doesn’t hurt me none to be nice. I didn’t want to tell you ‘cause I knew you wouldn’t approve.’

Taxman Tomkins died the following day, leaving Edgar with a strange empty feeling, but a greater appreciation of the generosity of his brother's spirit.

His happy recollection was interrupted by the sound of yaffle-birds. They were louder than the last time he heard their cry and they were more persistent. It was not a promising sign of things to come. The heavens were about to open and Edgar would be caught out in the downpour. He mounted Juliet and sped off down the boardwalk hoping to reach the village of Shysie before nightfall.

Edgar was not the only one to hear the yaffle's cry. When the rains began to fall, Drabella took shelter in the cavity of an ancient mire-tree. On either side of the tree, hundreds of obedient Ghul soldiers stood to attention, trying to make sense of the cold water that fell from the sky. The very concept of rain was alien to the Ghul; Drabella was beguiled by it, entranced by the way it created thousands of small explosions across the muddy surface of the swamp.

The downpour grew in intensity, making it difficult to be aware of anything else. It thundered in the Ghul sergeant's ears and filled her mind. Although the rain induced feelings akin to claustrophobia in her, Drabella felt strangely comforted by the deluge. She could feel her heartbeat racing, matching the syncopation of the raindrops upon the moor. So absorbed was she in her first experience of rain that it was half an hour before she noticed something so significant, she fell to her knees with cold-hearted joy.

It was something that the people of Marshmead failed to notice as they retreated to their windowless houses on the boardwalk. It was something that Edgar Worseley did not consider as he rode away from Marshmead, head bowed down to avoid the sheets of rain slapping against his face. And it was something that Adzoba Aethelflaed only realised when it was too late.

The Mayor jumped up from his favourite armchair, spilling the hot brew he made upon his arrival back home. 'The angelfire!' he exclaimed in terror as he opened the door and peered out into the mists.

There was no comforting red glow to grant him solace. The deluge had drowned the fire and razed the protective perimeter to the sodden ground. He peered up the wide wooden avenue that ran through the centre of the town and froze – his worst fears were realised. Through the

torrent of rain he could make out innumerable grey silhouettes moving slowly towards him. The Ghul had entered the town.

Chapter Twelve Hurucan Hill, Kolpia

Kali looked across the wide plains below. The grasses bowed gracefully as a playful zephyr danced amongst them. Late afternoon was always Kali's favourite time of day. Though the sun had not yet set, much of the plains lay in shadow. In every direction, the arms of the impossibly high Kolpian Circle cradled the land below. This mountain range had made Kolpia a sanctuary, where hundreds of species thrived, untroubled by civilization and progress. Life here unfolded in much the same way it had for thousands of years and that was how the plainspeople liked it.

To the south, a faint dust cloud rose into the air where herds of majestic staggorn hooved their way across a maze of hillocks, heading for home after a day of dining on the succulent sungrass that lay at the base of Hurucan, the great hill that Kali and his tribe called home.

At the base of this high domed hill, not far from the wide meadow of sungrass, a river cascaded over jagged rocks as it made its way down to a velvety, blue lake in the distance. Amidst the white foam of the rapids, Kali could just make out the thrashing movement of foot-long, female sysifins making their way upstream. They were remarkable creatures and Kali would often sit by the banks of the stream watching them struggle their way through the rapids on their nine month journey to the great waterfall many leagues upstream. Each fish pushed a single egg before her, determined to move the twelve inch ball upstream to the hatching grounds where its captive would be released into the world. It was a particularly tragic journey for the mother who, exhausted by the effort of traversing the rapids, would only live long enough to see the egg hatch. Upon emerging from its shell, the young sysifin would gorge itself on the body of its mother before commencing the wild journey back down the rapids to the lake where the females of the species would mate and begin the cycle again. Life for the male sysifin was not quite so bleak and he often lived for over 100 years, swimming and eating in the shady shallows at the base of the stream.

Kali pondered the life of the female sysifin – it was hard and it was brief. He had studied the fish, intrigued by its behaviour. The female was cursed with a gestation period that was no longer than an hour, so she had no choice but to lay the egg at the base of the stream where the males swam around, aimlessly drifting along the banks of the lake like vagrants. He had been perplexed over the need to push the eggs upriver until he realised that the hammering of the waterfall at the source of the river played a significant part in the cycle. The eggs were extremely

thick – they needed to be to survive the battering they received on the upstream journey – and the waterfall was the only thing strong enough to weaken the shell.

Looking down from the hill at the sysifins battling their way up through the waters that were relentlessly trying to push them back, Kali realised he actually admired the females. In their efforts to get upstream, they gave their lives more meaning than could be found in the unencumbered existence of the fat males in the lake below who would not lift a fin to assist the females in their fight.

Parts of the vast bowl of Kolpia looked different every time Kali gazed down upon it. This was primarily due to the presence of the huge mockworms that lay across the land. The mockworms often grew over 1,000 yards long and 100 yards wide. Their prodigious size was not the only notable thing about the worms. They were also blessed with an uncanny ability to camouflage themselves. The mockworms could blend in with a rocky escarpment or disguise themselves as a small range of hills. So successful was this transformation that Kali had once stood next to one of these protean invertebrates without knowing it. It was only when he leant on what he thought to be a hard wall of rock that he realised the deception. Upon feeling a tiny hand pressing on its chromatophore-rich skin, the startled worm shuffled off, leaving Kali standing in an empty field. This highly-evolved skill of transmutation was a strange ability for a creature so vast to possess, as there was nothing in Kolpia that could harm the mockworm. It was a pathologically timid creature that would surreptitiously wiggle away whenever another creature approached, and because Kolpia was filled to overflowing with native species, the mockworms were often on the move, disguised as hummocks, knolls and hills, sneaking their way across the landscape. In the fading light of dusk Kali could make out a pair of worms a league away, shuffling slowly across the plains, pretending to be a ravine.

The mockworms were not the only things on the move. To the west, Kali could see a pack of tumblethorns making their way over the hills. The tumblethorn was Kolpia's most feared predator. Although it resembled a woody plant, consisting of twisted branches heavily laden with thorns, the tumblethorn was actually an animal and an extremely vicious one at that. It had no eyes, mouth or nose, but this did not stop it from cutting a bloody swath across the plains. It did not discriminate and would mow down any creature in its path. The tumblethorn drank the blood spilt from its prey via pores in its coarse skin. The poor animals that weren't impaled upon its hooked thorns were usually left in shredded pieces on the landscape.

High in the sky above the tumblethorns, a flock of greyback vultira circled in the darkening sky, hoping that the malevolent, rolling predators beneath them would make one more kill before night fell.

Something small caught Kali's eye. In the dirt before him, a twin-headed flummox sat with a round kor-kor nut in its small, pudgy hands. Although diminutive in size, being no larger than Kali's foot, the flummox was as irascible and pugnacious a beast as one could find in the Myr. Its two heads were facing each other. Two pairs of bulbous green eyes were involved in a staring match, behaviour typical of the two-headed rodents that infested the sweeping Kolpian hills. Suddenly, the left head tilted right back, the mouth opening impossibly wide. As the mouth opened, the flummox lifted this head up high on its neck. The head on the right covered but the creature would not lift a hand in defence for fear of losing possession of the kor-kor nut. With a ferocity that would make a marrok squirm, the flummox's left head swooped down on the right, enveloping it entirely. Sharp incisors sheared through the right head's neck and in one of the world's most obscene animal behaviours, the flummox swallowed its own head. The violence of self-decapitation done, the flummox then spent the next few minutes yelping as the pain from its self-inflicted wound ripped through its entire body. A few minutes more and it collapsed to the ground dead, the trauma of the wound and the accompanying loss of blood too much for the little animal to bear. The kor-kor nut rolled away down the hill.

The sun sank below whatever horizon lay beyond the ring of mountains surrounding them and Kali closed his eyes. It would not be long now.

An hour passed and he was growing restless. Although he tried to dismiss them, hopeful thoughts crept out from the corners of his mind. These thoughts quickly retreated when he became aware of the hot breath upon his neck. Kali turned his head as much as his bonds would allow him. It was Chabriel. Night had fallen. The Ghul had returned.

Kali had been bound to a pole for three days as had every other member of his tribe. During the day, he could lose himself in the beauties of the world surrounding him. But at night, the horror of his captivity was brought back with brutal certainty. His body bore countless wounds and much of his dark, brown skin was covered in dried blood. That would all change soon, as Chabriel had returned to make new incisions and to

reopen old ones. Soon he would feel the warm caress of his own blood flowing down his body, to gather in a dark puddle at his feet once more.

Kali's tribe was incapable of defending itself against the cold-hearted interlopers. The Ghul had shown nothing but cruelty since arriving in Kolpia. The people of Hurucan Hill were a simple folk, peacefully living off the land, coexisting with all other creatures that called the plains their home. The tribe had no weapons. They barely had any tools. It was no trouble for the Ghul to round up all eighty-five of them and tie them to poles they had fashioned from a copse of trees that once stood atop the hill.

Although being almost twice the size of the Ghul, and second only to the Kheperans in terms of height, the plainspeople did not know how to fight. They had never witnessed violence outside of what occurred naturally in the world around them. The night the Ghul marched up Hurucan, they were met with no resistance. The Kolpians' display of curiosity swiftly turned to fear when Chabriel killed three tribesmen to announce her arrival. She spent the first night barking orders and screaming at the plainspeople, choosing to ignore the fact that the Kolpian lacked the very organ needed to hear her demands and threats – they had no ears.

'He's not here, Spulla,' Chabriel said to the old Ghul soldier standing in attention before her. Spulla held his favourite marrok, the hulking albino pack leader, on a short leash. Other marroks slithered around Spulla like devoted acolytes. The beasts leered at the men, women and children tied to the poles around them. Salivating jaws snapped at any Kolpian bold enough to look the marroks' way. A number of the marroks were lucky enough to dine on randomly chosen captives the previous night, and Spulla's pet strained on his leash in anticipation of a similar feed.

'No Major. I had two teams searching the countryside last night and neither picked up any trace of a male scent, other than those of the savages we have captive already.'

'It was just a vain hope. For all we know, Remiel Grayson is hiding on the other side of the world. What of the Morgai female, the one whose scent was picked up back in Grisandole? Any sign of her?'

Sergeant Spulla raised a bony hand to his mouth and picked at his teeth nervously. He wanted to give his commanding officer some good news, especially after their failure at Grisandole. He was old, even for Ghul, and didn't want to spend the rest of his days in the Nursery. 'We have... ah... lost the scent, Major.'

Suddenly Chabriel's left arm shot out and grabbed Spulla by the throat just as her right arm pulled a needleback spike from its scabbard at her side. 'Sergeant, you are well aware that I am prepared to use this should you fail me? Or even worse, perhaps you would like to join Droola in the Nursery back home?'

Chabriel could hear the rumbling growl that broke from the albino at Spulla's side when she grabbed him, but she was not concerned. She could finish off the white mongrel long before he had a chance to tear the meat from her bones. She glared down at the marrok and his growling stopped immediately.

Chabriel brought Spulla closer, so that his bloodshot eyes and fetid breath were only inches away from her own. Under her vice-like grip, she could feel the sergeant gulp as she lifted a hairless eyebrow to indicate she was still awaiting an answer.

'No Major,' he gasped. 'There's no need for such drastic measures – I won't fail you.'

Chabriel released him. She casually ran her thin fingers through her long strands of hair. 'Then what seems to be the problem Sergeant? Those beasts have smelled their way over...' – she paused, searching for the word Caliban had taught her – '...mountains. How can it be they have lost the scent here on the plains?'

Spulla took a step back, making sure he was out of Chabriel's reach. 'She's around somewhere, but she's elusive. The scent, it keeps changing, Major.'

'What do you mean?'

'The marroks keep picking up a new scent, replacing the old one. I can't make sense of it.'

Chabriel sneered. 'That is why you are still a sergeant Spulla. You just don't have the brains for anything more important. She's a shape-shifter. She probably knows she's being tracked.'

'Well, it's confusing the marroks.'

'Then I'll just have to make sure she comes to us. I'll make sure I get her attention.'

Spulla's red-rimmed eyes widened as he realised why Chabriel had made captives of the plainspeople, why she had only executed a few of them so far. She was trying to draw the Morgai woman out of hiding.

Chabriel sighed dramatically. 'It looks like we'll just have to spend more time with the savages. It's going to be a long, bloody night of torture tonight Spulla.'

The sergeant beamed. 'That's terrific news Major. Terrific news.'

Captain Baggut wiped Kali's blood from his eyes. The captain had piled the bodies of five slain plainspeople before Kali, just so he could reach the tall Kolpian's face. Standing on the mound of corpses, Baggut stared malevolently into the eyes of his captive. All the other plainspeople had screamed when they had gone under Baggut's knife. This one had endured far more than they had but not let so much as a whimper escape his broad lips.

Chabriel watched the exchange, curious to see where it would end. Baggut was the stupidest officer she had known but was also one of the most stubborn. The Kolpian on the other hand showed no sign of submitting. He just stood quietly and stared back at his tormentor.

'Cut him again,' encouraged Spulla who sat on the ground stroking the albino marrok as he fed him chunks of flesh taken from one of the plainspeople Baggut had already slain.

Baggut slowly slid his knife down Kali's cheek, pushing hard as he did so. The flesh peeled back like over-ripe fruit, exposing the Kolpian's cheekbone under gouts of blood.

Chabriel admired the man's stoicism. Then, out of the corner of her eyes, she saw one of the other plainspeople turn her head away from the scene. Chabriel walked over to the female and pulled her head around. Two watery paths ran in parallel lines from the female's eyes to the corners of her wide mouth. 'What is this stuff?' Chabriel asked as she placed a finger on the remnants of tears that had fallen from the captive's eyes.

The woman pulled her face away from the Ghul commander and stared out across the starlit plains. Chabriel looked from the woman to the man Baggut was torturing. There was some connection between the two. The water flowing from the female's eyes signified some sort of emotional attachment to the stubborn savage under Baggut's knife.

'Captain Baggut!' Chabriel called out to her subordinate who was up to his elbows in blood. 'That one is strong.' Her right hand fell to the hilt of a long bone knife that was tucked into a sheath attached to her thigh. Drawing the knife and raising it high into the air, she continued: 'I think if we are to draw the Morgai witch closer, we need to concentrate our efforts upon the weaker ones.'

Suddenly her tone changed to one of absolute contempt. 'These Kolpians are an abomination. No ears. No voice. No... head.' In an elegant flourish, Chabriel swung her long blade through the air. A spray of blood shot out into the night as her knife met with flesh and bone. A heart-wrenched scream broke from Kali's lungs as the head of his wife fell to the ground.

The cruel Captain Baggut was delighted to finally hear a sound emerge from the mouth of his captive. Inspired by Chabriel's cruel slaughter of the Kolpian female, Baggut turned to face Kali with a cold smile. The grin vanished from his face immediately, for once the captain had come close enough, Kali leant forward and sank his teeth into the vile creature's ear. Yanking his head around sharply, Kali ripped off the ear and spat it out into the night. Baggut howled with rage as he ran off into the darkness, searching for his discarded ear.

Chabriel came forward, carefully stepping over her victim's decapitated head. She sneered at Kali, scolding him for his small act of rebellion. 'Kolpian, not a very wise thing to do. Now you'll pay the price of your insubordination,' she said calmly. She strolled over to another Kolpian who strained against his bonds as the bone knife was raised to his throat. 'A most unfortunate turn of events,' she sighed, the insincerity of her words apparent even to Kali – whilst he could not hear her, he could guess what she purposed to do. 'Watch as your primitive tribe is removed from the Overworld. One. By. One.'

Another head fell. Again Kali screamed.

Chabriel moved across to the next captive, a small boy who strained so hard against his bonds, it looked as if he would tear his own arms from their sockets. His struggles were reflected by the terror in Kali's eyes. 'Ah, I see this one is also special to you – perhaps, your son...'

The anguish in Kali's face confirmed Chabriel's suspicions. The knife drew back.

'Enough.'

The voice broke across the hill like sunlight. It was quiet yet resolute and all other sounds ceased on the plain. Suddenly, an inferno broke out across the crown of the hill. Searing white fire erupted out of the very earth. The Ghul closest to blaze fled from it, but Chabriel remained where she was, her eyes focused upon the shape of a woman making her way towards them from the far side of the fire. The marroks took flight, even the albino, slithering away into the darkness, abandoning their subterrestrial masters.

The figure moved slowly, like an old woman, bent double as she came closer and closer to the blaze. But rather than walking around the conflagration, the figure kept her course and hobbled through it. She exhibited no signs of pain or distress. In fact, as she walked, her body became more erect and her gait became sturdier and faster. As the woman exited the flames, tongues of fire danced tenderly upon her skin.

'What is this?' Chabriel snarled.

The figure stood defiantly before the remaining Ghul. Her raven hair wove itself into the evening breeze. She was beautiful. Her skin was white and pure, and her dark eyes sparkled with a potency that put dread into the small hearts of the Ghul. 'My name is Lilith Cortese. I am Morgai.'

'At long last, Lilith,' Chabriel sneered, drawing deep from her well of hatred to quell the unexpected, distasteful sense of fear she felt in the woman's presence. 'I am Chabriel and I have been looking for you.'

'I know,' Lilith replied. 'I know what you are. I know what you seek.'

Voices rang in Kali's head. Incredibly, he could hear the words. It was strange hearing them – they were like bubbles in his brain – but he was strangely comforted by their presence. The Kolpians had names for things but these were private – unspoken and unheard. They had no way of knowing the names other members of the tribe ascribed to things. Although the concept of individual words with shared meaning was unknown to the Kolpians, Kali found he understood every word in the exchange unfolding before him. He could *hear* the harsh speech of the one called Chabriel and this was contrasted by the soft delivery of Lilith Cortese. She spoke with such assuredness, such gravity, that any concerns he held for his son's welfare quickly dissipated into the cool, night air.

Chabriel planted her feet wide apart and waved the point of her knife at Lilith. 'Then you also know what we are capable of should you not submit to our will.'

The Morgai woman laughed. It was a light, frivolous laugh that quickly ended. 'You are but bile secreted from the gullet of the earth. What you have done and what you will do is a text I have already read.' She stepped forward, her gaze fixed firmly on Chabriel. 'I have a message for your master. You will tell him to cease his attacks upon the Myr. Inform him that Remiel Grayson died many years ago. Caliban's search for his brother is a waste of his time.'

Chabriel was not accustomed to being spoken to in such a way. Her pale eyes flared with indignation. 'Do not prescribe me my duties, witch,' she sneered. 'I am no mere messenger.'

'And I am no mere witch.'

The small blaze through which the woman had walked erupted into a massive firestorm. The flames blew away all shadows and the Ghul were left naked to the light. Many fell to their knees covering their heads, but the fire would show them no mercy. The blaze took on a life of its own and reached out to embrace all the invaders. Incredibly, the plainspeople who had survived the Ghul's torture were left unscathed by the fire, but

the Ghul were burnt to ashes. Only Chabriel escaped the fiery onslaught and that was only because it was Lilith's will.

Kali watched the beautiful woman walk gracefully across the bloody ground. She waved her hands and all the surviving Kolpians felt their bonds go slack. With a mere gesture, Lilith had released them.

Exhausted, Kali dropped to his knees. On the edge of his sight he could see the face of his wife staring blankly at him. Kali scrambled over to his son and clasped him passionately to his chest. When he lifted his head, he was stunned by the scene before him.

Chabriel was hanging suspended at the end of a rope as if she were hanging from a gibbet. Her legs kicked at the air frantically while her thin, wiry hands clutched at the noose around her neck. Strangely, the other end of the taut rope was not fixed to anything. It just hovered in mid-air, no doubt held there by the will of the woman who had saved what was left of the plainspeople.

'You live because I require you to pass on the message I have given you,' Lilith said slowly as if she were speaking to a child. Her tone cut into Chabriel deeper than any weapon could.

'Woman, you have saved these few,' Chabriel screamed defiantly, 'but others will pay for your intervention when we unleash Kleesto upon this forsaken land.'

Suddenly the noose around Chabriel's neck loosened and she fell unceremoniously to the ground. Lilith bent down, grabbed Chabriel roughly by the hair and yanked her head around so that they were facing one another. It was a savage action and at odds with the grace and poise the Morgai had displayed to that point. 'I have not forsaken it,' she growled, her voice like a rasp over Chabriel's ears.

She picked up the Ghul commander and shoved her fiercely away from her.

'Now, leave!'

Chabriel swivelled her head around to register her contempt and then she was gone.

Lilith knelt down before Kali. Her face was young, but behind her eyes Kali could sense a deep and profound history. In his head, he heard a voice, as youthful and as ancient as her eyes. 'Your child is safe, for now.'

Kali placed his large hands to his temples. He looked inquisitively at Lilith. 'How is it I can hear you? Understand you?'

'I have certain talents.'

‘You can hear my thoughts inside your head?’ He had not expected Lilith to hear his question, let alone answer it.

‘Yes. I’m afraid I need words to communicate.’

‘Words. They are a strange concept. My mind feels like a storm has broken upon it. So much chaos. We have names but they are private, unknown by others. This sharing of words – it is confronting. I am not accustomed to communicating with such precision, with such complexity. Words are... disturbing.’

‘I’ve never considered it before, but I can appreciate your reservations. Words are often the means by which we hide our heart’s secrets. They can be the tools of mendacity. The plainspeople have lived for thousands of years without them. It is my weakness that I require them to speak with you.’ She looked around. ‘I am sorry for your loss. This is a terrible tragedy. I wish I could do more to redress the damage that has been done here.’

Kali firmly held his child, burying the boy’s face in his chest lest he see the decapitated head of his mother. ‘Why did they do this?’

Many emotions welled up inside Lilith. She could feel decades-old pangs of doubt resurface. Thirty years prior she had foretold of the very world they now witnessed, and the foretelling did nothing to avert the horrors predicted. She had long wrestled with the issue of whether she should have indulged Remiel Grayson in his request to peer into the whirlpool of time. She sought solace in the fact that she did warn him about the consequences of acting upon what he saw.

‘Remiel, that is not something I recommend... For you to hear all I see is dangerous.’

It seemed small consolation. She had not protested enough.

She thought about her talent. Her visions of the Ghul’s coming to Grisandole had given her time to escape, but she had no such warning of their entry into Kolpia. The future was growing increasingly enigmatic. She felt old. Soon there would come a day when she knew as much about tomorrow as anyone else. Deep down, Lilith hoped she would pass away before that day came.

‘I believe they were looking for me. This,’ she said looking around at the brutal carnage the Ghul had wrought upon Hurucan Hill, ‘was my fault.’

‘No.’

It was expressed with such absolute certainty, Lilith thought the Kolpian may have misunderstood her.

‘Had I not come to Kolpia, your tribe may have been left alone.’

Kali looked up at her. She looked tired. ‘Had we a need for language, we would still have no use for the word *maybe*. On the plains

of Kolpia things either *are* or they *are not*. There is no such thing as *maybe*. We have no use for doubt. Your intercession saved the life of my son.'

'But you have lost so much.'

'Yes, and you have no words that can convey our sense of loss. But you were not the aggressor in this conflict. I will hold you no more responsible for this slaughter than I would hold the moons above.'

A breeze blew Lilith's dark hair across her face. She lifted a small, delicate hand to wipe the long strands away to reveal a modest, gentle smile. 'For one inexperienced in the use of words, you express yourself with great sensitivity.'

Kali smiled in return, his broad mouth curling up above his jaw. 'One does not need words to be sensitive.'

'No, I suppose not. I hope you do not get too attached to this gift of language. It will not stay with you forever.'

Kali nodded. '*Magicka fed a tempa*.'

She smiled to hear his unexpected use of the old tongue. 'Yes. Magick fades in time.'

A small number of Kolpians had gathered around them, taking a reverent interest in the woman who had saved them from torture and death. Others tended to the injured, the dying and the dead. It was eerily quiet. Such bloodshed would usually be followed by demonstrative displays of grief, but this was not the Kolpians' way. With sad, slow movements, they gathered the bodies together, sombrely placing them in lines on the bloodstained grass.

Lilith's head cocked to one side. Her ears registered something on the very edge of hearing but her mind could not identify what it was. She closed her eyes and listened hard. Once she cleared her mind of all other distractions, she became aware of a droning sound. The noise was a thin, bombilating sound, much like that made by buzzbeetles before the honeyjuice harvest, only deeper in pitch. The humming increased in volume. The Kolpians, deaf to all sound, were oblivious to any threat.

'Something's coming!' she broadcast to everyone on the hill. 'Get down!'

With frightening swiftness the sound rose to a crescendo and Kleesto swung into view. Lilith's mouth dropped when she saw the massive avian monster for the first time. In her visions, she had seen a number of behemoths from Caliban's subterranean menagerie, but Kleesto was not one of them. Its wings of slate grey were spread wide, vibrating so rapidly they seemed a blur. It hovered for a second above Lilith, revealing six vicious claws that opened and shut in a frenzy, anticipating the ripping of flesh and the breaking of bones. The beast's wedge-shaped

head tilted back as it opened its beak to reveal three sets of short, sharp teeth and a short stub of a tongue that appeared to Lilith as if it had been severed.

‘You must be Kleesto,’ she said dryly as she prepared for the inevitable attack.

Kleesto’s reply was a volley of pure sound. The sonic assault hit Lilith hard. She put up a hand to dispel it but, weakened from her attack upon the Ghul, she was not able to conjure a defence in time. Her dark hair and clothes streamed behind her as if she was buffeted by a savage wind.

At the moment Kleesto’s barrage hit Lilith, Kali saw something he could not explain. For the briefest moment in time, he thought he saw another figure standing where she stood – a frail, old woman, cowering under Kleesto’s dreadful sonic scream. In an instant, the old woman was gone and in her place was Lilith’s lithe, youthful form. Her face indicated the attack had hurt her, for her forehead was creased and her teeth were clenched. She had fallen to one knee, clearly exhausted.

Incredibly, though Kali was near her, he had not been harmed by Kleesto’s attack. None of the Kolpians were. They had felt it but it had not hurt them the same way it had hurt Lilith. Somehow, their permanent state of deafness made them less susceptible to Kleesto’s sonic screams. Kali picked himself off the ground, indicating to his son to stay where he was.

Lilith lifted her head as Kleesto wheeled around in the sky to launch a second attack. Not knowing whether she could survive a second battering, Lilith quickly launched an offensive. A massive ball of flame burst into life before her. She raised her hands and the burning orb rose above the earth. With a sharp flick of her arms, she thrust the fireball at the beast bearing down upon her. The sky above sizzled as the searing ball cauterized the air and slammed into Kleesto before it could let fly with another attack.

For a moment, it looked as if Lilith’s pyrokinetic response had stopped Kleesto. It had pulled out of its dive to brace itself against the fireball. The flaming missile enveloped the beast, but did little more than annoy it. Kleesto shook its wings rapidly and the fireball dissolved into the air.

‘So, fire doesn’t bother you – that’s okay. We’ll try something else.’

Kleesto screamed again. The wave of sound shot through the air. Lilith had no time to prepare herself. All she could do in the split-second before the sonic scream hit was close her eyes and hope it wouldn’t be the end of her.

She was hit firmly, but from the side and not by Kleesto. Seeing the monster about to strike, Kali had thrown himself at Lilith and slammed into her side, thrusting her from the focus of Kleesto's attack. The sonic scream broke ineffectually across the Kolpian's back.

Lilith sat in a heap and looked up at the Kali. 'You saved me,' she whispered gently in his mind. 'Thank-you.'

Kali nodded graciously, then turned his head towards an enraged Kleesto. It extended its claws, a reminder to all below that it had other means to inflict pain upon its prey.

'Do you have any other tricks besides fire?'

Kali's comment reverberated in Lilith's mind. She raised her fine eyebrows in surprise and smiled. 'You've had the gift of language for a few minutes, and already you're indulging in sarcasm?' she responded playfully. 'Of course I have other tricks. Watch this!'

Lilith's hands extended, the tips of her fingers aimed directly at Kleesto. The air around grew cold and Kali noticed Lilith's hands had rapidly turned a shade of blue. Beads of frost gathered across her long fingernails.

The effect of this magick upon Kleesto was a lot more dramatic. Its wings slowed down considerably as a layer of ice formed on each scale. Its claws clenched up into tight balls as all heat dropped from the air surrounding it. Unable to stay airborne, the beast fell to the ground, where it writhed in agony as its veins began freezing. It unleashed a couple of anguished screams, but these were unfocussed and were no threat to Lilith.

'It's working,' Kali said, his voice a comforting presence in her head.

He was right. Kleesto's body buckled and shook as its internal organs shut down, reduced to frozen blocks of tissue in Lilith's frigid grasp. It released a tortured gurgle and then stopped moving, surrendering itself to the fate Lilith had dispensed. But then something happened that surprised all who witnessed Lilith's attack upon the savage creature that had tried to kill her moments before – she stopped.

Lilith sat down and stared into the night sky, her breast rising and falling as she struggled to get her breath back. Her hands were no longer blue; they were old and wrinkled. Kali could also see traces of similar wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. Her face still retained its youthful qualities – the proud, round cheeks; the full, ruby lips; the long, thick eyelashes – but these looked like a mask, hiding a countenance that was much, much older.

He looked over at Kleesto. The creature was not dead. Its claws twitched as life slowly flowed back into them – the beast's veins no longer frozen. It was vulnerable but would not remain so for long.

Kali turned back to Lilith to find that any wrinkles he thought he had seen had altogether disappeared. Her smooth, white brow was moist with sweat as were the palms of her small, elegant hands. Lilith's dark eyes continued to gaze up at the stars. 'Mercy?' Kali asked as he pointed over at Kleesto.

Lilith smiled at the Kolpian's innocence. 'No,' she responded gently. 'Exhaustion.'

It was true. She had nothing more to give. Although she was only a second short of killing Kleesto, Lilith could not summon another ounce of magick to put an end to the loathsome beast's life. She dropped her eyes from the skies above to see Kleesto roll onto its legs and skulk off into the darkness, unable to fly, unable to fight, but alive. She knew that it was not the last she had seen of it.

'What is to be done?'

It was almost morning. The skies to the east had transmuted into a beautiful, thick lazuline, a colour only seen by people who rose before the sun. Almost all of the tribe had retired to their grassy beds, their bodies depleted of all energy by three nights of brutal torture at the hands of the Ghul. Only Kali remained awake, sitting by a fire tenderly stroking the head of his son who had fallen asleep in his lap.

On the other side of the fire sat Lilith Cortese, hugging her knees, deep in thought. She was startled by Kali's question popping into his head, as he had not moved or spoken for almost an hour. 'I do not believe the Ghul will be back here any time soon,' she replied. 'They have nothing to gain by returning to Kolpia.'

Lilith took her arms from around her knees and placed them behind her back. She looked across the fire at Kali's broad face. He was a good man. He could be trusted. 'You must leave immediately, travel south to the city of Cessair. An assembly of all the Myr's nations will be convened in Cessair to respond to the emergence of the Ghul. You must inform them of what has taken place here. Only you can do this.'

Lilith awaited a reply in her head but he had none to give. The magnitude of what she had suggested was so great that he was at a loss for words. No Kolpian had ever gone beyond the boundaries of the mountains and very few Myrrans had made their way into Kolpia. Although Kali was aware of places and peoples beyond his land's

borders, he had never considered leaving the plains. It was as fantastical an idea as could be imagined.

Lilith pulled herself around the fire so that she sat beside him. She reached deep into the folds of her gossamer purple and gold robes and produced a scroll, bound with a richly-embroidered strip of cloth. She untied the cloth and unrolled a parchment before Kali. It was made of bleached leather and was completely blank.

‘Head south over the plains until you reach the feet of the southern range.’ As she spoke lines and pictures appeared on the map as if an invisible quill were drawing on it. The calligraphy upon the map was ornate and the drawings and markings that appeared were all presented in incredible detail. This was no crudely drawn sketch. ‘Head south-east through the mountains. Follow this map and you will find a path that none but the Morgai know of.’

Kali bent close to the map and saw a delicate line unravel itself across the intricately drawn representation of the mountains to the south.

‘On the other side of the range, you will see a magnificent, crimson lake.’ The map drew the lake and coloured it crimson. The ink seemed to shimmer as if the lake were lit by early morning sun. ‘On the far side of the lake lies a broad peninsula. Cessair Tower stands proudly at the tip of this peninsula. You will see it as soon as you cross the mountains, long before you step down into the land of Scoriath.’

The map displayed a grand spire, unlike anything Kali had ever seen. He looked closely at the picture and thought he could see twin stairways crisscrossing the tower, all the way to its lofty top.

Lilith rolled up the map, bound it with the strip of cloth and held it out to him. He was unsure of what to do and searched her face for some direction, but she just stared passively back at him, the rolled map sitting in her hand.

Kali reached out and tentatively took the map into his wide hand. Finally, he asked, ‘This assembly you speak of – to deal with the Ghul – how can you be sure it will take place?’

‘I am sensitive to the patterns and shapes of days to come. In my mind’s eye I see the Myr’s moons wax and wane three times before this council convenes. It is a long, hard journey on foot. You do not have a moment to waste.’

‘You can read the future?’

‘Patches of what is to come are revealed to me. I do not know all that is to come, nor do I know whether what I see will always come to pass.’

Kali cast an eye down at his son, still fast asleep in his lap. ‘If I go, will I see him again?’

‘I cannot see. I am exhausted. My battle with Kleesto has left me empty. It will be days before I could summon up enough energy to peer into the stream of time.’

Kali gently touched the boy’s face, affectionately running a broad finger down the bridge of his nose. His son was so deep in sleep, he was snoring. It was an endearing sound that Kali, deaf as he was, had never heard before.

‘He cannot come with you,’ Lilith said pre-empting Kali’s next question. ‘It is too long a journey for a young boy.’

‘If I stay, I can protect him.’

‘If you stayed, what could you do to safeguard your tribe? Whilst I do not believe the Ghul will return any time soon, there will come a day when desolation and decay will cover up all the lands of the Myr should this new threat go unchecked, and even the beautiful, cloistered plains of Kolpia will not be so far away as to escape this fate.’ Her voice was so passionate in his head, he could not doubt that she spoke anything but the truth.

Kali nodded. ‘I will go.’ He climbed up from his seated position, carefully placing his son’s head down on the soft grass. He looked southwards. ‘Will I be able to communicate with the other Myrrans as I speak to you now?’

She stood. ‘No. This *mindspeech* is a talent known only to my race, the Morgai. To my knowledge there is only one other Morgai still alive and I do not know where he is. You must rely on other means to tell the tale of what transpired here. You will find a way.’

‘The other Morgai. He is the one the Ghul seek?’

‘Yes.’

‘You said he was dead.’

‘Yes.’

‘You lied.’

She gave a wan smile. ‘As I mentioned earlier, words are the means by which we hide our heart’s secrets.’

Kali returned the smile. ‘Yes. I am beginning to see that.’

Lilith reached into her robes and produced another scroll. She knelt down on the grass, unrolled the parchment and laid it out before Kali. ‘Place your hand upon it.’

Kali did so. His hand was so large that it covered the parchment in its entirety. He felt a tingling sensation under his palm and broad fingers. He pulled his hand from the parchment to find ornately written text wandering across the leathery page.

‘These words... I can read them! It’s an account of...’ He paused as the words brought back the dreadful horrors of the Ghul attack on

Hurucan Hill. The image of his wife being beheaded flared up in his mind and he pushed the parchment away.

‘As you can see,’ Lilith said softly, ‘words can also reveal truths. It is vital that the world is made aware of this tragedy. Present this to the Assembly. It will be read to others there.’

‘Where will you go?’

‘I will endeavour to track down this beast they call Kleesto. Hopefully, I will find it before it attacks others.’

Kali took the second scroll and bowed before her. He leant down and kissed his son on the forehead. The word *good-bye* formed in Kali’s mind. It was a lonely word. He didn’t like it.

By the time the sun broke over the tops of the peaks of the eastern mountains, Kali was already crossing the river at the base of Hurucan Hill. He stopped briefly to watch the sysifins making their way upstream and couldn’t help but feel a certain kinship with the struggling fish.

Chapter Thirteen The Cold Mines of Sessymir

It started as just another day in the mine. On the steel landing overhanging the lip of the incredibly deep chasm, the morning crew awaited the cage that would take them down into the mine. A number of younger miners had gathered on the opposite side of the shaft, unwilling to wait for the slow-moving lift. At thirty second intervals, these foolhardy miners leapt off into the empty space and fell headlong into the darkness below. It was a spectacular way to start a working day, but had become common practice for many Sessymirians. When the miners had fallen about 1,000 feet – roughly ten seconds of plummeting straight down the icy shaft – they pulled at two cords sitting on their shoulders which released a magnificent silk canopy that quickly filled with the heated air rising up from the base of the mineshaft.

The name of the ice colliery was Strom Mir and it was the largest and most dangerous of all the Nilfheim mines. Thousands of Sessymirians worked in Strom Mir, mining Cold, the frozen fuel that powered engines all over the Myr. Although Cold was unstable and difficult to extract from the frigid rock, the Sessymirians had developed techniques to lessen the likelihood of mishaps. However the dominant Sessymirian traits – greed, impatience and lack of subtlety – meant a major disaster was always close by. Although they knew it was dangerous work, none could have imagined the calamitous events that lay in store for them that day.

As a distant sun pulled itself up over an ice-bound horizon, a party of burly miners came up Strom Mir's main shaft, standing on an enclosed platform suspended from a chain with links as large as a grown man. A noisy engine powered by low-grade Cold pulled the chain up the deep shaft.

The gang shuffled off the metal platform as it drew to a halt. Everything about the miners was utilitarian. Picks and hammers hung from dirty, leather belts. A crude helmet fashioned out of scrap-metal was worn by each miner shadowing a grimy face smeared with dust and sweat. This particular team had been working in a cavern prosaically called Room 391, which lay an incredible two leagues straight down. The morning shift grumbled greetings to the night shift and within minutes the new arrivals disappeared into the icy bowels of the earth.

The day shift team was being led by a man known as the Keeler. His full name was Vila Helstrom but most people had forgotten it. His face –

however – was not a face one easily forgot. On either side of the Keeler's face were three six inch long canyons where his flesh had been gouged out. His skin had been ripped to shreds by Keelii off the coast of Arnaksak. He was lucky to still be alive.

Keelii were sleek-bodied pinnipeds that inhabited the cold waters surrounding the icy land masses of Sessymir and Arnaksak. For thousands of years they lived happily amongst the pale blue seagrasses of the Oshalla, until the Sessymirians and Arnakki developed an interest in them. There was a lot of money to be made from Keelii pelts. Even more money could be made from the oils extracted from the Keelii's large, fusiform bodies. The fact that the Keelii demonstrated many of the traits of a sophisticated, highly-evolved society was nothing more than an inconvenient truth to the keelers, the name the cold-hearted fur-traders of the north gave to their line of work. The keelers believed that if a being did not wear clothes, it was a beast, and all beasts could be killed without any misgivings.

After centuries of being ruthlessly hunted, the Keelii rebelled, preying upon any Sessymirian and Arnakki ships that drifted into their territories. The Keelii would climb aboard and hunt out the captain of the vessel and flay the skin from his body. Whilst the Sessymirians tried to use this as evidence of the Keelii's lack of civilization, the tactic supported the notion that the Keelii had highly-developed thought processes. Even the Helyans who had openly supported the Sessymirians' right to hunt Keelii had to admit that the creatures' strategy of seeking out the enemy's leader did suggest a degree of tactical insight one couldn't expect of a dumb beast.

Helstrom was one of the last Sessymirian keelers to sail the Oshalla. The career of keeling had been banned by the Assembly of Nations in a vote of four to thirteen against. 'Sanctimonious bastards,' muttered Helstrom whenever the Assembly was raised in conversation. He had made a small fortune in his ship *The Termagant* plying the waters of the Oshalla, looking for Keelii whose pelts he would sell to the Helyans, Kompirans and Susanese at huge profit. When keeling was banned Helstrom found himself out of a job. He squandered his fortunes on women and ale and soon found himself wondering where his next meal was coming from.

It was then he met Lokasenna Hagen, who had just been appointed Foreman of Strom Mir. She was looking for desperate men who were not afraid of risking life and limb to make some real money. His greed and ruthlessness pushed him through the mining guild's ranks and within a year he found he was in charge of operations in some of the mine's most important caverns – and Room 391 was such a cavern. Lokasenna had

numerous teams working in there day and night and often she would personally oversee the dig.

‘Let’s go Handy!’ the Keeler called to the mineshaft lift-operator standing beside two three-foot long levers in the cage. ‘We don’t want to keep the Foreman waiting.’

Handy bent down and placed a leather satchel he was holding on the floor of the cage next to his feet, one of which was not a foot at all, but an ornately-crafted iron prosthesis, a perfect match for the equally ornate hook that stood in place of his left hand.

Handy was a cripple, a victim of an accident in the mine. He was not alone in this. Quite a few miners had lost limbs working with the volatile Cold. This explained why Strom Mir had three resident surgeons who spent most of their working lives down in the mine. These ‘meathackers’ as they were affectionately known were rumoured to be paid ten times what the miners earned despite the fact that most miners who lost limbs usually lost their lives upon the bloody slabs of Nilfheim’s surgeons.

Other industries benefitted from the perils of mining Cold. In contrast to the meathackers, who were held in contempt by most miners, the artisans who made prosthetic limbs from wood or metal for any miner in need were generally revered. Even the Foreman herself was short of a hand but she had not lost it in a mining accident. Lokasenna was a bastard child, and like all bastard children in the cruel land of Sessymir, her hand was cut off according to Sessymirian law. When she was old enough, instead of commissioning a claw or a hook, Lokasenna Hagen had a long, sharp spike sewn into her flesh. She used this spike to intimidate miners. It was rumoured that she had even killed a miner who was caught stealing from the colliery, but the official line was that he had fallen into an unsupervised shaft. That didn’t explain why, when they found his body, it looked as if someone had rammed a skewer into his eye socket, but no-one dared question it further.

The mining cage grunted as it began its thirty minute downward descent. The Keeler’s cheek brushed the freezing metal and he grimaced in pain. He put a hand to his face. It ached on particularly cold days and as every day in Nilfheim was particularly cold, he was generally an ill-tempered, unhappy man. He rubbed his face on his sleeves which gave him some relief. In contrast to the majority of the miners who wore the standard overalls issued to them by the Company, the Keeler proudly wore a tunic and breeches he had fashioned from the pelt of the last Keelii he had killed.

The Keeler noticed that Handy was particularly quiet this day. He stared out over the lip of the descending platform, avoiding eye contact with the miners in the lift. This puzzled the Keeler. For almost five years, he and the lift operator performed the same conversation on the way down the central mineshaft. 'Busy day ahead, Cap'n?' Handy would ask Helstrom to which he would inevitably reply, 'Always busy, Handy.' But today the customary conversation was curiously absent. Handy just kept his back to the miners, his eyes focused upon some distant point in the blackness below. Occasionally, he would glance down at the satchel by his feet to make sure it was still there. Although this stirred Helstrom's interest, the lift operator clearly did not want to talk to anyone, so the Keeler decided not to ask what was in the bag.

He turned his mind to what the day held for him. They were close to a breakthrough. Lokasenna had been particularly persistent in digging deeper and deeper in Room 391. Although he was a relative novice in the science of extracting Cold, he had not seen any indication that the room held any promise, yet Lokasenna had demanded more and more miners be rostered on to work in the cavern. The Keeler dwelt upon the mistake he had made the day before. Concerned with the dangers of putting Room 391 under too much stress, he questioned Lokasenna about the decision to double their efforts in this particular room. Her tempestuous response to this valid question was so animated, so intense, the Keeler felt a little nervous about returning to the room. She had held her spike an inch from his eye and she shook with such poorly-suppressed rage, he was lucky to still have his vision intact.

The platform pounded the frozen floor of the mineshaft and Handy dropped the cage's iron gate, allowing the miners to step off the lift. They were in a broad cavern known as the Lobby and it was a hive of activity.

To the Keeler's left, a large, flat expanse served as a landing zone for those miners who had chosen to freefall into the mine. Although he considered himself to be a fearless man, the thought of throwing himself into a black hole with only a thin sheet of Kompiran silk keeping him afloat seemed needlessly reckless, an opinion backed up by a number of dark red marks upon the landing; these smears were the stains left behind by men and women whose chutes did not open. It was a regular occurrence in the mines and a sophisticated betting arrangement was held between the miners dedicated to predicting when the next freefall accident would occur. A sign next to the landing area read: *3 days*. The Keeler had bet his weeks' wages on four days. He was relieved to find

that no-one had died since his last shift, but the day was still young. Upon the wall where the jumpers hung their chutes someone had scrawled: 'It's not the fall that will kill you – it's the sudden stop at the end.' It was typical Sessymirian humour.

Directly ahead of the Keeler as he stepped off the lift was Manny's Bar. As was customary, it was packed with miners. Many night-shifters spent a good hour or two here before taking the lift back up to the surface. This custom inevitably led to arguments, brawls and unwanted pregnancies, but the Company figured that it was a much needed distraction from one of the most difficult and unrewarding jobs in all Sessymir.

The Keeler looked enviously at the men and women cavorting in the bar. He wasn't much for socialising, but he sure felt like a drink. Lokasenna had that effect upon him.

To the right of the lift was the Farm. This was where the miners kept a collection of native animals, all of which were employed in the pursuit of Cold.

The snufflegroot ranked among the world's most awkward looking animal. It was a bird of sorts, but it lacked two aspects Myrrans usually associated with avian species – wings and a beak. It had short, oily black feathers covering much of its body, but nothing vaguely resembling wings. Short, stumpy legs poked out of a barrel-shaped torso. These legs did not end in talons but rather two flat appendages that were more like suction cups than feet. It used these suckers to climb over the icy walls of the subterranean rooms, even the roofs. It was a common sight to see flocks of snufflegroots waddling their way across the ceilings of the cavern, honking excitedly as they smelt out traces of Cold in the frozen rock. The snufflegroot's head was little more than a vast nose on a feathered lump. It had no mouth because it did not need one. It *ate* smells and was particularly attracted to Cold. The 'groots would shuffle down mines, sniffing out the smell of Cold, which they would feed upon until the miners came and extracted it. As a reward, the 'groots would be left a lump of Cold to sniff until they would fall asleep where they stood, their hunger satisfied.

Equally unusual, and perhaps a little more disturbing were the bombats. These spherical-shaped rodents were tethered to lines that were tied to a railing running around the Farm. They bobbed in the air like the balloons that held the Spriggan skyshops aloft. Natural gases inside the bombat gave the creature its buoyancy, and as the hours passed the build-up of gases within the bombat's body made it increasingly lighter than the air surrounding it. This was indicated by changes in its pigmentation. The less gassy bombats floating closer to the ground were blue in colour,

but the ones that were higher up, taut on lines that stopped them from floating up out of the mineshaft, were bright red. A newcomer to the mines could assume that these creatures were merely decorative, but they would be wrong. The mine's very existence depended upon the presence of the inert rodents. The bombat's gaseous state would culminate in a loud outburst of flatulence that would fill a cavern, however unlike most animals which produced methane, the biochemical process in the bombat produced oxygen. This gave the miners access to clean, fresh air without the need for ventilation shafts. This meant the Sessymirian miners could delve deeper and work longer than any other nation in the Myr.

Most of the Farm was dedicated to housing Strom Mir's twenty-six pulloks. The pullok possessed a segmented, serpentine body that could be as long as fifty feet from end to end. The size of the pullok was unfortunately disproportionate to the size of its brain. It was a patently stupid beast, capable of doing little more than moving its long, furry body along the icy surfaces of the mines. This would have been a simple enough task to achieve if the pullock had a head at either end of its body. Unfortunately, the absence of a head meant the creature was inclined to move off in one of two directions at any given time which was a problem for the Sessymirians who used the beasts as a form of transportation in the mines. It was necessary to have a driver at either end equipped with thick reins and endless patience. It was no easy task piloting the cumbersome animals, especially when the beast changed its mind about which end was its front and which was its rear. It was not uncommon for this to occur mid-journey, which often led to passengers swivelling around in order to see where they were going. Fortunately, the pullok's furry body had an adhesive quality which meant it could head down the steepest tunnels without falling.

The Keeler hated riding the pulloks. He had braved some of the Myr's most unforgiving seas, but after five years in the mines, he still got twitchy every time he took a seat on a pullok. 'Any beast that don't know its head from its tail shouldn't be trusted,' he grumbled to himself as he pulled himself onto the pullok's snowy white back. He felt the hands of the passenger behind him clutch his waist and he reluctantly leaned forward to place his own hands around the hips of the woman in front of him. He didn't like this part either. If he wanted to throw his arms around somebody, he would have taken the morning off and wasted some money in the brothel behind Manny's Bar.

It had been a hard night in the mines. In Room 295, twelve miners had lost their lives when the small cavern collapsed. It was a tragedy but one

Lokasenna could not dwell upon despite the part she may have played in the accident. She had redeployed much of the crew from Room 295 to Room 391 which had left the chamber undermanned. The disaster had surprised no-one but there was not a miner still alive who would speak against Lokasenna Hagen. They knew better than to question the Foreman. The Company had a long-established tradition of making redundant anyone who criticized middle management.

Until her seeming obsession with Room 391, Lokasenna had a track record for finding high-grade Cold that was better than any other Foreman before her. She was hardened, resolute and able to extract the maximum return for the smallest financial cost. The cost of human lives was another thing altogether, but the Company was never fearful of running out of employees, something Lokasenna knew too well. She had realized long ago that the Company valued those who took the greatest risks. It was a simple equation: the deeper the Cold, the better the quality, the higher the price. She chose to ignore the fact that the deeper the Cold, the more dangerous the mining.

The Sessymirian mines were also responsible for supplying much of the world's steel, iron and copper, but in Nilfheim, the only business was the Cold industry. The highly compacted ice could only be found deep below the surface of Nilfheim, a fact that not only made the locals proud but had also turned the city from an unimportant, frozen village to one of the Myr's largest and most influential metropolises. Ironically, the very thing that ensured their livelihoods, Cold, had been responsible for the deaths of more Sessymirians than war, famine or disease. A pick swung into a deposit of Cold could bring down an entire cavern, a fact evidenced by the collapse of Room 295.

Lokasenna's fixation with Room 391 was widely known. More and more miners found themselves reassigned to what had become Strom Mir's deepest and largest room. Only Lokasenna knew how many miners worked the room, but one thing was clear – the cavern was growing more and more crowded despite its increasing size.

A number of pulloks slithered through the wide entrance of the chamber. The beasts carried the last of the morning shift. It was a welcome sight to those who had toiled through the night under Lokasenna's stern gaze.

At the far end of the cavern, a number of miners clambered onto the shoulders of ice gluks, huge leathery bipedal beasts which were the Sessymirians' primary means of excavation. A single tooth stood out of the creature's mouth, a long pointed incisor that curved upward to the top of its head. On either side of the tooth, tiny white eyes stared out of a

dark face. The gluks' skin was black and coarse with a shock of long white fur that ran from the nape of their neck to the stubby tail at their rear. Their hands did not have any fingers, or digits of any description. Each hand was nothing more than a massive knot of muscles, bone and rock-hard tissue. The ice gluks fed on the rockmites that delved out their colonies deep in the Cold deposits below Nilfheim. The ice gluks' role was quite simple – they would bash away at the rock where the snufflegroots could smell the veins of Cold that led to the juicy rockmites.

The Keeler groaned as he saw the number of workers Lokasenna had gathered in the room. There were at least ten separate teams which was not in keeping with the unwritten rule that a cavern would only be mined by one team at a time. The potential for disaster was immense.

Lokasenna stood in the middle of the room shouting at a small, squat miner. He was a glukker which meant he had the unenviable job of managing a team of hungry, unresponsive ice gluks. But if he thought the chain-gang of ten ice gluks was hard to handle, Lokasenna was another thing altogether.

'And I am saying we will continue to dig until the deposit is found,' she screamed. 'Is that so hard to follow?'

After nine hours straight without a break, the glukker was not thinking clearly and made the mistake of speaking his mind. 'But Madam Foreman, there is no vein. The 'groots have no scent of any Cold and the gluks are getting hungry and careless.'

'A good miner occasionally has to go with his instinct, and I say push on.' She strode to the lip of the channel the gluks had bashed into the frozen floor of Room 391, glowering at the miner who had dared to voice an opinion contrary to her own.

The man glanced up at her then lowered his eyes deferentially. He realized his mistake and did not want to appear as if he meant to oppose her. He knew that it would be imprudent and dangerous to stay on her bad side; the dangers of over-mining the chamber faded when being stared down by the Foreman of Strom Mir.

It was not just the spike at the end of her left arm that made Lokasenna intimidating. Every aspect of her physical presence discouraged insolence. She was extremely tall and muscular. Her shoulders were as broad as a Sessymirian man's and her demeanour just as brooding. Her face was not one easily forgotten. A dark birthmark covered her left eye like a patch. Ironically, when she was younger, any youth stupid enough to comment upon the birthmark usually ended up sporting a black eye closely resembling Lokasenna's permanent one.

Her nose had been broken three times in her life, illustrating the sort of treatment received by all bastard children in Sessymir. Lokasenna's pugnacious nature as a child meant she never walked away from an insult, even from those handed out by adults. The third break in her nose was given to her by Nilfheim's Magistrate when she had turned seventeen. She was proud of the fact that his nose had ended up just as broken as hers. Not too many people troubled Lokasenna after that infamous fight.

'You know, it almost sounds as if you were questioning my authority in this matter,' she said slowly, lowering her voice so that only he could hear it.

The glukker's face went white with fear. 'Not at all Madam Foreman. I lack your inspiring perseverance, that is all,' he said meekly. 'I will try harder.'

'Then take these gluks and don't stop digging until you have reason to stop.'

He nodded and struck his team of gluks into action. The cavern filled with the sound of the gluks' huge fists pounding into the frozen rock at the base of Strom Mir. It was music to Lokasenna's ears.

Without turning around, she greeted her second-in-command who had quickly dismounted the pullok as it pulled into Room 391 and made his way to her side. 'We're close Mr Helstrom. I can feel it,' she said proudly.

'What are your orders Madam?' the Keeler said, careful to avoid anything resembling casual conversation. He knew this would please her.

'Dig,' she said plainly as she pointed at the floor of the cavern. 'That way. Down. I'll be in the Lobby if you need me.' By Lobby, she meant Manny's Bar. It had been a long night, but she did not want to go home. A stiff drink or two would hold her over until the miners broke through.

'What's your poison?' Manny asked as he wiped the broken glass from the table. He was just cleaning up after the first brawl of the day when Lokasenna came in and dropped herself on the old couch by the fire. Manny, the owner of the establishment, was a Spriggan and one of the few foreigners willing to reside in Nilfheim. The key to his acceptance in the inhospitable city was cheap alcohol. This was not to say he was liked, but he was less likely to wake up missing a limb or an organ than most other visitors to Nilfheim. He endured the taunts and the rebukes of the

local populace because they were willing to pay for alcohol he would not be able to sell anywhere else.

‘The usual, Manny,’ she replied, lifting her boots up onto the small table which wobbled under the weight of her long legs. She closed her eyes and as soon as the lids met, she felt herself spiralling into a heavy slumber.

‘Your drink Madam Foreman.’

She thrust her eyes open to find the Spriggan standing before her with a clear tumbler containing a dark purple liquid that bubbled and popped like an apothecary’s potion. The drink was called a *Sleepkiller* and one sniff explained why. As she lifted it to her mouth, the smell of the alcohol bit into Lokasenna’s nostrils and ripped all fatigue from her body.

The oily beverage slid down her throat and into her stomach. The muscles in her face quivered and a tingling sensation shot across her skin. This was followed by a rush of warm energy moving through her body like a river bursting its banks. ‘Ah!’ she sighed loudly, not caring if anybody could hear.

‘The beverage is to your liking, Madam Foreman?’ Manny asked politely.

‘Yes, it is Manny,’ she said with a tone akin to friendliness. ‘You’d better get me a bottle.’

‘At once, Madam Foreman,’ said the Spriggan, bowing before rushing off to the cellar.

Lokasenna looked across the Lobby. It was quiet. The Farm was almost empty except for a number of beasts that were being rested following a 32 hour long shift. It was small consolation to the Sessymirian miners that the animals were worked even harder than they were.

To the right of the Farm, the cage that brought the miners down the main shaft was empty. The iron platform lay deserted in the middle of the Lobby. Lokasenna noted the lift operator Handy had disappeared. It was expected that the lift operator always stayed by his lift when it was at the base of the shaft. It was one of Strom Mir’s few safety regulations – in case of an emergency, the lift had to be manned but Handy was nowhere in sight. Lokasenna looked around. No-one seemed to have noticed his absence. She smiled to herself and fell back into the couch, happy in a way she had not experienced before. Things were about to change and the anticipation of it was intoxicating. Or maybe it was the drink. Entranced by the red rivulets of embers in the fireplace before her,

Lokasenna let her mind wander far away from the ice and rock that had surrounded her for the greater part of her life.

‘Madam Foreman, you need to come quickly. We’ve found something.’

It was rare for the Keeler to speak with such emotion, so she sat up and leant forward to hear what he had to say. ‘Well?’ she said, encouraging him to continue. ‘What is it?’

‘It’s something most unusual. The gluks have scraped away a layer of rock to reveal something we can’t explain.’

‘Try.’

‘Well ma’am, it’s masonry.’

‘What?’

‘It seems we have unearthed a stone floor of sorts. Someone has been here before! The floor sounds hollow and –’

‘You stopped the dig?’ she said excitedly.

‘Yes. I thought you would want to be present when we broke through.’

‘You did well Mr Helstrom. Let us see what lies beneath.’

By the time Lokasenna and the Keeler arrived back at Room 391, it was absolute carnage. The Ghul, wasting no time to seize upon the opportunity had set hundreds of Kobolds to finish the job the Sessymirians had started months earlier under the direction of Lokasenna Hagen. As soon as the breach was made, burying a large number of Kobolds in the process, Lucetious had sent forth a squad of his most brutal warriors. They cut a path through the Sessymirians who were in such a state of shock they were easy pickings for the Ghul who had waited for this moment for innumerable days.

‘Madam Foreman, I’m sorry –’ It was the glukker she had shouted at earlier.

‘Have they said anything? Made any demands?’

‘No, but ten minutes ago, gangs of Kobolds appeared, clearing away the rock. They seem to be widening the breach.’

‘Widening it?’ asked the Keeler. ‘What for?’

A deep sound reverberated in the cavern. Lokasenna could feel it through the soles of her boots. Something massive was hauling itself up, out of the crimson darkness below. ‘I’d say they were widening it for that,’ she said as twelve long, armoured tentacles thrust themselves out of the hole in the middle of Room 391. The underside of each tentacle grabbed onto the lip of the breach as the creature to which they belonged

prepared to pull itself up into the cavern. The surviving miners let loose a collective gasp as they laid their eyes upon the Kaggen.

It was as ugly a creature as could be imagined. Its tentacles were covered in five-foot wide scales that formed a suit of dull, green armour around the monster. The Kaggen's spasmodic movement gave it a terrifying aspect, as if it were not in full control of its limbs. Rising from the breach in a jerky, uncomfortable fashion, it moved slowly, like a cripple. But it was not the sort of creature that would arouse feeling of pity in those who looked upon it. It was anything but pitiable. By the time the monster had completely pulled itself into the cavern, it was at least eighty feet high and filled a third of Room 391 with its repugnant body.

The tentacles connected to a thin section between the Kaggen's thorax and abdomen. The abdomen was spherical shape, and hung beneath the creature like the bulb of a plant that had been ripped from the earth. Protected by the armoured tentacles, the abdomen had no scales covering it. The Keeler almost retched when he realized the Kaggen's skin was translucent – he could see the beast's internal organs swimming in a fluid that swilled around inside it like ale in a half empty glass. The cavern shook as the monster plumped the bulk of its flaccid abdomen down on the flat, rocky floor on the far side of the breach.

In contrast to its abdomen, the Kaggen's thorax was heavily armoured. The scales there were wide, thick and yellow, resembling in a perverse way the golden armour worn by the knights of Pelinore.

The Kaggen's head was long and thick. It could have been likened to the keel of a capsized ship. It was thinner at the front, like a boat's prow, and it seemed to have gathered barnacles over much of its surface. But the barnacles were not separate creatures, they were not parasites nor were they symbiotes. The barnacles were actually eyes. Thousands of them. And they were not fixed. They scuttled across the Kaggen's head with alarming speed, gathering in thick bunches wherever its attention was, and the effect of this was unsettling to all but the staunchest constitutions.

But Lokasenna wasn't unnerved. She had known it was coming for months.

It was mid-afternoon and night was about to fall on Nilfheim. Compared to those experienced in other Myrran nations, winter days were much shorter in Sessymir. Adding to the gathering darkness, plumes of black smoke poured out of countless foundries and smelter houses, staining the low-lying clouds with their filth. The snow that fell on the tightly-packed

metropolis was anything but pristine; it dropped in grey lumps, sullied by the pollution the mines spewed into the skies.

The buildings in Sessymir's capital city were predominantly wrought of black iron. Nilfheim was a congestion of metal, bereft of any sign of life. There were no main roads. Instead a chaotic network of ice-covered paths and alleys crisscrossed their way across the cold city. Above these empty streets an intricate collection of iron-mesh walkways connected the buildings, adding to the enclosed atmosphere surrounding Nilfheim. The city resembled a prison. There were no trees, no lakes, no fields. Everything seemed manmade, even the sky.

The only things that moved in the hebetic environment were the snorse-headed pumpjacks, which rhythmically swung up and down, their characteristic nodding motions an affirmation of the Sessymirian's commitment to extracting anything of value from the ground beneath. The pumpjacks were used to draw water from the steel mines. The water, melted from the frozen caverns far below the surface, ran up long copper pipes that connected the mines to the pumpheads above. These pipes had to be constantly heated and smoke from the furnaces that supplied this heat contributed greatly to the pall that lay over the city, as did the Cold-powered engines that endlessly raised and lowered the pumpjacks' broad beams.

The buildings in the ghettoes of Nilfheim were ornamented by a thick mantle of rust. It was an ugly sector in an ugly city, inhabited by swarthy, mean-spirited individuals who were as quick to stick a knife in one's back as they were to accept a bribe. There were taverns but there were no inns – hospitality was an unpopular idea in this part of town. Visitors were unheard of, which is why Lokasenna Hagen was stunned to hear someone rapping upon her door.

Accompanying the passing of the day, a storm had moved in upon Nilfheim. At first Lokasenna thought the banging on her door to be a particularly aggressive gust of wind. But then, above the howling current of air buffeting her house of iron, she heard a voice calling out her name.

He was Acoran. They were no strangers to Sessymir, but usually stayed by the docks on their ships where they conducted business. It was most unusual to see a foreigner venture into the city and even more remarkable to see one in Nilfheim's most disreputable precinct.

'My name is Maeldune Canna,' he said as he stood in the doorway. The temperature of the room dropped dramatically as flurries of snow, carried by invidious northern winds pushed past him to enter the house.

'I am the Myrran Minister for Justice. I am also a friend of your father's.'

Momentarily, Lokasenna forgot about the brutal winds sweeping into her house and stood dumbfounded by his introduction. 'My father?' she said finally. 'I don't have a father.'

'But you do,' he said through clenched teeth as the cold wind unmercifully slammed into his back.

Lokasenna admitted the Acoran, leading him into a small room that was both her lounge and her bedroom. She gestured to a mound of marrok furs on the floor and not waiting for him to sit, placed herself down on an old couch directly opposite them. She made no offer of a hot brew to warm up her guest. She just sat staring at the furs, waiting for Maeldune to sit.

He shook the snow from his cloak and wiped back the long strands of dark hair that hung from his head in frozen clumps. He had more jewels on the rings on his fingers than Lokasenna had ever seen in her entire life. He also sported a brooch shaped in the form of a gillygull; Lokasenna knew it was worth more than she earned in a year. Smoothing out the coarse furs, he settled himself down, enjoying the sensation of warmth that gradually spread across his shivering body.

She stared coldly at him. 'Why should I believe you?' she said after some time.

'Because I knew your mother. Many years ago, I lived in Pelinore as the Acoran ambassador to Scoriath. Your mother was also stationed there, a representative of the Company. Politics seldom allow for the development of friendships, but over the years I can say that Annika and I became close.'

Her mother. Although Lokasenna was only a small child when it happened, she remembered – with absolute clarity – the day they came for her. She had watched as local thugs, paid off by Nilfheim merchants, murdered the poor woman and left her body in the alleyway outside in a rapidly freezing pool of blood. This was the price that was paid in a society that condoned all manner of heinous crimes but could not accept the sin of bastardy. It was this horrible day that Lokasenna was taken away and grotesquely punished for the terrible transgression of being born. Her mother had worked for twenty years representing the Company's interests abroad. She had created trade relationships that had contributed greatly to the Company's enormous wealth. But when it was discovered that she had given birth to a bastard child...

This bitter spectacle of the perversity of Sessymirian morality had hardened Lokasenna's heart, crushing down on it, turning it into a

smaller, colder organ. Much like the Cold she mined, this heart was volatile; the explosion, when it came, would be devastating.

She leant forward and stared at Maeldune, her eyes like a vice squeezing down upon him. She spoke, her voice constricted by suppressed emotion. 'Why did my mother return to Nilfheim, knowing what we Sessymirians do to bastard children and their mothers?' It was a question she had wanted to ask all her life.

'She had no choice,' Maeldune said coolly. He did not evade her intense gaze. 'The Company sent a squad of mercenaries to retrieve you and your mother from Pelinore.'

Lokasenna had to stand. Her mind was reeling. She wanted to run outside, away from this stranger who sat there calmly divulging horrors from her past, opening old wounds whilst making new incisions. She hated the feelings of vulnerability he had brought out in her. 'You mentioned my father? Who was he? Where was he when they came for us? Why did he not protect us?' The rapidity of the questions was matched by the beating of her heart. She had not felt such emotion before and it unnerved her. And there was one question that superseded all others. It had to be answered before they went any further: 'Why should I trust you?'

Maeldune Canna nodded politely, recognizing the importance of the questions. He did not open his mouth to reply, but rather reached into the folds of his travelling cloak. He withdrew a cube-shaped object no bigger than the palm of his hand. It shimmered as if made of water but it was solid. He handed it to Lokasenna.

The cube was smooth but it was not made of glass despite the fact she could see right through it. It was warm to touch, surprisingly heavy and – strangely – once she held it in her hands, she did not want to let it go. 'What is it?' she asked curiously.

'This is a memory cube,' Maeldune answered softly. 'It was made for me by a Pryderi witch I met in the town on Coldbrook. It cost me quite a lot of gold.'

'What does it do?' she asked, knowing the object was more than a transparent paperweight.

'It captures moments in time, moments of... emotional significance.'

'Emotional significance? You've come to the wrong place Minister. You'll find more warmth out there,' she said giving a nod to the icy city that lay beyond her balcony.

'Not emotionally significant to you. Significant to me. This is my memory cube.' Maeldune closed his eyes. 'Let us go back thirty years.'

Lokasenna gave an audible gasp as she peered into the cube. A three-dimensional image coalesced in the middle of the object. Three

individuals stood huddling around a bassinet. Two of them, she recognized immediately. On the left stood Maeldune, smiling as he looked down into the cot. He looked exactly as he did now. To his left stood her mother. It was an incredibly uncomfortable feeling to look upon her murdered mother but Lokasenna could not turn away from the cube.

Her mother was also peering into the bassinet. A look of pride was stamped across her face. She held hands with the third individual, a tall, young man with long dark hair. The man's face was somewhat sallow, as if he had not seen the sun for many years, but he was handsome in his own way. His eyes shone with intelligence and his face radiated such a smile that Lokasenna could not help but smile back. 'Who is this man?' she asked, suspecting the answer.

'That is your father. A man by the name of Caliban Grayson.'

Lokasenna brought the cube even closer and peered down through its transparent top to better see the child in the bassinet. She was asleep. Despite the distinctive birthmark over her left eye, Lokasenna thought she was as beautiful as the night.

'You were only a day old there, Lokasenna'

A minute passed before she lifted her head away from the cube. 'Why are you showing me this?'

'Because he needs your help.'

'He's still alive?' She did nothing to hide the amazement in her voice.

Maeldune reached out a hand and Lokasenna reluctantly returned the memory cube. It disappeared into the folds of his snow-stained robe.

'About the same time that you and your mother were abducted and brought back to Sessymir, Caliban Grayson disappeared. I was away when it happened, in Cessair. I heard rumours of the Sessymirian mercenaries that had been sent for you and I assumed they had also killed your father for his part in your bastard existence. But he had not been killed. He too had been abducted.'

'By Sessymirians?'

'No. By his own brother as it happens.'

'His brother?'

'Yes.' Maeldune fingered the gemstones on his rings as he thought carefully about how to proceed. He could see that Lokasenna was hanging on his every word. She was ready to hear the complete story. He was sure she would be willing to commit to the course of action he was about to put before her. 'For three decades, I believed Caliban to be dead. He was a dear friend and I grieved for him. But he was not dead. He was lost and now I have found him. Or rather, he has found me.'

Months ago, in the dead of night, I was visited by an emissary who came on behalf of your father. His name was Lucetious and was a member of a race of beings called the Ghul. He told me of Caliban's forced exile in a world beneath our own, in a realm called the Endless.'

'Forced exile?' Lokasenna asked. 'How was he imprisoned there?'

Maeldune smiled but there was neither warmth nor humour in his lean face. 'Now that's an interesting tale. Let me tell you about your uncle...'

Nilfheim's shock troops existed for two reasons – to respond quickly to the all-too-frequent accidents that occurred in the mines and to guard against attacks by pirates and mercenaries sent to sabotage the Company's business. Cold was power in the Myr and power to the powerless was everything. The troops were responsible for security in the mines and they took that task very seriously. It was not uncommon for them to cut down a miner stupid enough to try to smuggle a lump of unrefined Cold out of the colliery. The troopers were not highly intelligent individuals but had a reputation for doing the job they were expected to do and doing it well. As they sprinted through the entrance to Room 391, every one of them realised immediately that they were out of their depth.

The Kaggen had picked up twelve miners at once and held them high before hurtling them across the cavern where they collided with the frozen rock wall. The lucky ones had their necks broken immediately, but some survived only to be picked up again and tossed a second time. The Kaggen was not only dangerous; it revelled in its cruelty.

The glukker that had argued with Lokasenna was pulled off the back of his ice gluk and lifted up into the air. The Kaggen shook the man so savagely, it snapped his spine and he flopped about in its coiled tentacle like a broken marionette. It brought the glukker up to its face where thousands of eyes slithered together to better view the dead man, his blank face reflected in the mirror of the onyx eyes. The Kaggen's grip upon the man tightened, the coils of its tentacles pushing in on him harder and harder until his head popped off like a cork out of a bottle.

The shock troops hovered around the edge of the breach, not knowing what to do. A thick-jawed gunnery sergeant carrying a lightweight cannon stepped forward. The weapon, powered by Cold, was brand new technology and untested in the field of battle. It was a shoulder-mounted unit and stored four Cold-tipped steel shafts about four foot long. The cannon was designed to blast away rock and ice in the mines but the gunnery sergeant was more interested in seeing how a

living creature would fare against it. Lokasenna smiled sardonically. 'Boys and their toys,' she muttered to herself as the gunnery sergeant took aim. She had no doubt that the man would regret his actions.

The missile exploded from the cannon and thundered across the room. One of the Kaggen's tentacles whipped up and snapped around the projectile, catching it before it could impact upon its body. The eyes on its head all slithered to the front, focusing upon the man who had fired the cannon. One of its tentacles struck out and wrapped around him. The Kaggen rammed the man's head into the roof where it was crushed like an egg. The monster then discarded what was left, letting the Ghul have the pleasure of dismembering the body.

A number of the shock troops took the death of the gunnery sergeant as the signal to leave, but a small group of stoic troopers were resolved to fight back. Each man had a slingshot strapped to his forearm. In unison the troopers placed a small ball of Cold into the pouch of the slingshot. 'Aim at the eyes, aim at the eyes!' one of them hollered as the slingshots were brought to bear, and without waiting for the command to fire, the projectiles were released.

Even with its incredibly quick reflexes, the Kaggen could not hope to deflect or catch all the small missiles. The slug-like eyes scattered to the rear of its head as the missiles exploded. Small pieces of the green chitin encasing the Kaggen's head broke away revealing soft, pink skin underneath.

From an unseen mouth beneath the tentacles, the Kaggen screamed furiously, the pain from its exposed flesh searing across its malevolent brain. The tentacle holding the Cold missile the gunnery sergeant had fired flung the rocket back across the cavern. It exploded into the roof above the entrance to the room and the entire mine shook. Massive chunks of ice and rock fell down from the cavern roof, irrefutable signs of the room's imminent collapse.

The Kaggen's demolition of Room 319 was not a part of Caliban's plans. At the sight of the chamber's impending destruction, Lucetious barked one simple order to his troops. 'Get into the mine!' He screamed it over and over, inciting his troops to surge forward before the breach was closed again. He had to move as many troops into Strom Mir as possible.

Without any concern for their own welfare, the Ghul forces pushed forward. Many were squashed under falling debris but they were legion and would not be stopped. Lucetious scanned the area before him. Most of the Sessymirian miners had made their way to the tunnels beyond the entrance to the cavern. A number of his soldiers had pursued them, but

most of his troops were being crushed under the rock and ice cascading into the chamber. Strangely, a number of Sessymirians had not fled. On the far side of the breach Lucetious could see a woman stood staring blankly into the hole leading into the Endless. She was tall, much taller than any Ghul and she bore a distinct mark upon her face. 'It's her,' he said to himself. 'Caliban's daughter.'

He pointed at her, singling her out to the Kaggen. The stupid brute may have compromised their incursion into Nilfheim, but it could still serve a purpose. 'Grab the woman!' he screamed at the writhing behemoth. 'Grab the woman and give her to me!'

The Keeler picked himself up from the floor. The maelstrom of falling rock had pushed him away from Lokasenna. He could feel the warm stream of blood that flowed from the broad gash on his head, but he didn't care. He was alive and that was all that mattered.

The scene was one of absolute chaos. The Ghul soldiers ran through the storm of rock and ice, vainly trying to get to the entrance of the cavern before the entire roof gave way. They were not interested in fighting and passed him by as if he were not there. Many of them were pummelled in the crossing, but this did not deter the others from racing across the chamber.

On the far side of the breach, a Ghul soldier was screaming at the Kaggen and pointing to Lokasenna. The beast's eyes squirmed across its vast head to look at her.

'Madam Foreman!' the Keeler screamed at Lokasenna. 'We have to leave!' He would not abandon her. As much as he disliked her, he could not leave her to die. The Kaggen shuffled towards her, its tentacles extending to take Strom Mir's foreman.

She said nothing. Did nothing. Her eyes looked towards the breach and the approaching monster, but they were unfocussed. She seemed to have no sense of the danger she was in. Her mind was somewhere else...

Maeldune stood in the doorway. It had been months since she had seen the Acoran. Although he had not aged a day since that visit, he did not look the same. His dark cloak had been replaced by a bright red robe that seemed inconsistent with his personality. Lokasenna also noticed that Maeldune no longer sported jewelled rings upon his fingers. Even the way in which he carried himself seemed different.

'Lokasenna, it's so good to see you.' He seemed overly familiar, almost smug. Insincere. 'You look... tired.'

Lokasenna's hand rose to her face and ran down from the corners of her eyes to her chin, as if trying to wipe away the signs of lethargy from her skin. She knew her face reflected the weariness she felt in her bones. Excavating the deepest part of Strom Mir in the hope of breaking through to the Endless – and her father – had dominated her thoughts since Maeldune had last visited. She had become obsessive.

The Acoran waltzed into her quarters. He placed a large leather satchel upon her couch and then commenced walking around the room, as if inspecting it for the first time.

He pulled back the ragged curtains to reveal a dark alleyway beyond where piles of refuse had gathered. 'Lovely view,' he said contemptuously.

'I have no need for lovely views,' she sneered back at him. She stood on the other side of the room, arms folded, scrutinising his every movement.

'I would have thought that Strom Mir's foreman would be in a more enviable financial situation. But you live in squalor. I am almost embarrassed for you.'

Lokasenna's body stiffened as she drew from her shallow well of self-restraint. She wanted to leap across the room and plant her spike deep in Maeldune's eye socket, but he was her only connection to her father and she did not want to jeopardize that. She had too much to lose.

When Maeldune had first informed her of her father's plight, she wanted to leave Sessymir and make her way into the Endless via the route Maeldune had travelled but the Acoran had dissuaded her. He had convinced her that she would serve her father better by staying in Nilfheim. 'It is provident that Caliban seeks to open the breaches and here you are holding the key to one of them,' he had said to her. 'Stay here in Nilfheim. Open a path to him and reap the rewards of his gratitude.' And so she had stayed, not for any thought of reward but because Maeldune had said it was what her father would have wanted. She understood Maeldune's reasoning but this did not make the long winter any easier to endure.

He slumped down on the armchair of her couch and leant forward staring back at her. He was grinning and did not seem the least bit perturbed by her steely gaze. He seemed oblivious to any offence he may have caused with his preoccupation upon her financial situation.

Lokasenna looked around the room trying to suppress the sense of shame Maeldune had evoked in her. 'Minister Canna, let me remind you,' she snarled, 'I am a bastard child. I am paid accordingly.'

'That doesn't seem fair.'

'It is the way it is.'

'And you are not predisposed to change it? You deserve more Lokasenna.'

She decided to put an end to the subject. She was not interested in the wealthy Acoran's views on her socio-economic status. She had accomplished more in her life than any other bastard child in Sessymir – his criticisms of her smacked of arrogance and ignorance.

'You told my father you found me?' she asked, keen to pursue the subject she had thought about every waking hour since he last visited. There was a note of desperation evident in her voice.

'Your father?' he asked as if surprised by the question.

'Maeldune. Do not toy with me,' she said her voice low and dangerous. 'I am not one to be trifled with.' She stepped forward, her arms slowly unfolding as her anger grew. 'What did my father say when you told him?'

'I do not know your father,' he said nonchalantly.

She pounced on him. With her right hand clenched around his neck, Lokasenna lifted Maeldune clear off the couch. He was surprised by the ferocity of her attack, but could say nothing with her fingers gripping his windpipe like the hilt of a sword. Maeldune's right hand rose to loosen her grip, but Lokasenna plunged her spike forward. The sharp steel of the spike split the skin and tendons of Maeldune's palm, spearing through to the other side with ease. A stifled groan escaped Maeldune's lips as the pain of the impalement made him temporarily forget that Lokasenna was also crushing his throat.

She did not withdraw her spike. Instead she held it high. Maeldune's right arm hung from the spike and in a strange way he resembled a young child wanting to ask a question.

'Who are you?' she snarled, her face inches away from his.

Maeldune did not try to speak as the Sessymirian's fingers loosened slightly on his throat. He lifted his left arm and wrapped his hand around her wrist, his fingers digging into her white skin.

Suddenly a most surprising smell filled the room. The heavy stench of burning meat rose into the cold air around them. At first Lokasenna didn't know what it was, but a searing pain shooting across her right forearm quickly made it clear that it was her flesh that was burning. She winced as her skin blistered under Maeldune's scorching grip.

'What do you want?' she growled, ignoring the pain.

'I want you to pick yourself up from the ground. I know you only too well Lokasenna Hagen. I know the hate you harbour in your heart for your countrymen. I know how you have been treated.' She glanced up at her spike embedded in his hand. 'You have been made a pariah because of your mother.'

The smell of burning flesh intensified. Lokasenna could not bear the agony any longer. She yanked her left arm down extracting the spike from Maeldune's outstretched hand and released her hold on his throat, shoving him back down to the couch as she did so. Blood sprayed out from either side of his right hand but he did not seem overly concerned.

Lokasenna looked down at her forearm. The skin was dark brown where he had held her. Her arm throbbed with unimaginable pain and she could do nothing to stop tears welling up in her eyes. 'Get out! I don't know what you are, but go now, while you can!' she screamed, expelling any thought that the individual before her was the same man she had met earlier that year.

Ignoring the demands that he leave, he rubbed his hand where she had stabbed it. Looking up at the spike that still dripped with his blood, he nodded at her metal prosthesis and said, 'You should be careful where you point that thing, girl. Someone could get hurt.'

Suddenly Lokasenna felt her left arm go cold. The sensation travelled from the base of the spike up her arm to her shoulder. The entire limb went numb and stiff. A film of frost formed over the entire arm. The skin underneath was light blue.

Lokasenna's guest leant forward. 'I could snap your limbs off one by one and there would be nothing you could do to stop me. I could keep you alive, an unhappy stump of a thing, unable to stab at anything. Be careful who you threaten, Lokasenna. You would not want to make an enemy of me. I am not Maeldune Canna. My name is Addison Cole and I am Morgai.'

Maeldune's angular, handsome features vanished before Lokasenna as her visitor's face melted into that of an old woman. Simultaneously, his long, thin black hair transmogrified into even longer grey hair. A few strands of red hair amongst the grey hinted at the vibrant locks Addison had possessed in her youth, but that was centuries ago in a distant land. Maeldune's tall, lithe body was replaced by a smaller, fuller one and the clothes that were well-suited to his frame hung on her body like stolen robes.

'Morgai?' Lokasenna said incredulously when the shock subsided to a point where she could speak.

'Yes,' said Addison as she lazily waved her hand in the direction of Lokasenna's left arm. The numbness immediately subsided as warm blood rushed down her veins. The sensation was almost pleasurable, contrasting in no small measure with the throbbing ache that resonated from her right wrist. The burnt skin was permanent. It would not fade away with a casual gesture. It would serve as a reminder to Lokasenna of the power Addison possessed. 'I assume that Maeldune – the real

Maeldune – filled you in on the Morgai. Told you what your father's twin did to take your grandfather's Morgai power.' She had not just altered her appearance. Addison's voice had changed too. It had a husky quality, not deep like a man's but not feminine either.

'Yes. He said the Morgai were all but dead,' she replied.

'No – they are not all dead. Remiel Grayson still lives. The seer who condemned your father by her visions still lives. And I still live, my presence hidden from all but you.'

Lokasenna's heart was beating fast but the mention of her father accelerated her pulse even more. 'You said you've never met my father. Why do you know so much about him? About me?'

'One question at a time, my girl,' Addison said lightly. 'I know of your father. I am sensitive to his plight.'

Her appearance changed again. In seconds her feminine form was discarded. A man sat in her place. His skin was ravaged by disease, textured by scabs and flakes of dead flesh. A hideous smile spread across the grim visage, exposing yellow, chipped teeth hanging from bleeding gums. Addison's left hand retracted to become an ugly stump. She lifted the obscene limb in the air and said morosely, 'You see you have more in common with your father than just blood.'

Maeldune had told Lokasenna the story of how her father had to cut off his own hand to escape the fate his brother had planned for him. 'Stop it!' she growled, not wanting to look at his handless arm a second longer.

'Don't you want to see your father?' Addison taunted, her voice much deeper reflecting the physical change she had effected.

'Not like this,' Lokasenna said weakly and cast her eyes down to the floor.

Addison shape-shifted once more. Caliban's physiognomy was replaced by a much more familiar one. Lokasenna lifted her eyes to see herself staring back. The resemblance was perfect. The grey eyes. The burnt forearm. Addison even copied the chipped tooth Lokasenna had received in an altercation she once had with a miner who didn't take well to receiving orders from a bastard female. 'Perhaps this is more to your liking,' the Morgai said provocatively.

'Hardly. Can't you just be yourself?'

'Why? There's no fun in that.'

Lokasenna gazed at herself. She did look tired. The last few months had drained her. She did not like what she saw, but it was better than the disturbing presentation of her father. She wanted Addison to leave and the only way to do that was to get to the heart of the matter – Caliban.

'What is your interest in my father?' she asked as she sat herself down in the tatty furs opposite the couch.

'I have something he seeks.' Addison twisted to her left and picked up the satchel she had dropped onto the couch earlier. She undid the old brass buckles and reached inside.

'What is it?' Lokasenna gasped as Addison pulled out a thick, leather-bound text. It almost looked too large for the satchel that had carried it. Mystical tendrils of coloured light curled like smoke around the book's edges. Unfamiliar gold letters shimmered down its spine. Strangest of all, Lokasenna could hear voices; quiet whispers and hushed chants emanated from the book's pages which seemed to move slightly to allow such vocalizations to escape.

'It's called the Incanto. It is a book of ancient spells, written by the Pryderi long ago.'

'The Pryderi?'

'How like a Sessymirian!' Addison scoffed. *'Arrogant. Oblivious to anything beyond your own borders. The Pryderi is the name given to the witches who live in the land of Morae. This book was once located in the Moraen city of Bregon, a city that your people took from the Pryderi until its usefulness had expired and you abandoned it in a much poorer state than you found it. This grimoire was considered so powerful that my people, the Morgai, grew jealous of the power the Pryderi had gathered within its pages. Many, many centuries ago, the book was stolen from the Pryderi and taken to Grisandole, the Morgai stronghold to the southwest. It was hidden from all and forgotten by most. Indeed, as the years went by, even the Morgai lost sight of the significance of the Incanto. By the time I inherited my mother's power, the few remaining Morgai who knew of the text had concluded that it had perished long ago. But I knew otherwise. The Incanto was not something that people could destroy, nor was it something that time could diminish. After many years of searching, I found it, buried among the graves on Grisandole.'*

Lokasenna could hear the pride in her voice. It seemed Addison's recovery of the Incanto was more important than it seemed. 'What good is the book to you?' she asked. 'You do not seem to be lacking in the area of magick. My burnt skin is evidence of that.'

'You are right. It is of no use to me,' Addison responded, not showing any sign of remorse over the damage she had done to Lokasenna's wrist. 'I have neither the patience nor the desire to learn the incantations found here. But there are others who crave possession of this compendium of magick.'

'The Pryderi?'

'Oh most certainly. Over time, the power of the Pryderi has faded and without the book to guide them, they have become but a shadow of what they once were. But they are not the only ones who seek this text.'

'My father?'

'Yes. Your father desires this book and would do anything to get it.'

'How could you possibly know this?'

'I have seen it.'

'You're telling me you're a seer too? Apart from the rare skill of freezing my left arm and burning my right, you can also read the future?'
Her tone was incredulous.

'I can catch glimpses of the future. Moments of significance. Junctures in time. It is a trait once common to many female Morgai.'

'That must make life very dull for you, knowing everything to come,'
Lokasenna countered. She did not know why she felt so unsettled by the Morgai's claim to the gift of prescience. Perhaps it was the arrogance that accompanied it, or maybe it was because she had spent most of her life trying to avoid the future expected of a bastard child in Sessymir. She had committed herself to avoiding predetermination and now she was faced with someone to whom the future was already known.

Addison ignored Lokasenna's comment. 'The Incanto is foremost in your father's thinking. It is the keystone in his plans, so much so that it influences the fate of countless Myrrans. In my prophetic dreams, the Incanto is like a motif. Merely possessing it has made me aware of Caliban's desire to obtain it.'

Lokasenna's eyes squinted with suspicion: 'It's strange – Maeldune never made mention of the Incanto when he visited me six months ago. He told me much of my father's plans but nothing of the Incanto.'

'Maeldune!' Addison sneered. *'He did not mention it because your father has not told him of it. Through my visions I feel I have come to know your father well. He will not tell Maeldune anything more than that which he needs him to know.'*

Lokasenna's brow creased. Maeldune had presented himself as someone in whom Caliban had invested absolute trust, and he seemed to deserve it. He had journeyed all the way to Nilfheim to find her but now this Morgai implied that the Acoran was little more than an errand boy. Lokasenna felt foolish; she had accepted everything Maeldune had said and had followed his instructions to the letter. 'Are you saying that Maeldune is not to be trusted?' she said anxiously.

Addison laughed. Lokasenna grimaced. It was a disturbing thing, to see herself laugh.

Addison leaned forward. 'I would trust a convicted criminal before I would trust the Minister for Justice!' she taunted. 'I am not saying he

has lied to you – he probably has no need to at present – but if you think he is altruistic or loyal, you are very much mistaken Lokasenna Hagen. Do not confuse his interest in your father for concern or fealty. The Acoran assists your father because he hopes to catch a few scraps that will fall from the table when the Myr is eventually overcome.'

'And what is your interest Addison? What do you hope to catch?'

'I have no interest in your father. I have no agenda.'

'Everyone has an agenda.'

'Lokasenna, for centuries, life in the Myr has stayed the same. The rot has set in.'

'I don't follow.'

'You commented that it must be dull knowing the future. It doesn't compare to the excruciating tedium of knowing the present. Life in this world has stagnated. It is predictable. Known. Tamed. I am old – centuries old – and my life has become an endless succession of indistinguishable days. Until recently. Over the past fifty years I have caught glimpses of a future where the order of things is tipped on its head. Changes of a magnitude that have never been witnessed before. None will be unaffected by what is coming.'

Addison's glibness had completely vanished. She spoke with such passion, such intensity, that she seemed to forget her guise and by the time her speech had finished, she had reverted to her true form. Blonde hair faded into grey, tinged with streaks of red. Wrinkles and blemishes appeared across her skin. It looked as if she had aged a hundred years in a few seconds. Lokasenna watched in uncomfortable fascination as the stump at the end of Addison's left hand sprouted a hand. As unsettling as this transmogrification was, Lokasenna was pleased not to be looking at herself, pleased that Addison no longer hid behind borrowed faces. But she remained wary of her all the same.

'And you hope to usher in this new era,' the Sessymirian suggested.

'I don't believe in much, but I do believe the time has come for old practices to be cast aside. The wheel is finally turning. The Myr has a chance to revitalise itself and Caliban Grayson is the key.'

Despite all the shape-shifting that did little to imbue Addison's speech with truth, it was clear that she spoke honestly when she talked of her desire for change. Lokasenna did not trust Addison, but could not see a reason why the Morgai would lie about Caliban. Unless, she opposed him, saw him as a threat, or perhaps a rival.

'You don't seek power?' Lokasenna asked suspiciously. Maeldune had said that her father knew that the Myr would rise against him. He had warned that there would be people who would seek to keep Caliban in his subterranean prison. They would seek to protect the established

order by any means. And then there were those who wait for someone to take power only to wrest it from them when they have done so. 'Perhaps you seek to help my father only to depose him at the moment of his ascension.'

Addison's thin lips became even thinner as a mirthless smile cut across her craggy face. 'I have power. I do not require more. My ego is not so fragile that I seek dominion over others to appease it. I do not want to place myself in the centre of the events about to unfold. I prefer to work from the shadows. It is much more satisfying to influence the behaviours of others than control them overtly.'

'Do you seek to influence me, Addison?' Lokasenna said bluntly. It was her turn to grin. 'Or maybe you come to give me help,' she said, her sarcasm doing nothing to hide her dislike of the woman.

'You don't need any help. The hole you put in my hand is evidence of that.' In all the talk of books of spells and her father, Lokasenna had forgotten the injury she had inflicted upon her guest, the injury that had disappeared as soon as Addison shifted from the guise of Mældune Canna into her true form. 'Despite your attack upon me, I hope you and I can work together in a mutually beneficial relationship.'

'What do you require?' Lokasenna said coldly.

'Nothing you aren't prepared to give. Simply put, I want you to proceed with your plan to break through to the Endless.' Addison's withered hands trembled a little as she spoke. 'You must double your efforts to carve out a passage through to this realm beneath us.'

'It is not easy work.'

'You are the Foreman!' Addison barked. 'Accelerate the process. Bring in more teams. Do what you can, but get it done.' Her voice was shrill. Beady, bloodshot eyes stared out from an ancient face. She looked annoyed, an emotion her grizzled features seemed to exaggerate.

'Why?' asked Lokasenna boldly, enjoying the effect she was having upon the old woman before her.

'Because I have waited centuries for the winds of change to scour this land clean and the nearer I am to that time the more impatient I grow,' she snapped. She paused to wipe away some spittle that had formed on her bottom lip. Her voice trembled as much as her hands. It seemed the longer Addison stayed in her true form, the more her age revealed itself. 'The sooner your father gets the Incanto, the sooner he can use it as he intends. Believe me, Lokasenna Hagen, without this book, Caliban's return lies in doubt. Address your failure thus far to break through to your father's prison,' she snarled, goading the Sessymirian.

'How will you get the Incanto to my father?' Lokasenna asked, deliberately challenging the Morgai.

'Do not doubt my ability to uphold my end of this arrangement. If you manage to dig a hole for me to go through, I will find a way to sneak into the Endless.' She shifted shape again, her aged skin fading as her features were moulded into the shape of Handy, the lift operator Lokasenna saw every day on her trip down to Room 391.

There was nothing more to say. Lokasenna stood and held the door open for Addison. Taking the hint, the Morgai stood and carefully placed the Incanto back in her old leather satchel. Moments later she was gone, swallowed by the sougning grey mass of snow that endlessly swirled down the alleyways of Nilfheim.

It was hopeless. The Keeler had been thrown aside by one of the Kaggen's tentacles as another wrapped itself around Lokasenna, ripping her from his grasp. The cavern was seconds away from completely collapsing. The Ghul continued to pour through the breach, racing across the rubble-strewn floor before their access to the rest of Strom Mir was cut off. They clambered over boulders and thought nothing of stepping on the bodies of their comrades who had been crushed by the rock and ice that continued to rain down across the chamber.

The Keeler lifted himself up and cast his gaze upon Lokasenna. There was nothing he could do to save her. She hung limply, wrapped up in the coils of the monstrous beast that had destroyed the cavern.

Then he saw something strange, something inexplicable. At the lip of the opening to the dark realm beyond, he could see the old lift operator Handy speaking to the Ghul soldier who seemed to be in command. Handy reached into a satchel at his waist and slid out what seemed to be a large book. The eyes of the Ghul commander spread wide open when he saw the object. He raised a hand and a number of Ghul soldiers gathered around Handy and escorted him away.

As Handy disappeared into the darkness, the Keeler was momentarily distracted by a chunk of falling rock that scraped his shoulder. When he gazed back at the breach, Handy was gone. Curiously, a frail old woman was standing where the lift-operator had stood, holding the book Handy held only seconds before.

A pair of thick, worn hands reached down and picked up the cannon the gunnery sergeant had dropped when he had been snatched by the Kaggen. The weapon was hoisted onto the man's shoulders and after considerable fumbling with the firing mechanism, the second of its four missiles shot across the cavern.

The Kaggen was so preoccupied with Lokasenna, it failed to notice the projectile speeding towards it. The head of the missile buried itself into the exposed pink flesh at the front of the Kaggen's head. A second later the Cold warhead exploded, taking half the beast's skull with it. Lokasenna was pelted with viscera as was much of the cavern. The Kaggen fell to the floor of the room. Its tentacles flopped about for a few seconds before the entire body shook one last time.

The man who dealt the killing blow ran over to where Lokasenna lay unconscious, awash in the Kaggen's internal fluids.

She eventually opened her eyes to see a man peering down at her, showing more concern than one would expect to find in a Sessymirian mine. But the man was no Sessymirian. 'My name is Gerriod Blake. I'm going to get you out of here.'

Lokasenna wanted to protest but she felt her consciousness slip away from her once more. She could not even feel the mariner's arms around her as he dragged her to safety, away from the Kaggen, away from the Ghul, away from her father.

Chapter Fourteen Terminus, Helyas

The merchant ship *The Broken Promise* had never taken on such important cargo before. She had taken on illegal consignments that were highly valued by those who had commissioned them, but never personages of such significance. Amidst teeming crowds lining the long pier at Terminus were diplomats from Helyas and the Tamu Plains, and at least another four from neighbouring countries were due to arrive any minute. These ambassadors would not ordinarily board a ship of such questionable heritage as *The Broken Promise*, but the vessel that had been originally sent from Griflet to take them across the Sea of Telamon had never arrived and rumours had spread of its demise at sea. For months, whispers had moved through the streets of the port city of Terminus like an unexpected wind, and stories had been told of a monstrous creature roaming the waters to the east. Some who had access to ancient scrolls put a name to this leviathan – the Ryugin. It was believed that all 255 crew aboard the ship from Griflet had been killed by the beast.

The Helyan Senate decreed that all ships leaving Helyas would be accompanied by a military escort. Following the Ghul attack at Sulis, the Senate had wasted no time in redirecting funds from *civil enrichment* programs back into military coffers. Old dreadnaughts rusting in the ports of Ceres and Corineus had been hastily refitted and put to sea. The Helyan Ambassador Pedaues Rhodes and his consul General Pylos Castalia were charged with the task of securing the safety of the ambassadors travelling from Terminus to the Assembly of Nations in Cessair.

Pylos had decided that the ambassadors would travel in *The Broken Promise*. He had spoken to survivors of *The Princess Orani*, the Kompiran ship that had been attacked months earlier in the Jurojin Straits, and one thing they all agreed upon was that the sea-beast that had attacked them was intelligent. There had been reports that it had been looking for something or someone. Pylos believed that if the Ryugin were indeed searching for someone and if that person were a member of state, it would be unlikely that the creature would attack a merchant ship. The reasoning was crude and based on too many variables, but there was not a single ambassador who questioned the logic.

The Helyans had put to sea seven warships which would form a circle around a flotilla of ten ships that were about to set off from the port. These dreadnaughts sat on the horizon like cities, spewing out black smoke from their engines where teams of boiler men threw copious

amounts of Cold to turn the turbines of the massive vessels. The ships were armed with every known type of fixed weapon. Massive harpoons and carronades lined the hulls of the siege-ships, ready to unleash a brutal retaliation at a moment's notice.

Pedaeus stood with his hands on his hips, staring out at his seven warships. His stance reflected the pride with which he held these veteran vessels. Each had been restored to its former glory, thanks to his consul's efforts. Pylos used the attack on Sulis two months earlier as leverage to secure the finances the Helyan armed forces had been denied for too long. It did not take long for the money to roll out and it became apparent that the Senate had been sitting on a large fortune that they had planned to spend on less practical pursuits. A frenzy of activity had readied the dreadnaughts for this mission, and despite the carnage that had been wrought by the Ryugin already, a small but vociferous spokesperson at the back of Pedaeus' mind hoped the sea-beast would attack just so the might of the Helyan navy could be witnessed by all who ever doubted its relevance.

The docks were ablaze with colour and activity as boats took on supplies and crews. Four Helyan merchant ships were preparing for the crossing to Tethra. Typically, their crews were the larrikins of the port, the loud, boorish types that gave sailors a bad name. Quite a few of these men and women were still inside the taverns drinking, whilst the junior members of the crew – politely referred to as *landmen*, but more popularly known as *scrubbers* – did all the hard work getting the boats ready to sail. The merchant ships sat low in the water as the last of their cargo was brought on board. A train of grizzums pulling a large wagon laden with all sorts of merchandise made its way down the docks to the largest of the merchant ships, a 150 foot iron-clad frigate called *The Humble Pie*.

On either side of the frigate, two cruise ships began taking on their affluent passengers. The first of these, *The Daily Plunder*, was seemingly empty of crew, the Tethran sailors yet to rise from a rather indulgent last night in port. The other cruiser was called *Severed Ties*, a Sessymirian cutter with a headsail bearing the emblem of a silver axe which shimmered in the bright Helyan sun. Most of these passengers were members of the Sessymirian aristocracy, a selfish and unloved family, accustomed to obsequious servants and fawning friends. They lined the rail of the cutter, looking out across the dock with obvious contempt for the lower classes that inhabited any city's port. Some of these Sessymirians put voice to this scorn when some Spriggan traders

approached their boat to ply their wares. One of the cutter's passengers threw a half-eaten stonefruit at the nearest dockside trader. The fruit smashed into the side of the Spriggan's head, staining his skin with its yolk. The sight of this caused tremendous merriment aboard the Sessymirian boat, and hoots of mocking laughter pealed across the decks as the poor Spriggan picked himself up and wiped his discoloured face. The Sessymirian noble who threw the fruit was clapped on the back by his peers who then found more fruit to lob at the Spriggans until the traders moved away to the far end of the pier.

Two science vessels were moored in the deep water at the pier's end. One of these, a Kompiran caravel simply named *The Discovery* was a beautiful boat, with a hull coated in white iron and masts made from the purest Susanese whitewood from which stretched crisp lateen sails. *The Discovery's* proud crew lined up on the deck in a perfectly straight line whilst their captain, a small man immaculately dressed in the cerise naval uniform of Kompira, inspected every inch of the gleaming vessel. The caravel was bound for the Oshalla Ocean, a dangerous journey of well over 1,000 leagues. She would face dreadful storms and treacherous ice reefs yet her crew looked as if they were all eager to set sail. They stood gazing expectantly at their captain, a stern man by the name of Masuru Ochi, waiting for a sign of approval.

The captain ran his white gloved hand down the sterncastle railing and inspected his fingers closely. He turned back to his crew, his stony face revealing nothing. He held the men and women lining the poop deck in his gaze. The edges of his mouth crept up and he nodded indicating his satisfaction. The crew cheered and threw their caps up in a euphoric explosion.

'Chief Officer Nomura,' Captain Ochi said quietly. Despite the cheering of the crew, his voice was heard and his chief officer, leaning on a walking stick, stepped forward.

'Yes Captain?' she replied in a refined, mellow voice.

'Release the fins!'

She beamed. It was obvious to anyone watching that Chief Officer Nomura had been bursting at the seams to carry out the order. She quickly hobbled across the deck to the Petty Officer and gave him instructions to move the ship away from the docks. Within minutes all lines had been released and *The Discovery* bobbed in the deep blue water thirty yards from the pier's edge.

'Deploy the blades!' Kohana Nomura called up to the Petty Officer who subsequently bellowed the order down into the bowels of the ship

where, unseen by those above deck, engineers worked furiously moving gears and stoking Cold-driven furnaces. Suddenly the white, gilded sides fell away from the ship and swung forward, turning as they did so. These fins then gently swept backward stroking through the water in a graceful arc. Whilst this took place, a tapered mast at the very rear of the boat was tilted over the stern until it locked into a five foot wide recess in the ship's transom. The mast then separated into nine connected segments and as one they weaved through the water in a fluid, serpentine motion. It seemed the vessel had come alive. Modelled on the giant white turtle of the Arion Ocean, *The Discovery's* anthropomorphic body floated steadily in the deep blue harbour, her limbs gently pushing through the water causing concentric circles to radiate from her hull.

At the sight of this mechanical wonder, most people on the dock dropped their mouths in awe and some even clapped. The Sessymirians on the cruise ship – by contrast – stopped throwing fruit at the Spriggans and in an act of undisguised jealousy started lobbing it over at *The Discovery*, staining the elegant ship's sides with yellow and green smears.

The other science vessel berthed in Terminus that day was a much smaller craft that had arrived in port the night before. *The Silhouette* had sailed from Amasis, a small Acoran outpost to the east. She was bound for Griflet on the southern edge of Acoran. In contrast to the Kompiran ship, *The Silhouette* was rather prosaic in design. She had no sails at all, relying solely upon the brawn of her massive Cold engine. The tall, lithe Acoran crew manning this ship was carrying aboard supplies and paid scant attention to *The Discovery's* proud display of innovative design.

The captain of *The Silhouette* was in deep conversation with a dark-skinned Acoran woman. They could not have been more dissimilar. He was rather rotund for an Acoran and his fair skin was burnt under the harsh sun of the Helyan coast. His bald head was graced with a few defiant strands of long, blonde hair. She, by contrast, was willowy and her hair was black, cropped close to her skull. Her face shone brightly as beads of perspiration glistened on her ebony skin.

A roar of laughter burst out from *Severed Ties* where a particularly fat Sessymirian had thrown a Nessian clawberry at the Kompiran ship. This fruit, notorious for the jagged spikes on its heavy skin, had landed in the middle of *The Discovery's* triangular foresail and ripped a hole large enough to render the entire sail useless.

On the deck of *The Silhouette*, the Acoran woman raised a spyglass she was holding and set her gaze upon the fat Sessymirian who was preparing to lob another clawberry across at the Kompiran ship. The

Acoran squeezed the handles on either side of the spyglass and a rapid burst of air signalled the release of a small glass ball which shot through the air and pounded into the clawberry in the Sessymirian's hand. The glass orb shattered and the Sessymirian screamed as a viscous grey liquid spat out over his hand and oozed down his forearm.

She smiled. 'His arm will be numb for days, but he will recover.'

The Silhouette's captain chortled with glee and slapped the woman affectionately across the backside. 'You have done well, Dr Kallady. Your sister will be most impressed.'

'Yes, Her Majesty will be pleased,' she said with a wry grin exposing a perfect set of white teeth. 'Will we be back in Amasis before the end of the month?' she asked, clearly eager to return to the scientific outpost that gave birth to the unusual weapon she had just demonstrated.

As a member of the royal family of Acoran, Claudia Kallady could have chosen to live a pampered existence surrounded by the sort of wealth few Myrrans could dream of, but her brains simply would not allow it. In order to pursue her research with the sort of dedication only geniuses understood, Kallady removed herself from the Royal Palace in Elidor and lived a most satisfying life on the far side of the known world. 'I need to return to my work, Captain. Do I have your guarantee that you can have me back in Amasis within three weeks?'

He laughed again, eyeing the formidable weapon the scientist held in her hands. 'Dr Kallady, whilst you're holding that thing, I would not disappoint you for the world!'

'Jonas, you'd be foolish to ever disappoint your wife!' she returned, and then gave him a demonstrative kiss on the lips. She walked away and his eyes lingered on her for a few seconds. There was something about seeing his wife fire a weapon so proficiently that aroused Captain Jonas Kallady.

Pylos stood beside Pedaeus, gazing over the scene before them. He loved the docks of Terminus, especially on a hot summer's morning. The smells, the activity, the promise of adventure – it was more intoxicating than any ale served in the tavern houses at the entrance to the pier. The sight of the fleet of dreadnaughts standing like sentinels upon the horizon added to the appeal of the place.

'What time do you want to head out Pylos?' Pedaeus asked his friend as he stepped back to allow a young boy herding a small flock of shelp to pass. Shelp were among the Myr's stupidest animals and the boy was hard put to steer the flock onto the deck of *The Humble Pie* before too many just wandered off the side of the pier to drown in the waters

below. 'Woolly bodies, woolly brains,' the boy muttered apologetically as one of his flock started chewing on the toe of one of Pedaeus' boots.

'We'll be going soon,' Pylos said in response to Pedaeus' question. 'The ship's ready and I think we should leave before that Kompiran boat does what I think it's going to do.'

He nodded towards *The Discovery*. The Kompirans never took well to insults as the Sessymirian who had thrown the clawberry at the science vessel was about to learn. Some members of the angry crew were lowering *The Discovery's* torn foresail while others were fixing a spiked iron extension to the bowsprit. 'I think they're preparing to ram the Sessymirian ship.'

'Let us hope so,' replied Pedaeus temporarily dropping his voice. 'I can't abide those damn Sessymirians.' He then turned his mind back to the matter at hand. 'So what are we waiting for, General?'

'Not *what*,' replied Pylos. 'Who. The Kheperan Ambassador and his consul are apparently getting drunk at one of the dockside taverns. We're also waiting for the Ambassador from Ankara to arrive. Apparently his consul slept in this morning.'

Pedaeus laughed. 'Rama Ta! How typical. That man will fall asleep anywhere! At the last assembly he was snoring before the Chamberlain had finished his opening address.'

'I can understand that.'

'You don't like the assemblies, do you Pylos?'

'A bunch of politicians sitting in a room for six hours at a time, all talking, no-one listening – what's not to like?'

Pedaeus laughed. Even though he was a politician himself, he was not offended by Pylos' sarcasm. A sly look crept into his eye, a precursor to mischief. 'I believe Jehenna Canna will be at the next assembly.'

To a casual onlooker, it appeared that Pylos had no reaction to the provocative statement, but Pedaeus could see his friend's jaw tighten ever so slightly at the mention of the Acoran's name. Pylos stared across the docks, pretending not to hear, but Pedaeus' insistent stare eventually brought out a reaction. 'So?' he said irascibly. 'What's so significant about that? You say it as if it means something to me.'

'Oh come on Pylos!' Pedaeus exploded into the sort of mocking laughter only tolerated between friends. 'I've caught you staring at her! Besides, who could blame you? She's very easy to look at.'

'She's also very married in case you hadn't noticed Pedaeus, to the Minister for Justice no less.'

'Scared of him, are you? Afraid he'll throw you in the Hulks for consorting with his wife?'

Pylos scoffed. 'Afraid! Of that *rattu*! I don't think so. He's the last person in the Myr I'd be scared of.'

'Then what's stopping you?' Pedaeus cajoled. 'Perhaps you're scared of her.'

'Even if Maeldune were not around, I hardly think someone like Jehenna Canna would take any interest in me. I'm not exactly pretty, you know.'

Pedaeus looked closely at his friend. He knew Pylos was thinking about the scar that ran from his forehead to his jaw. 'But Pylos,' he laughed, 'I happen to know that lots of women adore men with battle scars. You'd be surprised just how interested –'

Pylos had heard enough. 'Seriously Pedaeus, there are days I am amazed you're actually an ambassador! You just don't know when to shut up.' He pushed past his friend and moved down the pier to yell at some soldiers who were sitting down playing Siege whilst they were waiting for the last of *The Broken Promise's* passengers to arrive.

'Ambassador Rhodes, just how much longer is this going to take?'

Pedaeus turned around to find two Tamuan females looking up at him. They were no taller than four foot but what they lacked in height they made up for in attitude. The Tamuans were known to be the world's most notorious complainers and Ambassador Kaniya Sawoye and her consul Sela Noye did little to break from that tradition. They wore ornate wooden masks over their faces, a fashion trait that was appreciated by Pedaeus as it saved him from having to look at their scowling expressions. The Tamuans' dark-skinned bodies were adorned with an eclectic collection of colourful bangles, feathers and paint which contrasted significantly with their typically sour temperaments. It was not just their striking apparel and negative personalities that made them distinctive. The Tamuans also possessed an unusual physical attribute that was unique among the peoples of the Myr – quills. The brilliantly coloured barbs ran in a straight thin line from the crown of a Tamuan's head all the way down to the small of the back. The spines were long, thin and shiny. Pedaeus knew that the needles could be used aggressively, but on the diminutive women before him, they seemed less of a threat than their acidulent tongues.

'Ah, Ambassador Sawoye and Consul Noye, it is indeed a pleasure to see you.'

'A pleasure to see us!' scoffed Sela Noye who had always been the more outspoken of the pair. 'We have been here for the past two hours and you have not bothered to extend a greeting to us.'

Pedaeus was accustomed to Sela's demanding manner, but this never made conversations with her enjoyable exchanges. 'Oh, quite the contrary, Consul Noye. I have been looking forward to seeing you again when I first heard you were coming to Terminus.'

The two Tamuans looked at each other and rolled their eyes behind their decorative masks. 'What a bold display of insincerity, Ambassador! Do you take us for fools? You have been ignoring us!' The mask was not enough to hide her disgust. Underneath it, her bottom lip pouted like that of a spoilt child.

'I am sorry Consul. I have had other things on my mind, such as your safe passage across the Sea of Telamon.'

'Pish!' she grunted derisively. 'Do you really think that you can protect us from this monster from the deep? I think you overstate your abilities, Ambassador Rhodes.'

Ambassador Sawoye waved her finger furiously. 'Yes, we happen to know that you have no real strategy to combat this beast should it attack us.'

She turned to her consul who nodded excitedly, the feathers sticking out from the top of her mask exaggerating her movements. Sela stuck out a ring-encrusted finger and prodded it into Pedaeus' breastbone. 'Why can't the Assembly of Nations come to us for a change?' she asked, moving on to a new topic of dissatisfaction. 'We Tamuans always have to travel further than anyone else to the assemblies.'

Pedaeus' patience was fracturing with each syllable that exited Sela's mouth. It was not just the substance of what she spoke. It was the manner in which she said it. Her voice was slightly nasal and coloured with an inflection that made everything she said sound like a tortured sigh. It seemed that he would be trapped with the pair until the other ambassadors arrived at the docks but then out of the corner of his eye he spied salvation. 'General Castalia, you know Ambassador Sawoye and Consul Noye don't you?' he said to Pylos as his friend was sneaking his way down the far side of the pier.

Pylos grimaced, knowing exactly what Pedaeus was up to. He reluctantly stopped and said through gritted teeth, 'Why yes, Ambassador Rhodes, we have met before.'

Before Pylos had a chance to move away, the Tamuans had swivelled around and were moving in on him. 'General Castalia, we have been here for the past two hours and you have not bothered to extend a greeting to us.'

A look of desperation fell across Pylos' face and he turned to Pedaeus to help extricate him from the conversation that would inevitably

follow, but the Helyan Ambassador was no longer there. He was heading back down the pier towards the line of taverns at the pier's entrance.

'Where are you going?' Pylos called forlornly as the two Tamuans shuffled around in front of him so that they stood between him and the retreating figure of Pedaeus Rhodes.

'I'm just going to see what has delayed the other representatives,' Pedaeus called, over-dramatising his sense of concern over the late arrivals. 'I'll be back when I can,' he added, quickly turning so that the Tamuans would not see the smug look that broke out across his face.

'I'll come too!' Pylos said eagerly.

'No, no, no!' protested Pedaeus. 'I wouldn't dream of it. You can stay and keep our Tamuan guests entertained until I return.'

In the square outside the taverns a ruckus had broken out. Two seven foot, horn-headed Kheperans staggered across the busy plaza followed by a group of grim-faced Helyan men. The Helyans also staggered, the result of three hours of committed drinking and gambling which was a fairly impressive achievement before noon. The Helyans were not young. Age had robbed them of the chiselled, muscular bodies that were typical amongst the men of Helyas, but their years and their paunches did not stop them from shouting a wide number of insults at the Kheperans. Their inflammatory comments did not seem to be of great concern to the Kheperans who laughed and sang as they walked a crooked line towards the boats at the far end of the pier.

'Ambassador Habid and Consul Hadith, I see you have made friends with some of the locals,' Pedaeus said to the pair as he nodded at the four Helyans pursuing the Kheperans up the crowded pier.

'Yes, we relieved them of a rather princely sum of gold in a game of sabat,' replied Ambassador Hafaza Habid, the older of the two Kheperans, winking at his consul as he spoke. The man's voice was deep and round, a pleasant voice to hear when it was not affected by the slurring caused by an inebriated tongue.

'They don't look happy,' Pedaeus observed.

The area between the Helyans and the Kheperans quickly emptied when one of the Helyans pulled a short sword out of his scabbard. The people of Terminus were quite accustomed to dockside violence and knew that a Helyan who drew his sword was not doing so for display purposes. The other three Helyans followed suit. The crowd pushed back, some individuals spilling off the pier as a wide space was created around the drunken Helyans and the equally intoxicated Kheperans. Without meaning to, Pedaeus found he was at the hub of the brewing

conflict.

‘Give us back our money, you Kheperan scum!’ snarled the Helyan who had been first to draw his sword. He was also the one who had lost the greatest amount in the game of sabat that had just concluded so unhappily for the Helyans.

A broad grin formed across Hafaza’s broad face. He was not even remotely intimidated by the man’s aggressive approach, nor was he willing to comply with his demands. ‘Come and get it you bloated bag of bile!’ he jeered at the man. To add insult to injury, the Ambassador dangled a large bag of coins in the air which was only a fraction of the money he and Sefar Hadith had won that morning.

‘Are you sure that’s wise, Hafaza?’ Pedaeus – always the diplomat – whispered to the Kheperan Ambassador.

‘Oh it’s just a bit of sport, my friend,’ Hafaza replied, playfully punching Pedaeus in the shoulder. It was a gesture of friendship but it was characterized with more force than familiarity. The Kheperans were renowned for not knowing their own strength, a fact supported by Pedaeus’ smarting skin.

‘Do you think *he* knows?’ Pedaeus said as he nodded at the aggrieved Helyan who sprinted across the space, his blade raised and ready to strike. The man’s face was contorted in rage and it was clear he intended to kill Ambassador Habid there and then.

He didn’t stand a chance. He was not even within six feet of the Ambassador when the Kheperan consul dropped to his knees and lowered his head, the horn on his forehead sticking out before him like a lance. He moved so quickly that the Helyan wasn’t even aware of the horn until twelve inches of it were buried in his belly. Just as swiftly as he had dropped, Sefar Hadith rose, flicking his head back as he did so. Incredibly, the Helyan was lifted clean off his feet and thrown ten feet into the air, his body creating a thin, bloody arc as it sailed over the heads of the surrounding crowd. The man disappeared momentarily in the choppy waves slapping against the pier’s wooden pylons before bobbing back up to the surface, a fleshy buoy in the blue waters warning others against raising arms against a Kheperan.

The other three Helyans realized that pursuing the conflict would not be in their best interests and cut their losses, sheathing their blades as they backed away down the pier, heading for the relative safety of the nearest tavern.

Pedaeus turned to Sefar and scowled. ‘That could have been handled better, Consul,’ he said sternly. The young Kheperan dropped his head contritely as a sign of respect to Pedaeus, but the bloody point of his horn almost struck the Helyan Ambassador in the eye which only

made the situation more uncomfortable. 'Let us get you to your ship before you kill someone else,' Pedaeus said gruffly, steering the pair towards *The Broken Promise*.

At the sight of Pedaeus returning with the Kheperans, Pylos excused himself from further conversation with the Tamuans who had spent the last ten minutes complaining about the fact the docks smelt of fish. 'Did you get the Ankarans?' he asked as he pushed between the Tamuans and drew Pedaeus aside.

'I got distracted on the way,' Pedaeus replied. 'I'll go fetch them now.'

'No need,' Pylos said gazing over his friend's shoulder. 'Here they come.'

Although the Ankarans were seen from time to time outside of their lush jungle lands, they always garnered protracted stares from those around them whenever they travelled abroad. They were quite tall – just a few inches shy of the height achieved by most Kheperan males – bipedal and generally humanoid in shape, but certain features separated them from other races. They had no nose on their face; instead a high, rounded ridge ran down from the crest of their heads to their wide lipless mouths. The top of the skull was adorned with a large, dark green dorsal fin that stood up as proudly as the crest atop a Scorian knight's helmet. From the sides of their heads flowed long, turquoise-coloured dreadlocks. These thick and slimy locks resembled tentacles more than hair and hung all the way to the Ankarans' waists. Many gold bands could be seen upon each strand and these clinked and tinkled like wind-chimes whenever the Ankarans moved their heads.

An Ankanan's eyes were much larger than those of most Myrrans and they had no eyelids. Despite their size, these large green orbs formed little purpose since centuries ago a terrible disease robbed all Ankarans of the gift of sight. Both men walked with the aid of golden walking staffs, intricately carved with distinct motifs understood only by the people of the jungle lands of Ankara.

The Ankarans' large hands and feet were webbed, the necessity of which was quickly realized by any visitor to the water cities of Ankara deep in the equatorial forests to the east. Their skin was covered in moist, coppery scales. Even under the harsh Helyan sun, the Ankarans maintained a constant state of moistness; under their countless scales, water was continually secreted, a biological trait that allowed them to

leave their aquatic habitats for as long as they needed to. The dorsal fin atop their heads soaked in any available moisture from the air and stored it in sacs which lay on either side of the neck, underneath their serpentine dreadlocks. Completing the Ankarans' distinctly amphibious appearance was a thick, tapering tail, which could usually be seen sticking out of the beautiful blue and red robes worn by the peaceful people. Despite the flurry of activity surrounding them, the two Ankarans deftly navigated the chaos of the docks with uncanny precision. Though blind, they were certainly not helpless.

As they drew closer to Pedaeus and Pylos, smiles appeared on both their faces. 'Gentlemen, so sorry for the delay,' said the Ankan Ambassador Pochica Ku, his apologetic voice soft and mellisonant, like a stream running over small rocks. 'My consul could not be woken from a heavy slumber.' His consul, Rama Ta, blushed, the dorsal fin crowning his head turning a shade of red.

'There is no need for the apology, Ambassador,' responded Pedaeus diplomatically. 'It has not delayed us.'

Hearing this, Sela Noye's tongue erupted into action. 'Not delayed us!' she exclaimed. 'Are you joking, Ambassador Rhodes? Of course it has delayed us. Why, Kaniya and I have been waiting for hours, sitting here being ignored by all and sundry!'

She would have continued but for a rather unexpected noise that was heard above the tumult of dockside activity. It was not a loud sound, but it was distinct. It was the sound of hooves *clip-clopping* on the timbers of the pier.

'It seems we are taking on two extra passengers,' Pylos said dryly to Pedaeus as they turned to face the origin of the sounds.

The Caquikki Ambassador Lokota Fall and his son Tawhawki had arrived, unexpected and unannounced. The sight of these two foreigners brought an unusual quiet to the Terminus docks. Caquikki were an uncommon sight in Terminus.

They were physically impressive, taller than even the Kheperans when measured from hoof to head. Their six-legged, equine bodies were large and muscular, covered in short hair that was usually light in colour. Their torsos were similarly muscular but were usually exquisitely apparelled, softening the Caquikki's appearance somewhat. The Ambassador and his consul wore richly-embroidered waistcoats embellished with a small pocket in which was placed a small, golden timepiece, a mechanical device the Caquikki had created to measure the passage of the day. Lokota paused to pull out his timepiece, open its lid

and check the time. He peered down at it through a pair of spectacles, another Caquikki invention that improved the vision of the wearer.

The checking of the time was little more than a display of intellectual pride, a characteristic of the Caquikki that had always bothered Pylos. He had travelled to the island nation of Caquix and marvelled at its wonders, but was always a little uncomfortable around the Caquikki themselves. They were intellectuals and artists adept in almost every endeavour they deemed worthy of their attention. He wasn't sure why they unsettled him so. The Caquikki were not as arrogant as the Acora nor were they as aloof as the Kobolds. They had none of the Sessymirians' penchant for obstinacy; in fact, they were more open-minded than almost every other race in the Myr. But there was something about them that stopped Pylos from feeling at ease around them.

Whereas Pylos found great solace in tradition, the Caquikki committed themselves to change. They were an enlightened society that had developed at a pace Pylos found almost frightening. He had heard rumours that they were developing the means to travel the skies in airships that made the Spriggan skyshops look like dust-motes, but the fact the Ambassador and his son were in Terminus, apparently seeking passage across the sea, suggested that the rumours had no substance to them.

As the Caquikki pair drew closer, Pedaeus stepped forward, his hands open wide in a happy show of hospitality. 'Lokota, Tawhawki,' he said with obvious fondness – Pedaeus had none of Pylos' reservations about the Caquikki – 'this is indeed an unexpected pleasure!'

The two Caquikki bowed low, their fetlocks temporarily resting upon the pier. The people of Caquix were well known for their civility, in dress, in speech and in manner.

'Dear Ambassador Rhodes, it is truly joyous to our eyes to see you and your valiant consul again!' the Caquikki Ambassador said magnanimously. His speech was so clean and precise, it made Pylos think of some of the actors he had seen perform in the Scarlet Rock Theatre, their diction so refined it seemed insincere.

'We are equally pleased to see you both,' Pedaeus replied, casting Pylos a quick glance to encourage him to show similar sentiments. Pylos added an awkward smile which was returned graciously by the Caquikki.

'Good Pedaeus, I am afraid we must impose ourselves upon you,' Lokota said with what Pylos thought to be feigned humility. 'We had planned to travel to Brigantia aboard our own ship, but our captain has made it clear to us that in today's fearful climate he would not risk

passage across the Sea of Telamon. We are stranded and humbly request your assistance.'

Pedaeus stretched out his hand and grasped Lokota Fall's in a show of friendship. 'And it is given. We sail for Brigantia shortly. We would be delighted to have your company.'

Lokota shook Pedaeus' hand and beamed with satisfaction. 'Then it is settled!'

'It seems we are all here,' Pylos said, turning towards the ship *The Broken Promise*. 'We will aboard immediately.' He nodded politely to the Caquikki pair and strode off toward the awaiting vessel.

'About time!' grunted the Tamuans as he passed them. He had to bite his lip to stop himself from saying something to them.

Having given orders to the crew, Pylos Castalia and Pedaeus Rhodes walked up onto the poop deck of *The Broken Promise* where they found the dignitaries they were escorting to Cessair engaged in heated argument. As a mindless prank, one of the *Promise's* crew – a foolish stevedore by the name of Agrippa – had thrown a dead fish on the deck as the blind Rama Ta made his way to the guests' quarters. The Ankaran had slipped on the fish, and as he fell his staff had whirled up and smacked Sela Noye in the back of the head. This had led to a long dissertation as to why blind people should not be allowed to set foot outside their own homes. Five minutes into Sela's rant, the Caquikki consul Tawhawki Fall had asked the Tamuan to stop talking. This was the last thing that would silence Sela and by the time Pylos and Pedaeus had come up to the poop deck, it was a place of dramatic gesticulation and wild remonstrance.

'Consuls and ambassadors, I know you are all excited about the journey but if I could have your attention.'

Pedaeus moved into the centre of the circle where Sela was thrusting her finger into Tawhawki's girth as she vainly tried to drive home her point. Pedaeus held up his hands in a polite request for silence. The yelling eventually subsided, although notably Sela's voice was the last one to stop. 'We will be departing any minute now,' he said with a warm smile upon his face. 'Do you have any questions before we leave?'

Pedaeus was a natural statesman. Charismatic to a fault, he could easily turn a bad situation into an interesting one. With his hands held open before him, he awaited the questions that he knew were rushing through the minds of all assembled on the poop deck.

Lokota Fall was the first to speak. 'Pedaues, what safeguards do we have for our voyage across the sea? We have heard of the beast that roams these waters. We all know what happened to *The Princess Orani*.'

'Not just *The Princess Orani*,' Sela added before Pedaues had a chance to respond. 'Sixteen ships over the last ten weeks have fallen prey to this thing from the deep.'

'That is true, but –' Pedaues began.

'And is it true that countless smaller boats are also being attacked by squads of Ghul roaming the waters between Helyas and Tethra?'

'I believe so, but –'

'And was not the port city of Tamesis attacked by the winged monster that has decimated settlements around Lake Erras?'

'It was, but that was weeks ago and the winged beast has not been seen since, so –'

'Thank-you Ambassador. That's very reassuring,' Sela snapped, cutting him off yet again. 'So you're basically saying that it will be a miracle if we ever get to Cessair.'

'Consul Noye, every precaution has been made to ensure your safety,' Pedaues said firmly yet softly. 'You will be well-guarded during the transit.'

'To be honest, Pedaues,' said Rama Ta, 'as much as it pains me to say it, I think the Tamuan consul has a point. All the naval support you can muster is of small consolation when we face an enemy that can't be killed.'

Pylos stepped forward and reluctantly entered the circle. 'Consul, with all due respect, that's not entirely true. We slew many Ghul when they attacked Sulis two months ago. Whilst the Ghul are difficult to vanquish, they can be killed.'

'Well, that much is true,' Sela added begrudgingly. 'On the western edge of the Tamu Plains, where the savannah meets the mountains, we discovered a cavern that contained the scattered remains of thousands of Ghul.'

A collective gasp sounded across the deck. This was an astounding revelation to all gathered there that day. The Ghul had made their malevolent presence known in almost every country throughout the Myr and the thought that they could be killed and in such large number brought great hope to those who had suffered at their hands.

'Dead?' Pylos said incredulously.

'In pieces, therefore dead,' Sela answered proudly, as if taking personal responsibility for the slaughter.

The two Caquikki glanced at each other curiously.

'Who had killed them?' Rama Ta asked.

The Tamuan shrugged. 'We don't know. It actually looked like they had killed themselves.'

Lokota Fall frowned behind his glasses. 'A mass suicide?'

'No. A battle.'

'A battle?' Tawhawki asked. Like his father, he was struggling to digest the tale Sela was unfolding.

'Yes. It must have been a savage confrontation. Pools of dried blood. Dismembered limbs. Burnt husks of bodies. That sort of thing.' She paused as she noticed that everyone was paying attention to her. Every individual on the poop deck was silent, hanging on every word she said. Sela sighed before continuing, enjoying the moment. 'There wasn't much left of the bodies. They seemed to have exploded.'

'Exploded?' Pylos muttered to himself, remembering what had happened to the Ghul he had slain on the walls of Sulis. They too had died in a similarly volatile way.

'What did they look like?' asked Tawhawki.

'That's the interesting thing,' Sela replied. 'Most seemed to be wearing the bone armour we now associate with the Ghul... but not all. There were other Ghul at the site. They looked different to the ones we have encountered thus far. Although it was hard to tell from the bloody remains, they seemed to be smaller, not much taller than a Tamuan, and they wore skins instead of armour. What was left of their faces was coloured in ochre paint and they...' Her voice trailed off as her mind wandered away to the day she and her tribe members made the grisly discovery.

'They what?' asked Tawhawki, somewhat exasperated that she had not completed her last sentence. He had forgotten his earlier request – that she stop talking – and now waited impatiently for her to finish her description of the Ghul massacre.

'Didn't you ask me to shut up before?' Sela asked smugly. She had not forgotten his comment.

'I apologise,' he said after a long pause. 'Please continue, Consul.'

She was contented. Sela enjoyed nothing more than the sound of a forced apology. She smiled smugly to herself before returning to her story. 'There was something else. It didn't seem important at the time but we found a number of Myrran weapons.'

'What kind of weapons?' Pylos asked.

'Axes mainly. Black ones. The type fashioned by the Kobolds.'

Pedaeus turned to Pylos. 'Then Camulos has been invaded too. It would seem these Ghul stole the weapons from the smithies of Sarras.'

Pylos nodded. 'But what is being described here is a civil war. Amongst the Ghul.'

The Caquikki leaned towards one another and exchanged puzzled glances. 'The Ghaddar?' Tawhawki whispered to his father, not intending the comment for public consumption. But the ears of the blind Ankarans were so finely tuned that both Rama Ta and Pochica Ku heard him.

'Who are the Ghaddar?' Rama said in the direction of the Caquikki.

Lokota Fall looked over the rim of his spectacles and said, 'Pardon?'

'Your son mentioned the Ghaddar? Please tell us who or what they are.'

'It's nothing,' Lokota said dismissively. He turned away from Rama, avoiding his staring blind eyes.

'No, it's something,' Pylos said, sensing there was more to the matter. 'We're in this together Ambassador. If you know something, please tell us.'

The Caquikki Ambassador reached up and took his spectacles from his face. He pulled a small white handkerchief from his waistcoat pocket and wiped the spectacles carefully before placing them back on his face. It a gesture Pedaeus and Pylos had seen numerous times before in the Assembly of Nations. Lokota Fall was a frequent contributor to political discussions and wiping his spectacles was always a prelude to a speech.

'What I am about to say,' he said after clearing his throat, 'is not fact. My reluctance to speak on it reflects the tenuous nature of the information.' He stopped and considered carefully the details of his thoughts. 'Long before I was appointed to the position of Ambassador, I was an historian. A professor. In the universities of Caquix, there are many ancient books, hundreds of dusty tomes and parchments dedicated to histories long since faded from our consciousness.'

It was a wonderfully eloquent introduction but it was lost on Sela who wasted no time in voicing her confusion. 'Ambassador Fall, what are you talking about? I can see your lips moving but I cannot understand what is coming out of them.'

The Ambassador was unaccustomed to being addressed with such rude speech and he glowered at the impertinent Tamuan. Despite his desire to castigate her verbally, he returned to his speech. 'These creatures that have invaded our lands, the Ghul, come from a realm beneath us once known as the Endless. It is not the first time they have invaded the Myr. Eons ago, they were a scourge upon the world, but our ancestors fought back and after years of toil, managed to lock the Ghul up in the prison of the earth. However they were not the only subterranean race. Another race, resembling the Ghul in every way but their hatred of all things living also dwelt in the Endless. They called themselves the Ghaddar and they did not seek dominion over the peoples of the Myr.'

They opposed the Ghul and their barbarous ways. When we most needed it, the Ghaddar came to the Myr's aid and helped defeat the Ghul. Or, at least, that is the way the old books describe it.'

'Then these Ghaddar are our allies!' said Pedaeus with a note of triumph in his voice. 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.'

'Enemies? Friends? Who can say?' Lokota said sagaciously. 'These are strange times and we should be careful where we place our trust. The texts that make mention of the Ghaddar are ancient. They have been translated and reinterpreted. I'm not sure they can be relied upon at all.'

'But this battle the Tamuans stumbled upon, it does support the notion of two opposing forces, a situation we can use to our advantage,' Pylos said, sharing Pedaeus' optimism.

'Perhaps, but Ghaddar were supposedly few in number. Our salvation lies not with them.'

It was clear to the Helyans that Lokota was trying to discourage them from pinning their hopes upon the Ghaddar. Pedaeus understood why, but a Helyan was taught from birth to recognise opportunity, and the existence of a subterranean species opposed to the Ghul was a favourable circumstance he could not ignore. 'We should go to Tamu,' he suggested. 'Enter the cavern, search for Ghaddar survivors. Maybe they could give us information, or even fight alongside us.'

'Pedaeus,' Lokota said as he put a large hand on the Helyan's shoulder. 'If the texts are accurate and the Ghaddar did exist, there is no surety that they remain alive. For all we know, the slaughter the Tamuans discovered may well have signified the final destruction of the Ghaddar.'

'But, at the very least, we should investigate the cavern,' Pedaeus urged, surprised that his advice would be met with any resistance.

'There will be no going back to the cavern.'

Sela had said it with such absolute certainty that it took Pedaeus several seconds to articulate his response. 'Why, Consul? This cavern may hold the key to our survival against this pestilence from below. Give me one good reason why we should not head directly to Tamu and explore the site of the battle.'

'Because it no longer exists. We brought in a team of stone gluks and razed the cavern to the ground.' It was well known what a team of stone gluks could do when properly motivated. The stone gluks were slightly smaller than their Sessymirian cousins, the ice gluks, but were just as destructive when set to work on stone. 'It took us twenty days but we managed to bring the whole cavern down. It would take months to

clear away the debris. If there were any survivors, they now lie buried under rock and rubble a thousand yards thick.'

Pedaeus and Pylos looked at the Tamuan consul, their mouths agape. 'Why would you do such a thing?' Pylos said straining not to display the anger that bubbled in his veins.

'We felt vulnerable,' Sela said defensively, recognising the tension in Pylos' voice. 'We were not willing to leave ourselves open to attack, so we closed down the route the Ghul had been taking to our lands.'

It was a fair point and Pylos knew it.

'Excuse me, General.' It was the ship's boatswain, a man named Capaneus, accompanied by the stevedore Agrippa. They stood to attention by the stairs that ran from the poop deck to midships, both men on their best behaviour before Helyas' greatest military leader.

'Yes, Bosun?' Pylos replied. 'What is it?'

'Cap'n says ship's right to go, sir. He's just awaiting your orders.'

'Are all the other ships in the flotilla ready?'

'Yes sir.'

'Then give the captain my assent, Bosun. Head nor' west until we have cleared the shoals, then due west until evening. The dreadnaughts escorting us will be taking this course. Let us begin our march across the waves.'

'Yes sir!' Capaneus replied and the two sailors made their way around the group to inform the captain of Pylos' wishes.

Rama sniffed the air. He recognised Agrippa's scent. The smell of the dead fish he had placed under Rama's foot was still on the man's hands. He could feel the stevedore tiptoe around him. He could sense his guilt as he passed by.

Suddenly, the Ankaran stuck out his staff, jamming it into the coaming running down the side of the deck. Agrippa had no time to react and toppled forward into Sela Noye. He fell across her back and immediately felt the unique sensation of hundreds of sharp quills against his bare skin.

A harrowing scream filled the air as he thrust himself away from the Tamuan. A moment later he toppled backwards over the low gunnel encircling the deck. Seconds later, he hit the choppy waves heaving against the ship's barnacle-encrusted hull.

Pylos turned to Capaneus whose face was a mixture of shock and concern, and said, 'We can't wait for him Capaneus. He can swim back to port. Tell the captain to set sail without delay.'

'Yes General,' Capaneus said, saluting Pylos before heading back to the bridge.

Suddenly a great crashing sound erupted from behind the ship's stern. For a terrifying second, Pylos thought it was the dreaded Ryugin but one look back at the pier revealed the source of the disturbance. The Kompiran ship *The Discovery* had rammed the Sessymirian cruiser *Severed Ties*. *The Discovery's* iron-clad bowsprit had torn a gaping hole in the Sessymirian boat which was taking on water faster than its passengers and crew could bail it out.

By the time the Sessymirians had abandoned ship, *The Discovery* was at least a league out to sea, the broad fins of the ship effortlessly pushing through the azure waters of the Sea of Telamon. Pylos stood on the quarterdeck watching the beautiful Kompiran vessel disappear into the distance.

'She's a magnificent ship,' observed Pedaeus as he joined his friend by the starboard gunnel.

'Yes,' agreed Pylos. 'I hope she reaches her destination safely.'

Pedaeus laughed. 'If I were you General, I'd worry more about myself!' It was a deliberately inflammatory comment. Pedaeus knew Pylos would bite.

'Why do you say that?'

'Pylos, think about it. When we get to Cessair, everyone will tell their tales of death and destruction and then the Assembly of Nations will look for a solution. And someone to implement that solution. Whatever happens at the Assembly, know this Pylos – you'll be in the thick of it. Somehow, my friend, I think that the road in front of you is a lot worse than whatever is in store for that Kompiran ship. Why, I'd be very surprised if you ever get back to Helyas in one piece.'

'That's comforting,' Pylos said, not amused by his friend's theatrics.

'You don't need comfort, General,' Pedaeus said with a wry smile on his face as he pulled out a bottle of Nessian aleberry wine. 'You need a drink.'

So the two Helyans sat down on the deck and drank until their words became slurs and their slurs became sleep.

Chapter Fifteen Cessair Tower, Cessair

He had not thought things through properly. Porenutious Windle had left his king in a vulnerable position and he knew it. Exposed. Open to attack. It did not matter that the footsoldiers were out of harm's way. Nothing mattered but the safety of the king.

'Is that the best you can do?' Chamberlain Llyr asked as he leaned across the circular, tiered board and took Windle's king. He lay the piece on its side, as was the custom at the conclusion of a game of Siege, and sighed, his blue eyes reflecting his disappointment in Windle's performance. 'You know Mr Windle, I really miss Mr Melkin. Now there was a man who could play a good game.'

The chubby bureaucrat blushed but in the dim light of the Chamberlain's ornate sitting room, his embarrassment was not as obvious as it could have been. Windle had just lost his third game in a row and the Chamberlain had made it abundantly clear that he expected better from someone occupying such an important position within his ministry.

'I apologise that I cannot put up a greater defence,' Windle said, wringing the folds of his purple robe nervously.

'Oh pish!' said the Chamberlain dismissively. 'If it were just your defence, then we could actually work on something. But it's not. It's your offence too. You seem to have no stomach for conflict, Mr Windle. Am I correct?'

'So it would seem, Your Grace. I wish I could be a more formidable opponent.'

'So do I, Mr Windle. So do I.' The Chamberlain leaned forward and looked his advisor in the eye. 'It does surprise me that someone of your station in life does not possess a more strategic mind. How can you advise me in matters of politics without any appreciation of tactics and strategy?'

'I can only try my best,' Windle muttered, his ego slightly battered.

The Chamberlain smiled softly and chuckled to himself. 'Of course, dear Porenutious. And that's all I expect from you.' It was impossible to tell whether this comment was genuine or the most subtle of criticisms.

Although the Chamberlain was not particularly tall, he had undeniable presence. Some observers had commented that his piercing blue eyes were his most powerful political weapon. He rarely blinked and that unnerved some people, especially Windle who could not look at someone for longer than five seconds without getting anxious.

Llyr was a much loved leader, especially by the general public who often found themselves caught up in the stirring rhetoric of his addresses;

however, those who knew him well also knew to fear him. It was not that he was prone to displays of anger or erratic behaviour, as was the case in the previous chamberlain. Llyr was quietly spoken and generally consistent with his mood. But he had a very low tolerance for fools so it had surprised Windle no end that the Chamberlain had persevered with him for so long. As a result, Windle was kept in a constant state of nervousness, keen to please his superior but frequently unable to do so.

It was late, only a few hours before daybreak. Unable to sleep, the Chamberlain had summoned his advisor to his chambers. Llyr usually found a few games of Siege to be relaxing as the strategies of the game were a welcome break from the more intricate subterfuge of world politics. But Windle was such a poor player, the absence of any challenge meant that the game was no more distracting than a sneeze.

A long yawn rolled out of the Chamberlain's mouth. His sleep over the past few months had become increasingly irregular. This was not surprising. Reports of Ghul incursions and the appearance of monstrous beasts came in almost daily. All over the Myr, people were unsettled, many too scared to venture out at night. The Chamberlain knew that they would turn to him for answers and contrary to what many people believed, he had none to give.

Llyr stood up and walked over to a small, round table by the window where a carafe of expensive wine stood beside an ornate silver goblet. 'Wine, Mr Windle?' he offered as he poured himself a drink, seemingly oblivious to the fact there was only one goblet.

'No thank-you, Your Grace,' Windle said with a note of sadness in his voice as he enviously watched the Chamberlain lift the goblet to his lips.

'Have you heard any news of Mr Melkin? Should I have any hope that he may return to me?'

Windle pulled out a satin handkerchief and dabbed at the perspiration building up across his broad forehead. He was prone to sweating, even at night. His short, chubby fingers scrunched the handkerchief into a ball and tucked it back up his sleeve. He looked up from his seat and proffered a weak smile. 'No sir. There has been no sign of him since the incident. I... I do not believe we are likely to see him again. The Ghul were ruthless.'

The Chamberlain swirled the wine around in his goblet as he considered this remark. He lifted his eyes from the purple liquid and stared at his advisor sitting uncomfortably in the chair before him. 'It is incredible that you were able to escape from their clutches.'

Windle shifted in his chair. The small of his back began to ache. It had ached for months, ever since Caliban's monster Succellos had

rammed her sting into it, but strangely it seemed to flare up whenever he had to lie, which was happening with increasing frequency. It was not that he had any moral compunction against lying – Succellos had stripped him off all moral sensibilities and the determination that accompanies them – but he was not well practised in the art of deceit, despite thirty years in politics. He understood the task Caliban had set for him and it was the only thing he thought about, but he had simply never been good at lying and he felt every time he did so, he was on the verge of being caught.

Samuel Melkin pulled his snorse to a halt at the top of the hill. In the fading light of day, he could make out a copse of trees to his left and to his dismay from that copse he could hear the sad cries of yaffle-birds heralding the coming of rain.

'Come on Porenutious!' he called to his purple-clad colleague whose snorse was slowly making its way up the slope, straining under the prodigious weight of its rider. Windle was clearly not enjoying their ride across the windswept hills of Scoriath. His face conveyed every ounce of discomfort his ample body was feeling. 'Don't tell me to hurry up!' he called back. 'Tell this damned nag to get a move on!'

Thunder rolled across the Scorian landscape, making the bleak land even bleaker. Melkin frowned. 'It's going to rain any moment now,' he yelled to Windle who was wiping his brow free of sweat despite the cool and overcast conditions. 'I wanted to set up camp on the Assipattle River before nightfall but –'

'But what?' said Windle as his snorse drew up beside Melkin's.

Melkin didn't respond. He was looking past Windle, down the hill into the shadowy gully from which they had just emerged.

Windle followed Melkin's gaze but could see nothing that would hold his attention. 'What is it?' he asked, unsettled by the preoccupied stare of his partner.

Melkin shrugged. 'I thought I saw something move down there.'

Windle rolled his eyes. 'That's great Samuel. Here I am, already scared out of my wits in the middle of the wilderness and you're now seeing things. That really makes me feel safe.'

Melkin gave his head a little shake. 'Would you prefer that I pretended not to see things?'

'Perhaps!' Windle replied a little petulantly.

'Let's go,' Melkin said with a sigh. 'We'll camp by that copse of trees. It's getting dark and it's' – a heavy raindrop fell on his bald head, the first of many – 'raining.'

The pair sat huddled around a small fire, under a thin canopy that did not completely shelter them from the downpour. Melkin had prepared the camp, built the fire and cooked the strips of shelp meat he had brought, but it was Windle who was complaining about the situation they were in. 'I tell you Samuel, Maeldune Canna is getting far too big for his boots.'

Melkin smiled. It was typical of Windle to use a phrase like too big for his boots. Melkin had known Windle since childhood. For thirty-five years, he had watched Windle living the most pampered of pampered existences, the only child of an overly-protective mother. His speech was always laced with phrases one would expect of someone twice his age.

'He's a minister, Porenutious,' Melkin said as he threw a chunk of steaming shelp into his mouth. 'He can tell us to do anything he likes.'

Windle frowned, irritated by Melkin's table manners. Windle liked Melkin, had always liked him, but found his habit of speaking whilst eating to be uncouth in the extreme. 'I do not agree Samuel. We are no mere bureaucrats. We are advisors to the Chamberlain himself, not messengers!'

'Minister Canna sees this as a diplomatic mission.'

'What!' said Windle indignantly. 'Travelling all the way to Morae to investigate rumours concerning the Pryderi going missing? Isn't this a job for a Magistrate? Or for the Cessair Guard? We'll get ourselves killed out here Samuel.'

Melkin swallowed the last of the meat and wiped his face on his sleeve. He was normally well-mannered, but there was something about Windle that made Samuel Melkin mischievous. His chubby companion was too precious and Melkin knew he would get a reaction to every social indiscretion put before him.

'Do you have to do that?' Windle groaned as he pulled a spare handkerchief from his puffy sleeve and handed it to Melkin.

'Thanks!' said Melkin. He caught the handkerchief appreciatively, blew his nose upon it and then tossed it back to Windle who jumped back letting the handkerchief fall to the dirt where he would leave it for all eternity.

Windle looked out at the darkness surrounding them. There were no stars in the sky. Occasionally the Myr's moons tried to break through the rain clouds that bloomed overhead, but they provided no illumination upon the wet, black landscape. 'This place makes me nervous,' he remarked.

'Well I'd rather be here than Camulos,' Melkin said dryly.

Windle nodded. 'I heard. Maeldune said the entire country had been wiped out.'

'That's not certain. I was told that thousands of Kobolds were unaccounted for.'

'How can that be? Where would they go?'

'I don't know.' Melkin's voice was uncharacteristically strained. Windle had always envied his confidence, his ability to meet difficult situations head-on, but the situation in Camulos had rattled him. Melkin had confided in Windle that he was finding it hard to sleep at night. His dreams were frequently stained by the terrible events that had taken place in a country he held dear to his heart. Samuel Melkin was one of the few Myrrans who had visited Camulos and he had nothing but respect for its people.

'And all those Spriggans slaughtered.'

'That's just a rumour, Porenutious. We don't know that for sure.'

'Well, where are they? I haven't seen a Spriggan skyshop for the best part of a year. They're gone Samuel.'

'Not all of them,' Melkin corrected Windle quickly. 'Some traders still live abroad and I heard that Jehenna Canna's team had found one still alive in the ruins of Sarras.'

'Poor fellow. Who knows the horrors he has seen?' said Windle with genuine compassion.

'If I were you, I'd worry more about myself,' said a hollow voice out of the darkness.

Melkin and Windle spun around to see the shapes of countless Ghul emerging into the light of the small campfire.

Lucetious sank his teeth into the side of Melkin's head. After a grotesque flurry of movement, accompanied by Melkin's howls of agony, the Ghul lieutenant lifted his head to display a bloody ear resting between his jagged teeth. He took the ear and held it up for all to see. For a brief second, he eyed it curiously, licking his thin lips as he did so and for a second, Windle thought he was going to eat it.

But Lucetious was not interested in satiating any hunger he may have felt. He merely wanted his two prisoners to see that he had no qualms about hurting them. He casually threw the ear away and knelt down before the two bound men.

'Since coming to your world, I have seen many strange things. Clouds. Mountains. Trees. In the still of night, I have watched trees shed their leaves. It is a truly wondrous thing to watch a leaf fall from a

branch. There seems no pattern to it, no way of knowing where it will land or which leaf will fall next.'

'What madness is this? Why do you talk of trees?' Melkin shouted. Despite the fog of pain that had descended upon him, Melkin could hear Lucetious with his remaining ear.

'You need to understand this. I have no more concern for your limbs and appendages than I do for this tree. I will strip your bark, pull off your leaves and break your branches without a moment's hesitation.' He snapped the branch he was holding for dramatic effect. Whilst Melkin just stared back at the Ghul with undisguised hatred, Porenutious Windle gazed at the broken branch in horror. It was no great leap for the politician to imagine the same thing being done to his own limbs. *'You will comply with any request we make of you.'*

Melkin growled. Windle could see the bestial look in his eyes. Despite being cornered and at the mercy of creatures who had no mercy to give, a spark of defiance still burned deep inside him.

'For goodness sake Samuel,' Windle begged his companion, 'submit to him.'

'No Porenutious, you can't just submit to them,' Melkin shot back. 'If you give yourself to scum like this, you'll have nothing left.'

A Ghul female stepped forward, her eyes blazing with malice, her crooked teeth bared. 'Sir, I don't believe the tall one is paying attention to you. Perhaps we should break his fingers,' she suggested.

'It's tempting but we don't have time. Caliban wants these two straight away.' He casually bent over, picked up a rock and slammed it into Samuel Melkin's skull, knocking the man into a state of bloody unconsciousness. *Windle fainted long before the rock got close to his head.*

'I was lucky, nothing more, Your Grace.' He slumped forward in his chair and dropped his face in his hands, averting Llyr's probing eyes. Peering through the gaps in his fingers, Windle concentrated on the sharp patterns in the parquetry covering the chamber floor, hoping his dissimulation was not apparent.

Then, unexpectedly, the Chamberlain was kneeling before him. *'Mr Windle, I'll be honest with you. You have not been the same since the Ghul attack. Perhaps this is understandable. You are no warrior – you're a bureaucrat, softened by years of talking. I realise that the Ghul attack must have scared you out of your wits and you don't like to talk about it, but our duty is to the people, not to ourselves. We must do what we can to combat this terrible situation we now find ourselves in.'*

'I understand that, Your Grace, but I have nothing to add to what I have already told you. And I have lost a dear friend in Samuel Melkin. Perhaps my only friend. I... I'm sorry!'

Windle clenched his teeth and tried to produce tears. The effort made his whole body shake. Whilst this was not the result he was hoping for, it had the desired effect.

'No, I am sorry, sincerely sorry, Porenutious,' Llyr said tactfully. 'You have been through a lot and it is unfair of me to me drag it out further. I won't question you about it again.'

'I have tried hard to forget, but the memories of that night just won't let me go.' Despite the complete absence of emotion inside, Windle's voice was thin and tremulous. 'Horrible memories.' He sniffed loudly and accentuated this by wiping his bulbous, red nose upon his silk handkerchief. 'Your Grace, you can't sleep because of what is to come. I can't sleep because of what has passed.'

The Chamberlain took hold of one of his advisor's elbows, helped him out of his chair and tenderly led him to the door. Windle kept his head bowed down.

When they reached the door, the Chamberlain put a hand upon his advisor's shoulder and Windle lifted his head to face him. The Chamberlain's blue eyes did not burn with the same intensity they had earlier. 'I have been very selfish, my friend. I won't take up any more of your time.'

Windle smiled appreciatively but he did not say anything. He shuffled across the black marble landing, looking as sad and miserable a figure as could be imagined. The Chamberlain, unaccustomed to seeing a grown man reduced to such a state, felt he had to say more. 'Mr Windle,' he called across the landing. 'Is there anything I can do for you? To help you?'

Caliban stood on the rickety pier leaning on his staff. Like so many things in the Endless, the pier had been constructed solely of bone. Below him Porenutious Windle sat quietly in one of the strange boat-creatures the Ghul used to traverse the underground waterways. Lucetious stepped down into the boat and took his place opposite Windle but the bureaucrat did not acknowledge his presence. His eyes were fixed on Caliban who was prescribing the last of his duties.

'Once you are sure that the Chamberlain will follow the course of action I have outlined, you must retreat to the shadows and await further orders. Carry on with whatever routines you follow, but stay out of the light. Under no circumstances are you to speak to my brother should you

encounter him. I have no doubt he will be able to detect Succellos' touch upon you. You must also stay away from the fisherman Gerriod Blake. He was there when Succellos embraced you. He may recognise you.'

Lucetious raised his hand to speak and Caliban gave his permission to do so. 'My lord, are we not presented with an opportunity to strike at the heart of the Myr. We could remove the leader of these overworlders in one bloody strike. I suggest Windle kills the Chamberlain in his sleep.'

Windle looked at Lucetious with mild interest. He was neither alarmed nor excited about Lucetious' recommendation. He heard it, understood it but had no emotional response to it. Succellos had taken from him all emotions, all feelings. She had given the poor man over to Caliban and it was his will that would now be done.

Windle lifted his head to face Caliban and waited for his approval or disapproval of the idea.

It was a good thirty seconds before Caliban responded. Lucetious looked about nervously, aware that the silence did not reflect a happy disposition in his master. He had heard the silence before and it was usually a precursor to a rebuke on his mild days and retribution on others.

'Lucetious,' Caliban sighed finally. 'Lucetious, have you learnt so little in your time with me? Is your capacity for learning so limited that you have been unable to glean from me some sense of strategy?'

Although it was a rhetorical question, Lucetious felt compelled to reply. 'My lord, I have learnt more from you than I could chronicle.'

'Then why would you recommend that we kill Tiberius Llyr?' Caliban scolded. 'What possible advantage could that give us in the battle ahead? You think like a thug Lucetious, which is to say you do not think at all!'

The lieutenant dropped his head submissively and said, 'I apologise, Lord Caliban.'

Caliban sneered. 'Lord Caliban,' he mimicked. 'Lord of what? Lord of a race of savages that see the manifestation of true power in the ability to slit a man's throat. Your willingness to slaughter without cause makes you little more than a henchman, Lucetious. It is not the ability to kill where true power lies Lucetious. It is the ability to manipulate. It is the ability to subvert another to one's will.'

'My lord, I spoke foolishly.'

Lucetious' contrition was not enough to quell the anger that had swelled up on Caliban's breast. 'Lucetious, it simply amazes me that you would recommend killing the Chamberlain when we now have one of his advisors as a colleague. One thing we need is more time. Time to find more Cabal. Time to gather and train more Pryderi. Time to position

our pieces on the board. I don't want to slit the Myr's throat. There is no satisfaction in that. Nothing to gain. You want to stab with the knife. I'd rather twist it. The longer we draw out this campaign of terror, the more it will hurt my brother when he realises it is all for him. Whilst I admit I have some doubts as to how much influence Mr Windle will be able to cast upon the Chamberlain, I believe if he plays the part we have given him, things will unfold as they should.'

'Help me?' Windle asked distractedly.

'Yes,' answered the Chamberlain. 'I feel terrible. I want to do something.'

'Your Grace, there is something you can do, but not for me. There is something you can do for the people of the Myr.'

'And what is that?'

'Stop this madness. Everything Caliban has done has been an overture to war. I have no doubt that he has more Ghul at his command than we could hope to defeat in battle. But there are other ways to defeat an enemy.'

'Such as?'

'Assassination squads. If you handpick the squads, you may find it is easier to remove this threat quietly, without the loss of lives that would inevitably follow a full scale war.'

The Chamberlain did not move as he thought about this. Very occasionally Porenutious Windle supplied advice that justified his position. Whilst it would have been easy to go to war and in the short term that may have appeased the people of the Myr, the Chamberlain was also sensitive to the political ramifications of fighting a protracted campaign against the Ghul. Such a war would inevitably lead to casualties in the thousands. And then the people would look to someone on whom to blame all the lost lives. It was not a road upon which he wanted to travel.

'I think your idea has merit, Mr Windle. Come back inside and we'll explore it further. Have you given thought to who should be picked for the squads?'

'As a matter of fact, I have,' said Windle, as he was led back into the Chamberlain's sitting room.

Chapter Sixteen Cessair Tower, Cessair

Although he lived under the wondrous Skyfall, the sight of the shining, black-tower city of Cessair stopped Trypp in his tracks. He pulled on the reigns of the snorses. The creatures gave their obligatory grunt of dissatisfaction, and the carriage slowed to a halt.

He turned to the Ambassador, as if to receive confirmation that the structure before them was real. Akampa Lodd smiled knowingly. He had seen the tower thrice and still his skin tingled when it came into view. They had come to the crest of a meadowy hill and there before them was the splendour Trypp had heard about but never fully imagined. Fields of flowerfall, spread across the land like the golden robe of a monarch. The fields rippled as the shadows of fast moving clouds raced over the land. Five leagues away, the black tower of Cessair stood proudly, a great monument to Myrran endeavour.

‘The tower has been crafted in a material called shatterstone,’ Akampa informed Trypp.

‘Shatterstone?’ Trypp queried, amazed that a structure as tall as the tower could be made of something sounding so fragile.

Akampa guessed his mind and laughed gently. ‘It’s actually a metal and despite its name, it is incredibly strong. It can not be wrought by traditional techniques. The Kobolds of Camulos, the people who built this great tower, discovered the means to manipulate shatterstone and have mined it for centuries. From it they have fashioned blades, arrowheads and hatchets. They have crafted doors and gates from it. They even gave the Sessymirians the opportunity to cover the prows of their ships with it, enabling them to slice through the ice floes in the frozen seas to the north.’

‘And this tower is built from it?’

‘Not quite. The tower’s outer shell is covered in it. Shatterstone is rare. Its origins make for compelling reading. Some postulate that it is not of this world.’

‘Then how did it get here?’

‘It is said that it fell from the sky, cut free of its mooring in the firmament. There are those who claim that the Worldpool was created when the blazing orb fell into Lake Erras.’

‘But Akampa, the Worldpool has always been, just like the Skyfall.’

‘Trypp, you are about to meet many people of disparate viewpoints. Some of them believe that the world has not always been as it is.’

‘And what do you say, Akampa?’

‘What do I say? I say this, my young Okku. I say that the world is a big place, and there is plenty of room for all views.’

‘With the rumours of this realm under the ground, this Endless, it sounds like the world has just become a lot bigger.’

‘The world, perhaps, or maybe it is your mind that has grown larger.’

It was Trypp’s turn to laugh. ‘My mind, Akampa? My mind feels the same size as always. Not much bigger than a nutshell!’

He flicked the reigns and the snorses broke into a gallop and the carriage was pulled down the slope across the flowerfall.

Two shatterstone stairs leading to the Cloud Chamber, the meeting place of the Assembly of Nations, encircled the tower like a braid. Up and up they went, crisscrossing on alternate sides of the incredible spire, wide enough for ten men to use side-to-side. A large door giving access into the tower was found at every point where the stairs intersected, and on these landings Myrrans of all races gathered.

The lower landings were filled with outdoor markets selling everything from Nessian sunberries to Helyan weaponry. Above the markets were public squares, dotted with statues, fountains and potted trees. Great care had been taken to ensure these landings were peaceful areas of respite from the flurry of activity that took place within the tower, where the business of Myrran bureaucracy took place.

Higher up, a number of landings were devoted to ale houses. Here beer-stained tables and benches filled the flat areas where the stairs met. Above the taverns, open air cafes and restaurants could be found. The views were so breathtaking, some Myrrans travelled hundreds of leagues just to have a meal on the tower landings. Further up the spire, the landings were private, occupied by those wealthy enough to afford an apartment in the tower.

At the very top lay the Cloud Chamber, the stunning room created specifically for the Assembly of Nations. It was said that 10,000 steps lay between the base of the tower and its crown.

Some visitors enjoyed the climb up to the Cloud Chamber more than others.

Pylos Castalia, Pedaeus Rhodes and Bannick Landen attracted a number of looks as they made their way along the avenue before the great tower. A number of whispered conversations followed in their wake. It was not surprising; they were among the most famous men in the Myr. Their names were even known in lands they had never visited.

Despite the warm summer's day, Bannick was dressed in the traditional grey furs worn by most men and women from the frozen land of Arnaksak. In contrast, Pylos wore a light cotton tunic that was held to his muscular body by a plain leather belt from which hung a short sword on his left side and a dagger on his right.

'I apologize, Pylos,' said Bannick loud enough for passers-by to hear. 'Your sister does not work in a Tethran whorehouse. I mistook her for your mother.'

Although they had not seen each other for almost a year, Bannick had wasted no time in falling back into old routines. Making lewd comments about Pylos' mother was one of Bannick's favourite pastimes, a pursuit made all the more enjoyable by the fact that Pylos could never come back at him with a remotely funny retort. Pylos was a brilliant military tactician, but when it came to verbal jousts with Bannick Landen, he was little more than a squire.

It was such a battle of wits that had given Pylos his most recognizable feature – the long scar running down the left-hand side of his face. The incident had occurred in a bar on one of the upper levels of the tower five years earlier. It was the day Bannick and Pylos met. They had already known of each other long before this meeting and their reputations were such that a friendly rivalry existed between them before they had actually been introduced. Upon shaking hands at the introduction, Bannick commented that Pylos shook hands like a girl. This quickly degenerated into a series of humorous but derogatory comments, culminating in Bannick's lewd claims regarding Helyan men and flocks of shelp. Pylos, having no comeback to this slur jumped on Bannick and wrestled him to the floor. As they fell about the room, wrestling like two naughty boys, Pylos' knife fell out of its sheath. He instinctively reached to put it back and Bannick believed him to be on the attack. The two grappled with the blade, but Bannick's greater strength forced the tip of it towards Pylos' face and...

And from that moment on – or shortly afterwards, once the misunderstanding had been cleared up – a kinship existed between the two that was closer than most people could understand. The friendship between two of the greatest warriors of the era, one from the Myr's coldest land and the other from one of its hottest, was well known; it was rare for the two of them to be seen apart during the annual meeting of nations in Cessair.

They tried to outdo each other with larger than life tales of their exploits on the battlefield and in the bedroom. Bannick was clearly the master in the latter, having seduced and corrupted more women than Pylos had even spoken to. Bannick was a rogue and had an appalling

sense of what was appropriate. In perhaps the greatest breach of protocol in Myrran history, Bannick had held the most intimate of relations with Chamberlain Llyr's wife. Pylos respected Bannick's many feats of bravery but his dalliance with Tamora Llyr seemed reckless in the extreme.

'I really hate this part!' Sela Noye exclaimed as she stood staring at the innumerable steps weaving their way up the outside of the spire. 'Why can't it be like a normal tower, and have the stairs on the inside?'

Ambassador Kaniya Sawoye nodded her head in wholehearted agreement, a gesture that sent the feathers lining her ornate mask into the eye of a passing merchant. The man clutched at his eye and was about to abuse the wearer of the ridiculous mask, but quickly shut his mouth when he saw it was a Tamuan. It was mid-morning, he had much to do and the last thing he wanted was a drawn-out debate with a member of the Myr's most fractious and argumentative race.

'The design of this tower is a monument to suicide,' Sawoye noted to her consul. 'I could slip off the edge and fall, you know.'

'Perhaps the first order of business today should be a recommendation from us that a railing be installed on those stairs.'

'Excellent idea Sela. You propose the idea and I'll second it.'

'I imagine the Chamberlain will want to talk about the Ghul attacks instead.'

'Then the man's an idiot, Sela. First things first. The stairs must be fixed!'

Pylos, Pedaesus and Bannick tip-toed behind the Tamuans, not wanting to be brought into their discussion. They made their way up to the broad square at the very base of the tower. Here the two intertwining stairways began their climb up the impossibly tall structure, one going left and the other going right.

Bannick raised his hands to his face and with a look of mock alarm said, 'Oh dear Pylos! It looks like a long way up! Would you like me to carry you?'

'Bannick, you will struggle under the weight of your purse,' Pylos scoffed. 'What say I lighten it a little? Shall we say fifty gold coins?'

'Let's make it one hundred.'

They shook on it. Bannick turned to Pedaesus who had been waiting for such a challenge to be announced as they approached the tower. 'Excuse me, Ambassador Rhodes,' he said with exaggerated formality.

‘Your countryman and I have a difference of opinion over a small matter.’

‘Hmm? A small matter, is it sir?’ Pedaeus answered, indulging Bannick.

‘Well, actually, it’s a tall matter,’ he grinned, revealing a perfect set of beguiling, white teeth. It was the same smile that Bannick used to woo women, the same smile he would give to an enemy seconds before dispatching him. Bannick exuded total confidence. Those who envied him considered him arrogant in the extreme, but most who fell sway to his boyish charms, just regarded him as being slightly cocky. ‘If you would be so kind to hold the winnings. I’ll collect them from you at the top.’

‘Always happy to help,’ Pedaeus replied, taking the money from both men and placing it in a small bag hanging from his waist.

Bannick waved his hand out before Pylos in an elegant gesture and said, ‘You may choose your stairs.’

Pylos’ brow scrunched up slightly. ‘But they’re the same!’

‘I know. I was just being a gentleman.’

‘Oh. I’ll take the left.’

Bannick turned to Pedaeus and bowed. ‘My lady, I will win this in your name,’ he said in his most chivalrous voice.

Pedaeus just rolled his eyes and said, ‘Bannick, you are insane.’

The two men jostled each other as they stood shoulder to shoulder waiting for the start. Pedaeus, standing with his back to the tower, held up a red scarf he had acquired from a bemused local citizen. With a flourish, he dropped the scarf and the two competitors broke into a sprint. Pylos was first to move, exploding from a standing start, but he didn’t get far. Bannick had been the smarter contestant, sticking out his leg as the red scarf fell. Pylos tripped and tumbled, smacking his head on a shatterstone flagstone. By the time he had gathered his senses, Bannick was halfway up the first of many flights.

‘You’re nothing but a cheat, Bannick!’ he called out to the figure disappearing around the curving steps to the right of the tower. A mocking laugh floated back. Pylos grinned and within a few seconds had also disappeared out of view as he bounded up the shiny steps of the citadel.

Pedaeus was smiling, clearly entertained by the exchange.

‘You know you shouldn’t encourage them! They behave like unruly children. They’re meant to be consuls, Ambassador.’

Pedaeus spun around to see a pair of colourful Tamuan masks staring at him. ‘Consul Noye, Ambassador Sawoye, with the utmost respect, I must disagree,’ he said, quickly donning his diplomatic guise. ‘I believe,

you could search for 1,000 years and not find two people who would represent their respective countries more admirably. They are competitive I grant you, and occasionally robust in their demonstration of that quality, but –'

'Oh nonsense, Ambassador Rhodes,' Sela interjected. 'They're a pair of silly boys, nothing more!'

Kaniya Sawoye pushed past Pedaeus, accidentally jabbing him in the leg with one of her spines. 'Come on Sela,' she huffed. 'Let us leave Ambassador Rhodes and his red scarf. We have 10,000 steps to climb.'

Lara Brand was dreadfully out of breath. Her lifelong friend Arinna Brine was also panting. The two Pryderi had scaled half the tower, and Lara was on the point of collapse. Her arms were shaking uncontrollably. If she had knees, they would have buckled. It was not easy slithering up so many steps.

She looked up at the spire above. 'I... I can't do it. It's too high.'

'It's a shame you don't still have the flying lobbisle we magicked up for you,' Arinna said, trying to sound as light-hearted as her breath would allow.

'Puddy,' Lara responded somberly. 'His name was Puddy.'

Arinna twisted around on the step and took Lara by the hand. Her brown eyes were so full of kindness and understanding that Lara momentarily forgot her discomfort. 'I'm so glad you're here, Little One,' Arinna said softly. 'I am very proud of you.'

Lara blushed. Arinna had always known the right thing to say. They cast their eyes up at the tower one last time, and then one step at a time, continued their trek up the stairs to the Cloud Chamber.

Trypp and Akampa sat on the edge of the steps about two thirds of the way up the tower. They faced the west where snow-clad mountains could be seen wrapped around the distant edges of a crimson lake. Though nowhere near as large as Lake Erras, it stretched out to the west, north and south so that its crimson waters surrounded them.

'Akampa, the lake – why is it such a strange colour?'

The old Sapphyrran was pleased with his companion's questions. Trypp's curiosity in the wider world was hardly surprising. It was curiosity that had compelled Trypp to explore the precipices of the Skyfall. It was his interest and respect for the natural world that had made him the fine Okku he was. Akampa was pleased he had agreed to accompany him to the Assembly.

Looking down on the body of water that had captured Trypp's attention, Akampa said, 'The waters are full of ancient algae. At night it glows and the lake looks like it is on fire. It is something to see.'

'It's beautiful,' Trypp observed.

With a mischievous twinkle in his big eyes, Akampa Lodd observed, '*Our* lake is bigger,'

But if he was enamoured by the stunning view of the unique lake, Trypp was totally unprepared for the sight and situation awaiting him in the Cloud Chamber. Sitting at the very top of the tower, the Cloud Chamber should have been no larger than thirty feet across, but the round room before Trypp was massive, at least 200 feet from side to side. It defied his comprehension and like so many others, he struggled to find the words to voice the first thought everyone had when they first laid eyes on the room: 'It's bigger on the inside!'

The Cloud Chamber stretched out before him like a field. Overhead, a gigantic glass dome was held in place by four ornately carved, curved wooden beams. From the apex of these beams a single lantern hung. As was the custom, the lantern was lit to mark the occasion, but instead of the oily light that shone from the lantern in the past, a small cloud of shatterbugs had been placed in the glass globe and their light shone like a small sun above the world.

Much of the floor of the chamber was covered by a map of the Myr, but a map unlike any Trypp had ever seen before. It was a three-dimensional, semi-solid disk. It stretched across the floor for well over 100 feet. The world had been recreated in exquisitely fine detail and it lay there at his feet. At the edges of the raised map the waters of the Myr's oceans cascaded to the floor where they dissipated in a fine mist.

On the far side of the map, Trypp could see the waters of the Skyfall streaming down from the tall mountains behind his home town. The waters flowed into the sparkling blue pool of Lake Erras, now only twenty feet across. From where he stood, he could see hundreds of small green mounds that were the manifestation of the countless islands of the lake. In the centre of this amazing puddle of blue, a dark spot was evident. A churning vortex of dark water and ice that was only a few inches in diameter. The Worldpool. To the north of the lake, a dense patch of grey mist hovered above the floor – the swamps of Mag Mel were as obscured here as they were in the world outside. To the south of the lake, he could spy two cities he knew to be El Khadir and El Silat. The closer of these two metropolises, El Khadir, was bordered to the south by steep dunes that rose like mountains. There were so many parts

to the map he wanted to explore, places he had heard of but never seen. He knew there were people in the Cloud Chamber, other delegates he should meet, but he was so captivated by the fantastical map, that he simply couldn't lift his eyes from it.

Trypp knelt down and placed a finger in the ocean at his feet and ripples spread out across it. He could see miniscule waves lapping onto beaches he had never seen before. To his right were some islands, off the coast of Acoran. He could touch them, feel the sensation of their presence but his hand also went through them. *'It is like touching colour,'* he thought. *'If light could take on a solid form, it would be like this.'*

The more Trypp peered into the map the more astounded he became. Cirrus clouds drifted across the skies of Helyas in the centre of the room whilst a dark storm rolled in from the Sea of Hodur on the map's northern fringe.

'Do you like our map?' said a clear, gentle voice behind Trypp. The Saphyrran managed to pull himself away from the simulated world before him. The man who asked the question gazed at him with penetrating blue eyes. 'It's very impressive, isn't it?' he said cordially.

'Yes, yes it is, sir,' Trypp replied, somewhat overwhelmed by the occasion.

'Hello. You must be Trypp Elan,' said the man. 'I am Chamberlain Tiberius Llyr, but most people around here call me *Your Grace*.'

Trypp bowed deeply. 'It is an honour, Your Grace.'

'The honour is mine, Trypp,' the Chamberlain said kindly as he placed a hand upon Trypp's shell. 'Come now, you can walk out into the map.'

Llyr led Trypp out into the centre of the room. The world rushed by, sending a tingling sensation running up Trypp's shins. The map around his legs swirled and settled within seconds of his passing, like thick, coloured smoke. They strolled out across the tiny fields of flowerfall that surrounded Cessair. Then they walked through the fens surrounding Tindalo. Crossing the Nessian Sea, they both stepped over tiny ships ploughing their way across the rolling waves to Garlot. A few more steps took them past Nessa's famous blue cliffs. Trypp thought he could smell the succulent scent of gorseberries rising up out of the farms surrounding Gobnet. They waded past the steep Amaranthine Mountains that divided the verdant pastures of Nessa from the arid wastes of Khepera. A tiny sandstorm whirled up to Trypp's right and he was captivated by the way it carved out new shapes among the dunes. Infinitesimal grains of sand swirled around as the storm slowly drifted southwards. The sands faded into harsh, red rock as the pair made their way past the Marid where tiny

shoots of water burst out sporadically from the oppressive slab of heated rock that covered this lifeless part of the Myr.

And then he was home. Trypp reached out to touch the Skyfall. He could feel it rushing through his long, blue fingers. It was cool on his skin. He ran his hand over Lake Erras, his fingertips dancing across little islands. He could feel the gentle tug of the Worldpool around his legs. To his right he could see the lands of Tuatha and Tuirren. Dark rain clouds floated above them and miniature flashes of lightning pealed above the moors to the north. Trypp walked through these clouds and the thunder could be heard softly booming around his waist. Beyond these lands, to the north-east, a sea enveloped in mist stretched out ominously.

Trypp continued walking around the map as the Cloud Chamber slowly started populating with representatives from all over the Myr. He was vaguely aware of the Chamberlain's hand occasionally lifting off his shell as the old man greeted the delegates streaming into the extraordinary room.

As he walked along the coastline of Arnaksak Trypp noticed that he could feel the arctic breezes swirl around his legs. He continued across to the vast ice wastes of Sessymir and was overwhelmed by the size of the country. It was as large as Lake Erras. He could see lights sprinkled over the port cities of Oshalla and Gylfi where a bank of thick, grey clouds laden with snow kept the land bathed in a gloomy, blue light. The grey waters of the Gulf of Sessymir purled in monochromatic currents below his knees. Trypp knelt down and the map swallowed his legs. He could see trading ships carving through the choppy water. He cupped his hands and lifted thirty leagues of ocean. Three golden specks – Acoran merchant ships – swirled about in his hands before he carefully put them back down off the coast of Grisandole.

'Make's you feel like a god doesn't it?' smiled Llyr, his eyes assuming a paternal aspect.

'I'm not sure what a god would feel like,' said Trypp uncomfortably. 'Who made this map?'

'Many, many years ago, the Morgai walked among us. A powerful race they were. This unique representation of our world was their gift to us. The map is a symbol, not only of the world but of the unity of its peoples.'

'I noticed ships sailing through the oceans. Are those ships really at sea, or was that just an embellishment on the map?' Trypp asked.

The Chamberlain nodded indicating his approval of the question. 'Master Trypp, what you see here is a mirror of what is out there. The map reflects what is going on in the world.'

'But not under it, Lord Chamberlain,' said a clear voice from behind the pair.

The Chamberlain pirouetted around to be met by a woman as beautiful as any that could be found in the Myr. Long, dark hair hung from her pretty head. Her ears and eyes had the slightly pointed aspect common to the Acora. Her lips were full and sat in a slight pout on her proud face. There was nothing demure or dainty about her, other than a slightly upturned nose which gave her countenance a youthful air.

Clad in the tan coloured leathers and arm-mounted weaponry that comprised the uniform of the Acoran military, Jehenna Canna cut a figure that made most men look twice, irrespective of their race. She bowed politely before the Chamberlain but he ignored such ceremony and took her in his arms and held her close. 'Ah, the beautiful Consul of Acoran!' he exclaimed. 'Now you are a sight for an old man's sore eyes. You look as breathtaking as always.'

'I will endeavour to take your comments as they are intended, Your Grace,' she replied somewhat ambiguously, politely removing his hand from her waist.

The Chamberlain's smiling face twisted into expression of concern as he remembered the news he had been given that morning concerning Jehenna's homeland. 'Dear child, I have forgotten myself! I was informed this morning of your losses. You have my sincere condolences.' Everything about his demeanour suggested he was truly sorry for his oversight. His sharp blue eyes softened as he brought to mind the catastrophe that had been unravelling outside the city of Lucien in Acoran.

'We were made aware of the breach to the north of Lucien just under two weeks ago. How long it has been there, we do not know. We have been hit hard. In the past ten days, we have lost over a thousand troops.' Jehenna's eyes narrowed a little as she recounted the situation to the Chamberlain. She spoke with the precision one would expect of the Acoran military. Acoran forces were renowned for their discipline and focus. Whilst lacking the brute power of the Sessymirians, the finesse of the Kompilerans, or the strategic brilliance of the Helyans, the Acora were warriors held in high regard, renowned for their sense of duty and clarity of purpose. Jehenna was the living embodiment of this tradition, and despite obvious feminine qualities that so many found alluring, the Acoran consul was a person to be feared and respected.

'Over a thousand Acora now dead,' the Chamberlain echoed sadly.

'All slain by the Ghul,' Jehenna added. 'If what we hear from other countries is right, it is only a matter of time before even more terrible creatures come crawling out of the breach.'

‘Well content yourself with the knowledge that we will act upon this threat and act swiftly.’ He said it like a statesman and only the most cynical audience would have doubted his conviction. Llyr turned to introduce Trypp to the lithe Acoran, but he had wandered off to join Akampa at the far side of the map.

A tall, dark shadow of a man passed behind Jehenna and took her by the hand. ‘I see the Chamberlain wasted no time in putting his wrinkly, old arms around you,’ he whispered in her ears.

‘Maeldune, don’t be absurd,’ she said lifting her head to look at her husband’s blank face. ‘He hugs everyone.’

Maeldune Canna just stared inscrutably back at his wife until she dropped her gaze and looked at the swirling sea at her feet.

Over the next hour, the Cloud Chamber gradually filled up with delegates from almost every nation in the Myr. Those who had arrived early were well looked after by koopoo attendants that ran in and out of the chamber carrying delicacies and drinks of all descriptions. The Chamberlain was well known for his hospitality. In the kitchens below the chamber, Nessian chefs laboured away making gourmet treats that were usually reserved for the finest restaurants in Garlot.

The Tamuan koopoes who brought around the trays laden with food and alcohol were something of a delicacy themselves, but had been spared the butcher’s knife only because most people were of the opinion that koopoes were better serving plates than being served on them. This was not to say that they tasted bad, but rather they served particularly well. The koopoes were little more than a thick ball of fluff on two long legs. Four similarly long arms protruded from their downy torsos and on these the strange animals could balance three or four plates with little chance of dropping one. The koopoes’ sense of balance was unrivalled by any other known creature; in Cessair, this skill was harnessed for domestic duties such as serving food. This practice was held in contempt by the gourmands of Tethra who saw no use for the creature other than on a plate beside a serve of milkrice.

‘Pylos, you look like you’re about to vomit,’ said Bannick Landen in a cocky voice as he watched his friend struggle up the last few steps outside the Cloud Chamber.

‘I would have got here a lot sooner if someone hadn’t overturned a cart of fruit on one of the landings back there,’ Pylos panted as he glared at Bannick.

'That was an accident, I can assure you!' protested Bannick, struggling to stifle his delight as he said it.

'You almost killed me!' Pylos growled. 'I slipped on a pokpok and almost went flying over the edge of the stairs. If it weren't for some Tuathan I slammed into, I would now be a stain at the bottom of the tower.'

Bannick winced dramatically, acting out a look of horror that did nothing to placate Pylos. 'What a way to go!' the brash Arnakki mused. 'Death by fruit.'

'You're not as amusing as you think you are, Bannick,' said Pylos, wiping his brow with his tunic before entering the domed chamber.

Bannick clapped his hands rapturously as he watched Pylos preen himself. 'You know Pylos, if you really must wipe your forehead with your tunic like that, you should invest in some form of undergarment! The walls are made of glass after all.'

Pylos looked up, mortified by the knowledge that he had just aired himself to anyone in the Cloud Chamber who happened to be looking his way. The shocked look that had been stamped on the faces of various delegates inside made him want to go back down the tower and return home to Helyas. He turned his back on the Cloud Chamber and grimaced in shame.

Bannick slapped a hand on the Helyan's back so firmly it made him jolt forward a step. 'Ah relax, Pylos. I don't think she saw your sword!' he said nodding back towards the chamber where on the far side of the room Jehenna Canna sat with her husband.

For a brief second Pylos contemplated throwing his friend off the landing but Bannick was blessed with a disarming smile that excused him from all but the most unforgivable indiscretions. 'Come on!' he said encouragingly. 'You've got nothing to be ashamed of. Let's hope this thing doesn't drag on too long. I met a Nesson lass down below who -'

'Bannick, you're incorrigible! You really haven't changed a bit!' Pylos scolded. The reluctant grin attached to this comment meant Bannick could only take the observation as being complimentary.

'Well you know there are only two things certain in life - death by poison and a girl from Nessa.'

'Well I hope you find one and not the other!'

'Pylos, I'm not sure how to take that! Which one do you want me to find?'

They laughed and Bannick drew the Helyan to him in an affectionate wrestle. 'It is good to see you again Pylos. As soon as this Assembly finishes, you and I are going drinking.'

Pylos smiled. 'What happened to the girl from Nessa?'

‘Ah, she wasn’t particularly attractive anyway!’

Tagtug the Mabbit was led into the Cloud Chamber by Mulupo the Spriggan. Ignoring the fact that Tagtug was no closer to understanding his voluble speech than he was when they first met, Mulupo proceeded to comment upon everything that came to mind as they strolled across the map. It was only when a passing koopoo failed to notice that Mulupo did not have a drink in his hand that the Spriggan stopped talking, leaving Tagtug stranded in the Camulos Sea while he sought out a drink for himself. The Mabbit tentatively walked to the shore and gasped as he recognised his homeland. He extended a furry hand to touch the Briar Patch and hopped with delight when he felt a prickly tingle upon his fingers.

Remiel Grayson and the Archbishop of Garlot entered the room. Remiel had his hood pulled over his head and scarf drawn across his face. By contrast, the Archbishop, who was not required to wear the thick cloth veil not only had his face displayed but was beaming a toothy smile at anyone vaguely looking his way.

‘So this is the Cloud Chamber,’ Remiel Grayson gasped as he quickly scanned the room, pausing occasionally to take note of the individuals contained therein.

‘Yes, it is!’ chortled the Archbishop. ‘Father Gideon, I am so pleased you asked me to accompany you on this expedition. I can’t remember doing anything so exciting before.’

‘I am happy to have your guidance, Your Excellency,’ Remiel said humbly. ‘I am a novice in the ways of the world. I’m still not sure I should have come here.’

The Archbishop momentarily stopped nodding at the people around him and looked earnestly into his companion’s eyes and said, ‘I am sure, Father Gideon, that you will find a role to play in the proceedings to come.’

The Chamberlain continued to breeze around the room, engaging in small talk here and there and making sure his guests were being looked after. Every now and then, he would look over at the entrance to the chamber to check for new arrivals. He clapped his hands when he saw two long and colourful masks appear in the arched entrance. ‘Our friends from Tamu

have now arrived!' he exclaimed as he gently pushed his way through the gathering crowd to welcome Kaniya Sawoye and Sela Noye.

'It's a funny way to treat friends,' said Sela ungraciously. 'Making them climb thousands of steps!'

'Consul Noye,' he tittered. 'I see you haven't lost any of your acerbic wit since last we met.'

'One day Chamberlain, I'm going to find out what *acerbic* means, and I think you're going to be in a lot of trouble!'

'Then I must hide all the world's dictionaries so that I can deny you your revenge,' he said with a chuckle.

Sela just huffed and walked away. '*Hide all the world's dictionaries!* Those damned Caquikki have already saved him the trouble!' she muttered to Kaniya as she thrust a look of contempt at the pair of Lokota Fall and his son Tawhawki standing in the middle of the room.

The Chamberlain leaned over and whispered into Porenutious Windle's ear. 'We're almost ready to start. Only the Ambassador from Tuirren to come and –'

He stopped mid-sentence, all attention stolen away from him by the sound of grunting and panting coming from just outside the Cloud Chamber.

'I'm going to die – quick get me a drink!'

Will Stoops puffed as he stumbled into the chamber and collapsed on a bench that ran round the outside of the map, sending the bottoms of all those currently seated on the bench a few inches into the air. Stoops was larger than life. He had the dark skin of many Tuirrenians but took their stocky frame and built on it extensively. Everything about Stoops was given in large proportions. If Bannick Landen had the admiration of most Myrrans and Pylos Castalia the respect, Will Stoops had their affection. His sense of humour was infectious, his presence immediate. Around Stoops, life was worth living. He had been a member of the Assembly of Nations for fifteen years and in many ways was the heart of the gathering.

He wiped a prodigious amount of sweat from his bald head. 'I propose that all future assemblies be held at the base of the tower instead of the top.' He also had the uncanny knack for stating what others were thinking but lacked the confidence to say.

'I second that motion!' responded Sela Noye who had overheard the comment. Sela had a gift for overhearing comments.

Will Stoops' huge frame belied his formidable stature as a protector of the Royal Family of Tuirren – there were few more dangerous than he

and none so deadly with a bow. As he often remarked in defence of his lack of athletic prowess: 'I don't have to walk or run to shoot you.' He was not a warrior but he was not someone to be dismissed either. In his younger days, Stoops had made a great deal of money travelling the Myr performing in demonstrations and competitions. He could shoot further, faster and more accurately than anyone else alive, a skill he accepted modestly despite all his showmanship when watched by others.

It was also rumoured he could eat an entire adult shep in one sitting.

Disregarding protocol, Stoops had entered before the Ambassador from Tuirren, Lady Valeria Essar of Tir Thuinn. She was in every way a contrast to her consul. She was fair of skin and slight, a waif of a figure encased in layers upon layers of deep green and grey foulard. Whereas Stoops revelled in the theatre of his arrival, it was clear that Lady Essar was most uncomfortable with the way the eyes of all in attendance scanned whoever entered the chamber. She was shy to the point of being rude.

Behind Lady Essar sauntered Kip, Stoops' eldest son, a hulking tower of a man with long, matted hair. His body was a statement of sorts – pierced, tattooed and muscular. He had none of his father's girth but all of his zest for life. His eyes were as large as moons as he surveyed the Cloud Chamber for the first time.

'Hello Tiberius,' Stoops hollered across the chamber with a familiarity bordering on treason. 'Are you serving food at this shindig? A climb up a tower like this is an inducement to hunger.'

Chamberlain Llyr cut his way across the floor of the chamber. 'Hello Will, it's good to see you fit and healthy,' he mocked, patting Stoops' stomach, an inappropriate action for one in his office, but indicative of the close relationships Stoops crafted so easily.

'Fit? All I'm fit for is an early grave,' Stoops laughed.

A cough from Porenutious Windle reminded the Chamberlain that Stoops was present as a consul and not in an ambassadorial capacity. 'Lady Essar, I do forget myself. Welcome. I trust your journey here was a pleasant one?'

'My Lord, it seems these days just surviving a journey makes it enjoyable.'

The Chamberlain was unsure how to respond to such a gravid statement, and so he just put a hand to his chin and nodded. 'Yes, yes. True enough.'

Sensing their mutual discomfort, Stoops stepped in and introduced his son. 'Tiberius, my son, Kip. As discussed Tiberius, this will be my last assembly; my son is ready to take the reins.'

'This is your son?' the Chamberlain remarked incredulously, craning back to take in the whole man. 'Why the last time I saw you, you were only...' He indicated a height only a few inches above the mountains of Camulos at his feet.

'It is an honour to see you again, Your Grace.' He bowed deferentially.

'Ah Will, he is a gentleman!' And then whispered playfully in Stoops' ear: 'Are you sure you sired him?'

The Tuirrenian shrugged his shoulders. 'Who knows, Tiberius? I can only go on what his mother tells me!'

The Chamberlain slapped Stoops on the shoulder in a manner characteristic of old friends. He moved off through the crowd nodding and smiling, welcoming all into his domain.

Gerriod Blake was one of the last to arrive. It was only when he was standing up to his knees in the room's wondrous map that he looked up to take in his surroundings. He was immediately overwhelmed, by the people, the room, the map and his own part in the events they were about to discuss.

He was immediately swept up in the cordial arms of the Chamberlain and introduced to ambassadors, prime ministers and consuls of all races. Whenever they asked him what he did, he felt a sense of shame rise up in him as he informed them he was a mariner. He regretted these feelings of shame almost as quickly as they appeared. He thought of his father and the quiet dignity he had projected from the helm of *The Melody*. There was nothing shameful about being a mariner.

Windle looked over at Gerriod and blanched. The mariner. Caliban had told him to avoid him at all costs.

When Llyr had moved away from Gerriod, Windle rushed to the Chamberlain and said, 'Your Grace, I must ask your leave. I have just remembered something that cannot wait.'

The Chamberlain looked at his advisor curiously then waved him off. As Chamberlain he had too much on his mind this day to worry about Windle's erratic behaviour. He did not need his advisor to welcome delegates nor did he need him to start proceedings. 'Very well Porenutious. Off you go. Do whatever it is you have to do.'

Windle waddled away, pausing only to speak to Maeldune Canna before departing.

The Chamberlain took his position at the northern end of the map. It was the place of honour reserved for him and there was none who

begrudged him his place. With his hands held high above his head, and the world literally at his feet, Tiberius Llyr called the Assembly to order.

‘Good people of the Myr, welcome to Cessair. We have much to discuss!’

Chapter Seventeen Cessair Tower, Cessair

The hum of conversation that had filled the room died down as the consuls and ambassadors took their seats on the circular bench running around the outside of the map. Koopoos carrying trays laden with food darted back and forth behind the delegates. Not a single person had to wait more than a few seconds to have their appetites satisfied and thirsts quenched but this did not stop a pair of swarthy Tethrans stockpiling so much food that their laps resembled a buffet table.

As was tradition, the delegates took seats in close proximity to the countries on the map they represented. The Chamberlain sat at the top of the map between Sessymir and Arnaksak. 'I'll try to keep introductions as short as possible,' he said pleasantly.

'Wonderful!' Mulupo whispered to Tagtug. 'An hour of prolegomena before getting down to business.' The Mabbit just blinked uncomprehendingly then proceeded to amuse himself with a small brass compass that was hanging on a chain around his neck. The compass was a gift from Mulupo, a token of his appreciation for saving his life back in Sarra. This one had not been designed to point to the north; instead it revealed the direction of the Briar Patch and that made it the most treasured gift of all.

The Chamberlain began proceedings by waving a hand in the direction of Maeldune Canna who was making his way around the outside of the circle to join his wife on the part of the circular bench set aside for the representatives of Acoran. 'Ladies and gentlemen, to begin I would like to pay homage to my Minister for Justice, Maeldune Canna. His counsel in the weeks leading up to this august meeting has been invaluable and I would like to publicly recognise his countless contributions.'

A tepid round of applause followed. Bannick clapped the least enthusiastically of all. Pylos grinned when Bannick rolled his eyes. Bannick's dislike of the Minister for Justice was no state secret.

Pylos was not the only one to catch Bannick's frivolity. The Chamberlain had seen it and was not impressed. Tiberius Llyr was one of the few people in the entire chamber who did not hold the Consul for Arnaksak in high regard. He considered Bannick an insincere upstart whose brash exterior hid a dull and cynical mind. Bannick's unwillingness to pay due respect to the authority of office had been a thorn in the Chamberlain's side since the bold Arnakki first appeared in

the Cloud Chamber. And then there were the rumours he had heard – the ones about Bannick and his wife.

Whether he was right or wrong about Bannick, Chamberlain Llyr knew better than to publicly air his misgivings about the man. He did not rise to popularity by criticising those who had the favour of the masses.

‘On my left, we have Ambassador Arjuna from Arnaksak and his consul, Bannick Landen, who needs no introduction, I’m sure.’

Despite the austere tone of his voice, the Chamberlain did not completely disguise his annoyance with Bannick, but the hoots and cheers that had broken out around the chamber drowned out any antipathy he may have expressed. Ambassador Arjuna, a plain, grey-headed man quietly nodded to the gathering, but the audacious Bannick – never one to miss an opportunity – stood up and bowed, revelling in the attention. The eyes of every female in the chamber lingered on him and he knew it. There was nothing boorish about him, only a playfulness that most found endearing.

‘Good to be back, my lord.’ Bannick said once the applause died down. He knew that the correct address for the Chamberlain was *Your Grace*.

The Chamberlain’s blue eyes flashed momentarily. ‘Ladies and gentlemen of the Assembly, may I ask that you save your applause until all delegates have been introduced. Otherwise, we may be here until Arma, Aldra and Colla rise over our heads!’

A few polite laughs echoed around the room. Bannick, satisfied that he had taken full advantage of his moment in the sun, leant back on his bench and signalled for a koopoo to bring him a drink and a pokpok or two.

‘For Scoriath,’ the Chamberlain continued, ‘we are honoured by the presence of Ambassador Thomas Shinnick and Sir Edgar Worseley of Pelinore.’

All eyes in the chamber fell on the shining figure of the knight. He sat erect, his posture perfect, with his feet parallel to each other and at right angles to the bench. Edgar was wearing the ceremonial golden armour of the Pelinore Guard and it glowed. The sun shining through the glass dome above seemed to focus its light upon the pristine metal and it was hard to look at the knight for more than a few seconds. Edgar smiled courteously to the Chamberlain, whilst Shinnick, a taciturn red-headed man simply lifted his hand in acknowledgement of the introduction.

The Chamberlain returned Edgar’s smile. ‘Ambassador Shinnick, Sir Edgar, it is pleasing to see you both back in Cessair.’

Edgar nodded appreciatively then turned his attention to removing the crumbs of snowbread that had found their way from Shinnick's plate onto the folds of the knight's red robe.

'Next, our dearest colleague from the Isles of Cephalonia, Prime Minister Lambert, has sent us Bormanus Cole. The Prime Minister was somewhat wary of making the long trip from Cephalonia to Cessair and has sent us Mr Cole in his stead. Mr Cole hails from the city of Cibola and comes highly recommended.'

The Chamberlain gestured to a small, white-haired young man sitting in the shadow of the hulking, gleaming mass of armour next to him. In contrast to the heaviness of Edgar's metal suit, Bormanus was arrayed in delicate Corran silks, accentuated by white ruffles, ornate buckles and countless silver bangles. Everything about him was effeminate and a number of battle-worn consuls stared incredulously at the newest inductee to the Assembly of Nations. He sat nervously, looking warily into the sea of cold faces before him. His tiny fingers articulated his discomfort, making delicate little movements as he waited for the Chamberlain to move to the next delegate in the ring.

Unexpectedly, Remiel Grayson leaned forward and said, 'Cole? I have heard that name before.'

'It's a common name in Cephalonia, Father.' His voice was thin and wispy, as if all bass tones had been removed from it. 'Have you ever been to Cephalonia?'

'This is my first time abroad,' Remiel replied, his voice slightly muffled by the dark scarf across his face.

'Really?' said Cole raising an eyebrow, as if he were surprised by the comment.

'I live in a relatively cloistered environment,' Remiel said defensively, not enjoying Cole's sudden interest in him. He was unsettled by the questions.

Bormanus leaned forward and smiled. 'Then we're both newcomers here, Father...?'

'Gideon,' Remiel said quickly. 'My name is Father Gideon.'

'No! No! No!' cried the Chamberlain, smiling but obviously annoyed at the interruption. 'I am doing the introductions!' he said laughing lightly. 'You will get your turn Father Gideon.'

Both Bormanus and Remiel eased back down on their benches, but before the Chamberlain moved on, Remiel was sure he heard Bormanus say, 'Gideon? I have heard that name before.' It almost seemed that the epicene man was mimicking him, but he decided to dismiss it as hypersensitivity brought on by his anxious state.

‘Once more, Tuatha is represented by Ambassador Cierra Greenwood of Findias.’

He smiled solemnly to a woman sitting beside Bormanus. She was clad in yellow, the traditional mourning colour of Tuatha. Her face was hidden behind a veil and her head was bent forward. ‘We regret to announce that Ambassador Greenwood arrived here alone. Her ship was attacked en route to Tindalo. Her consul and son, Maddock Greenwood, died whilst protecting his mother. Ladies and gentlemen of the Assembly, Maddock Greenwood had been appointed to the rank of Consul only three weeks ago.’

The Chamberlain stared into her yellow veil. A look of earnestness was chiselled across his face. ‘Cierra, he died before his time and this assembly will do all it can to avenge his death.’

The veil shook slightly as she nodded her head appreciatively.

‘Also from Tuatha, we have the mariner Gerriod Blake, who, as some of you may know, escaped from the realm from whence these attacks upon us have been launched. He has much to share with us and I know he will be a great asset as we devise our plans to respond to the situation in which we now find ourselves.’

Gerriod lifted his eyes to accept the welcoming eyes of the Assembly members, but instead found a number of cold stares and looks akin to suspicion. The weak smile he had proffered quickly vanished and his gaze fell back to the swirling clouds on the map as he tried to understand the mistrust he had seen in the faces of numerous individuals in the chamber. To a certain extent, he was angered by their response to his introduction but as he sat there and dwelt upon the matter, he could almost understand it. He was a humble mariner who had eluded the very creatures that had already slaughtered countless brave and honourable Myrrans. Could he really blame anyone for doubting his escape? He wrung his hands in his dirty woollen jumper and waited nervously for the Chamberlain to move to the next introduction.

‘For Tuirren we have the Lady Valeria Essar of Tir Thuinn and her consul, Will Stoops.’

Applause broke out again, despite the Chamberlain’s earlier request concerning such shows of approval. But it was impossible to legislate against such displays of affection and in Stoops’ case, the Chamberlain thought the acknowledgement was well-deserved.

Stoops joined in the applause whilst Lady Valeria demurely lowered her gaze. She resembled the gold-beaked nightswans that ambled over the crimson waters of Lake Cessair. Her long, willowy neck rose elegantly from an ornate, gold brocade dress. Stoops couldn’t help but

squash against her and she pulled a face every time his rough burlap cloak pushed against her delicate fair skin.

‘...and representing Nessa, the Archbishop of Garlot and his prelate Father Gideon. We are honoured to have their company.’

The Archbishop could hardly contain his excitement and was clearing his throat to speak when Llyr quickly interceded.

‘These two holy men are considered luminaries among the people of Nessa. It is my hope, and that of my counsellors, that the presence of two devoutly religious men will lend a certain moral weight to our collective response to these attacks against the Myr.’

‘From the beautiful city of Skyfall Town we have the Sapphyrran Ambassador Akampa Lodd and his newly-appointed consul, Trypp Elan. As some of you may know, Trypp Elan was one of the first to encounter one of the monsters –’

‘I don’t know how much more of these introductions I can bear,’ muttered Sela Noye as she stretched her short arms into the air. This gesture was followed by a yawn so long and loud that it stripped the Sapphyrro of any attention they had received.

‘I hope the next introduction doesn’t bore you, Sela’ the Chamberlain said tersely to the Tamuan, ‘because it is yours.’

‘It all depends on what you say, Chamberlain,’ she replied unabashedly.

Llyr wanted to bite back at this comment but he knew any retort would be lost on the eristic Tamuan consul. There were few people present that had not, at one point or another, been on the receiving end of one of Sela Noye’s barbed comments. Their sympathies lay with him whatever he did.

‘From the all-too-distant Tamu Plains, we are blessed to have Ambassador Kaniya Sawoye. And her consul Sela Noye. Thank-you for making the journey all the way from your faraway savannahs.’

From behind her mask, Sela scoffed. ‘Thank-you, Your Grace. Like any journey, it’s the last 10,000 steps that seem the longest. Surely –’

‘I do apologise for cutting you off, Consul,’ the Chamberlain said quickly, ‘but as you so rightly pointed out, these introductions are eating away at the time we have available. If you would not mind holding your comment for now.’

It was fortunate that Sela wore a mask. Everyone was spared seeing her livid face. Before she could embark upon the most brutal riposte she could think of, the Chamberlain was gesturing in the general direction of the Ankarans to Sela’s left.

‘From the great water city of Copacati, we are fortunate to have the Ankaran Ambassador Pochica Ku and Consul Rama Ta join us.’

Pochica gave a small smile in acknowledgement of the introduction, but Rama swept his head around so that all could see his happy face. His long, thick dreadlocks swung about as he nodded to the Assembly.

‘What’s he smiling at us for? He can’t even see us!’

The comment came from the southern edge of the map where two Tethrans sat laughing in a most disrespectful fashion. They were an intimidating-looking pair. Both were over six foot tall and had the characteristic weathered skin of all inhabitants of the dry land to the south-east of Cessair. Their faces were equally rough, battered by hard living in a harsh landscape.

As was their way, the Tethrans’ bodies were covered in scraps of metal. When a Tethran was old enough to be considered an adult, he or she would subject themselves to a horrific process euphemistically called *getting dressed*. This entailed having sheets of iron and plates of steel cauterized into the skin.

The elder of the pair, Ambassador Barbarossa Judd, had a lean, muscular physique and a moderate amount of plating. In contrast, Gunther Ross, his consul, was a large-framed man carrying more weight than any other consul, with the obvious exception of Will Stoops. A healthy appetite had caused Gunther’s metal plates to move away from one another over the years and expanses of hairless skin could be seen between them. The plates had lost all their lustre and around the edges brown patches of rust had built up.

Gunther exhibited all the characteristics of a man addicted to having metal work done. Even his forehead had been covered and one half of his skull. The hemisphere of his head that was covered in metal had a large dent in it, the result of a tavern brawl with a group of Sessymirians. He wore the dent with pride. Gunther even had his knuckles armoured and the metal there was adorned with sharp angular studs. He had been known to break a man’s jaw within one punch of a fight starting.

The most disturbing aspect of Gunther’s appearance was not the armoured plating, but rather the massive iron ball connected to a great chain that had been worked into the flesh of his right forearm. The chain was curled around his armoured right hand which seemed to be ready to swing the brutal weapon at a moment’s notice.

From across the Cloud Chamber, Sir Edgar Worseley looked upon the pair with disdain. It was not their oafish behaviour he found so objectionable – it was their lack of cleanliness. He wanted to go over to Gunther in particular, and wipe the grime from his plating. Edgar found it difficult to even look in their direction without feeling dirty.

‘I mean, what’s the point of having the damn Ankarans here?’

Known to have less tact than brains, Gunther was ignorant of the contemptuous looks his comment had attracted. He slapped his compatriot on an armoured knee and continued with his unrestrained commentary on the presence of Pochica Ku and Rama Ta. 'How are a couple of blind men going to help us stop the Ghul?'

Bannick Landen, having finished his pokpok, made a move to throw the core of the fruit at the Tethran. As his elbow pulled back, it hit one of the koopoo attendants right in the eye. The poor koopoo gave a little yelp and the glass of wine it had been carrying was flung high into the air. All eyes were on the glass as it sailed over Arnaksak and the Oshalla Ocean. It was about to land in the orchards of Nessa (from whence the wine had come) when a hand caught it and most of the precious liquid. In fact, only a few red drops had landed on Garlot.

The hand belonged to Rama Ta who had leapt from his seat as soon as he heard the koopoo's intake of breath as it let go of the glass. He had listened as it arced over the northern reaches of the Myr and he was ready to catch it before it hit the green fields of Garlot. He held the glass up like a trophy then strode across the map and presented it to Gunther Ross.

'I think I'll shut up for a bit now,' Gunther muttered as he took the glass.

His partner nodded. 'That's probably for the best, Gunther.'

'And from the Helyan city of Sulis, Ambassador Pedaeus Rhodes and General Pylos Castalia...'

Applause again. Llyr had expected the response. Pedaeus and Pylos were almost as well-loved as Bannick Landen and Will Stoops

'...Hafaza Habid and Sefar Hadith, paladins of Khepera.'

They both stood and bowed.

On the other side of the room, Trypp Elan was in awe. He had never seen a Kheperan before. The Kheperans were not great lovers of water and saw no attraction in crossing Lake Erras to visit Skyfall Town, so the sight of the tall, horned men in long flowing robes was something of an event in the Sapphyrran's eyes. It didn't cross Trypp's mind that to the Kheperans, he was just as unusual a sight.

As the Kheperans sat down, Trypp noticed Sefar Hadith's robes fall open slightly. It was difficult to be sure in the mist of the map that swirled around the Kheperan's legs, but Trypp thought he saw something very strange – where he expected to see the boot of the man, he had caught a glimpse of what seemed to be a talon much like the kestra that flew above Skyfall Town.

'My friends, Ambassador Lokota Fall and his son Tawhawki of Caquix.'

The Caquikki were not seated on the bench. They had stretched out on the floor at the edge of the circular map. The tall waves of the Tamtu Ocean broke harmlessly on their massive six-legged bodies. Lokota Fall nodded deferentially to the Chamberlain, a picture of civility. He wore a blue silk waistcoat, matching silk shirt and an ornate ceremonial headdress made from the feathers of a Tamtu vaingull.

‘Your Grace, we are pleased to be in attendance and it is our hope that we expedite a solution to these matters as swiftly as time allows.’ His speech was eloquent, his diction perfect. Fortunately, his hearing wasn’t what it once was, otherwise he would have heard Gunther Ross mimicking his polite response to the Chamberlain’s introduction.

‘Representing the twin island states of Kompira and Susano is Emperor Yoshiro Kimura accompanied by Princess Sumi Kimura, Consul for Susano, and Taro Kumari, the newly-appointed Consul for Kompira... in the absence of Trojanu Sato.’

The Emperor’s colourful silk robes filled with swirling designs and shimmering hues contrasted starkly with the black garb of his daughter who sat in perfect stillness beside him. She did not blink, did not react to the introduction but her eyes sparkled with absolute attention to the proceedings.

The Chamberlain addressed Sumi directly. ‘Consul Kimura, I feel for your loss. Trojanu was a truly great man. A hero of the ages. We held him in the highest esteem. He will be terribly missed from our assemblies.’

His voice was tender and it shook slightly. There was no doubting it, Chamberlain Llyr was speaking from the heart.

‘Thank-you, Your Grace,’ she replied, a flicker of emotion springing up in her deep brown eyes. She said nothing but dropped her head recognising the kindness of his words.

‘...For Tethra, we welcome Ambassador Barbarossa Judd from the Ganesa Plateau. We have already heard some words of wisdom from his consul Captain Gunther Ross and as always we endeavour to find merit in his contributions to our proceedings.’

Gunther scratched the fleshy part of his forehead, trying to decide whether the Chamberlain had just insulted him or not. Finding the task too difficult, he drained his glass and looked about for a koopoo to fill it again.

‘Ambassador Judd, is it true what I hear?’ asked the Chamberlain as he took a glass of wine from a passing koopoo. ‘This is your last appearance in the Cloud Chamber as Tethran Ambassador.’

‘Yes Your Grace, it is,’ Barbarossa replied, the sound of his voice as rough as his appearance, but his words reflecting years of friendship with

the Chamberlain. 'I have been offered the wardenship of the Hulks, and as much as I enjoy climbing the stairs to the Cloud Chamber, the financial incentive to take on this new position is too good to ignore.'

'You will be a fine warden, Barbarossa. We are lucky to have you continue to serve the Myr in such an important capacity.' He meant it. The Chamberlain knew that the management of the massive floating penitentiary moored outside Brigantia was no easy job but the welfare of the Myr depended on it. Should the thousands of criminals imprisoned in the Hulks ever escape... it was a thought too frightening to dwell on.

'I will do my best,' Barbarossa said with a degree of humility rarely seen in a Tethran.

'From the city of Elidor, representing Acoran, are Her Majesty Ana Carrucan and her consul and niece Jehenna Canna.'

The family resemblance between the two was unmistakable. Their proud features were almost identical, apart from Jehenna's skin which was dramatically fairer than that of her aunt's. When her mother Claudia – Ana's younger sister – had married the fair-skinned seaman Jonas Kallady, everyone they knew joked about the poor children who stood to inherit his swarthy appearance. As it was, all Jehenna inherited was Jonas' pigmentation. She had her mother's alluring eyes, straight teeth and high cheekbones. Unfortunately for Jehenna's brother Simeon, *swarthy* was an appropriate word to use when describing him.

'You have all met my Minister for Justice,' the Chamberlain said as he nodded to Maeldune Canna, 'so now we move to two very special guests. Although the nations of Camulos and the Briar Patch have never sought representation in the Assembly of Nations, we have made places for the Spriggan Mulupo and the Mabbit, Tagtug. What they have seen concerns us all and the information we have garnered from them has helped us greatly in our search for an answer to the darkness that has fallen upon our golden lands.'

As the Chamberlain spoke, all eyes drifted to the two small figures sitting beside the lofty Acora. Unfortunately, the Spriggan had consumed at least six glasses of Nessian wine since the Chamberlain had started his introductions and was oblivious to the fact he was being introduced.

Similarly Tagtug had no real sense of what was going on. He had no interest in the introductions and so found his eyes and mind wandering across the map before him.

The sudden silence tapped away at Tagtug until he could not ignore it any longer. He lifted his head to find everyone in the Cloud Chamber staring at him. He blinked nervously in response to their gazes – he was out of his depth and yearned for the solace of the Briar Patch. He tugged at Mulupo's waistcoat to get his attention. The Spriggan looked at

Tagtug who nodded to the ring of delegates quietly waiting for the pair's acknowledgement of the Chamberlain's introduction. Mulupo, realising that it was his time to be introduced, shot up to bow which sent his plate of seafood spiralling over Tagtug's head and onto the lap of Maeldune Canna who gazed dumbfounded at the piscatorial mess on his expensive robes.

'Oh, I don't believe this!' Maeldune groaned as he cast a penetrating look at the intoxicated Spriggan who sank back onto the bench without another word.

Gunther clapped loudly, much amused by the incident. 'Ha!' he bellowed. 'The Ankaran didn't catch that one!'

Bannick was also laughing and Pylos had to stare at his fingernails to avoid joining him.

The Chamberlain was feeling like he was losing control. Things had gone a lot smoother when he had rehearsed his introductions with Porenutious the day before. He decided Gunther Ross, who was laughing loudest, would have to be reined in. 'Do you have anything constructive to offer, Captain Ross, or will your contributions be limited to jeering, heckling and inane laughter?'

The question had caught Gunther off-guard, and being too dim-witted to realise that the sarcasm was a rebuke requiring nothing more than an apology, answered somewhat disrespectfully: 'This is better than a circus! A fine lot of help a Spriggan and a Mabbit's going to be.'

Barbarossa Judd turned to Gunther, looked him straight in the eye and said, 'I thought you were going to shut up for a while.'

Gunther just shrugged and muttered, 'Well, how long's a while?'

'If we may continue?' asked the Chamberlain, risking a rhetorical tone again. This time Gunther gave no answers and just played with the Isle of Antaeus with his foot.

The Chamberlain reached into his richly embroidered red gown and extracted a scroll. He opened it and held it aloft so that all in the chamber could see it. 'I cannot claim I wholly understand the parchment I hold before you but it informs me of terrible things done in Kolpia. Many Kolpians have been killed. A creature known as Kleesto has been loosed upon the land. Ladies and gentlemen of the Assembly, may I introduce to you Kali of Kolpia, one of the few surviving members of his tribe, a peaceful, private people to whom violence was unknown until two months ago.'

All eyes went to the hulking Kolpian who sat looking out at them like a caged animal. He could see them communicating but his ability to hear words had long since faded.

Gunther Ross could not help himself. 'Oh, this just keeps getting better. The Kolpian is really going to help with the discussion.' He paused to see if anyone had taken his meaning, and upon receiving nothing more than angry stares added, 'Those Kolpians can't hear you know.'

'Yes, I kind of guessed that Gunther,' groaned Barbarossa, all too aware of the bad name his countryman continued to give all Tethrans. 'Maybe it was the complete absence of ears that gave it away.'

'Captain Ross,' said the Chamberlain sternly, 'It would be advantageous if you chose not to speak for the remainder of the session.'

Gunther threw his arms up in despair which lifted the heavy iron ball at his feet up into the air and back down again, missing the Queen of Acoran's foot by inches. 'Am I to be silenced for merely saying what everyone else was thinking? How much help do you think the Kolpian can give? And I wouldn't worry about offending him. He can't hear a word I say!'

'The Kolpian will provide more assistance than you could possibly give, you moronic metalhead!' said Bannick coolly from across the chamber.

'Oh, you just walk over hear and say that pretty boy,' Gunther said somewhat nervously.

'Perhaps you'd like to discuss it out on the landing...' Bannick inquired, again politely, impassively.

Gunther knew he was no match for Bannick and did not answer. His eyes darted back and forth as the delegates waited for him to accept or reject Bannick's offer. Instead, he picked a piece of fruit from the heaped plate on his lap and started eating. Crunching down hard on a sugar-apple was as great an act of defiance as he was prepared to make.

Chamberlain Llyr returned to the leather parchment in his hand. Kali watched the Chamberlain moving his mouth as he held up the scroll containing the Kolpian's account of what had happened in his homeland. He watched the faces of the delegates drop as the tale of what happened on Hurucan Hill was relayed to the Assembly. When the Chamberlain finished, Kali saw that no-one spoke, not even the big man with the metal skin. He knew they wanted to communicate with him, but lacked a medium.

The Chamberlain placed the scroll back in his lap and gazed passively around the room.

The scroll. Lilith said he would find a way. Kali stood slowly and walked over to the Chamberlain. He held out a large hand and Llyr quickly realised he wanted the leather parchment. Kali took the scroll and placed his palm in the middle of it. Moments later he held the scroll

up high for all to see, just as the Chamberlain had done. Upon it a single sentence formed:

If you have a question to ask of me, please do so.

It was Pylos Castalia who was first to respond. Kali watched as the man with a long scar running down the left side of his face rose from his seat and crossed the floor. The man bowed respectfully to the Chamberlain, then reached out for the scroll in Kali's hand. He placed his palm on the scroll and closed his eyes as his mind repeated the question it had formed when he first heard Kali's tragic tale.

He handed the scroll back to Kali.

Do you wish to fight alongside us?

It was a question Kali had considered many times on his long journey from Kolpia to Cessair. His desire to turn around and return to his son's side slowed him many times in his tracks, but Lilith's words kept coming back to him: *'There will come a day when desolation and decay will cover up all the lands of the Myr should this new threat go unchecked, and even the beautiful, cloistered plains of Kolpia will not be so far away as to escape this fate.'*

It was this comment that had propelled him onwards to Cessair and it was this comment that had opened his eyes to the world beyond Kolpia's steep borders. More than anything, Lilith's words made it clear to him that his responsibility to his son demanded that he should do what he could to avert the day when the Ghul returned to Hurucan Hill to finish what they had started.

Kali put his hand upon the scroll and gave his answer. He handed the scroll back to the scarred man who read the answer aloud. The ring of Myrrans then broke out into applause when the scarred man read his answer and though Kali couldn't hear the sounds of clapping, a smile appeared on his broad, thin mouth to show he understood the gesture.

'From Morae, the Pryderi have given us the emissaries Arinna Brine and Lara Brand. This is indeed an honour as we have been out of contact with our fair friends of the wood for far too long.'

'The fault is ours, Your Grace,' Arinna said after an uncomfortable pause. 'It is one we hope to rectify. It is time for us to rejoin the world outside.'

The Chamberlain smiled broadly and moved onto the two fair-headed individuals to the Moraens' left.

'And Sessymir is represented by Ambassador Alberich Falskog and Lokasenna Hagen.'

The Sessymirian Ambassador, clearly annoyed at having to wait so long to be introduced, gave the other delegates a dismissive wave. He was a self-absorbed, dim-witted man, elevated to his position by familial ties. He was the type of person who spent most of his time wishing he were somewhere else. Despite the fact he was, at heart, a rather unexciting individual, his eyes would often flick around a room during conversations looking for more interesting exchanges. He did not have the ability to compromise on political matters which explained why Sessymir had so many ongoing disputes with other countries.

Despite the unity the Assembly of Nations encouraged, the Sessymirians were expansionist and in the past century had tried to graft land from Arnaksak, Morae, Tamu and Tuatha. Ambassador Falskog had been unapologetic for the countless Sessymirian forays into other countries. Anywhere a profit was to be made the Sessymirians would go, usually at the expense of other nations. Once the profit was had the Sessymirians would inevitably depart without a second thought for the trail of destruction left behind. If the role of the Ambassador was to accurately reflect the will of people they represented, then Ambassador Alberich Falskog was a perfect choice for the position.

Much more surprising was the Sessymirians' recent choice of consul. The previous consul had been killed during the battle with the Ghul at the bottom of Strom Mir. Rather than choose a highly-regarded officer from the armed forces, the Sessymirians had appointed Lokasenna Hagen. Her commitment to Strom Mir's development had much impressed the merchants who bankrolled the Sessymirian government and it was these merchants' belief that Lokasenna would be able to serve their interests effectively in the world of politics. It was also rumoured that the Myr's Minister for Justice had advocated Lokasenna's appointment; after her posting had been ratified a number of crucial legal decisions regarding certain trade practices fell in favour of the Sessymirians.

As Lokasenna was being introduced, a koopoo walked by with a bloody staggorn steak that Sela Noye had sent back to the kitchens for not being cooked enough. Lokasenna speared the slice of rare meat with the spike she bore in lieu of a left hand. She gnashed at the steak, ignoring the gaze of the other Myrrans as the Chamberlain commented upon how she had fought so tenaciously against the Ghul invaders in Room 391. The juice of bloody meat ran down the spike and stained the white sleeve of her Keelii fur coat.

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 that had caught his gaze.

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.

'My friends, we have a problem. All of us. I have asked Jehenna Canna to speak first as I believe what she will tell us will highlight the magnitude of this crisis that has recently come to light.'

As the Chamberlain took his seat with a most austere expression on his face, Jehenna rose from her position in the ring and stepped forward, confident and purposeful. She looked her audience directly, holding their gaze as she spoke. She did not seem intimidated by the number of men who leaned forward to look upon her. They would have argued that they were listening intently but each one of them let his eyes wander down her body at one point or another. In Gunther's case, it took all his will just to look at her face occasionally.

'Thank-you, Your Grace,' she said her voice as clear as a summer morning. 'It seems that almost all of us have been subjected to some form of incursion over recent times. As many of you know, the bone-clad creatures are called the Ghul. A few months ago, I led a party over the Acoran Ranges to Sarras. For almost a year we had no contact from Camulos.'

'So?' Gunther asked, momentarily breaking from ogling Jehenna to interrupt her. 'Those damn Kobolds always keep to themselves.'

'You really have a problem with whole brain-mouth relationship don't you, Gunther?' Bannick called across the chamber.

Gunther sneered back but said nothing.

Jehenna continued. 'We had been awaiting the delivery of shatterstone swords and arrowheads. As is the Kobold way for large orders, payment had been made up front and –'

'Ha!' blurted Gunther, ignoring his place again. 'How like the Acora. Travelling all the way to Sarras to make sure they got what they paid for!'

'Gunther!' shouted the Chamberlain. 'One more interruption and you will be asked to remove yourself from the chamber.'

Gunther put out his hands in a gesture suggesting he was innocent of any wrong-doing. He opened his mouth to protest, but was stopped by Barbarossa who placed a firm hand on his compatriot's forearm and squeezed. Gunther took the hint and sulkily sat back on his bench and stared at the tiny ocean around his feet. When he felt that all eyes were off him, he returned to staring lasciviously at Jehenna.

'None of us were prepared for what we found in Sarras,' she said plainly. 'The level of devastation was astounding. Entire buildings were razed to the ground and the beautiful hollow of Mine One was a pit of destruction. The bones of Kobolds and Spriggans littered the landscape. We scoured Sarras looking for any survivors. There were none save the Spriggan, Mulupo, and the Mabbit, Tagtug.'

'The Kobolds and Spriggans – they're all dead?' inquired Remiel Grayson. The veil over his mouth was not enough to muffle his quavering voice. His heart pounded so fiercely it felt as though it would break his chest.

'No, Father Gideon,' Jehenna answered respectfully, 'we don't think so. We think the majority of Kobolds are still alive. Although there were hundreds of Kobold bodies, thousands remain unaccounted for. There are so many missing, we believe they have been relocated.' In contrast to the rising emotion in the room, Jehenna spoke perfunctorily. It was not that she did not care about the horrors she had witnessed, but like many of her race, she preferred formality and protocol to the chaotic swirls of emotional expression. She had clung to the Acoran traditions of stoicism as she had waded through the slaughter in Sarras. It was the only thing that had stopped her from succumbing to despair.

'And the Spriggans?' asked Remiel.

'Apart from those who were abroad at the time of the attack, and Mulupo here, the Spriggans are all dead.'

Underneath his cowl and scarf, Remiel's face lost its colour. 'But why would anyone want to wipe out the Spriggans of all races?'

'We were in his way,' said a slurred voice to Jehenna's left. It was Mulupo's.

'Whose way?' asked Will Stoops, trying hard to stay on top of the information that was being delivered.

'Caliban's.'

It was a name a number of them had heard before.

Pylos and Pedaeus had heard it at the front gates of Sulis: *'This is what becomes of all who defy Caliban!'*

Lara had heard it in the clearing in the middle of the grove where she lived: *'Fail to comply and under our blades your wriggly offspring will go. This is the word of Caliban.'*

Edgar first heard the name on the landing at Simeon's Reef: *'Drabella said that Caliban wants us to redress the past.'*

Gerriod's father had told him about Caliban in terrible detail: *'Caliban is many things, but above all, he is my host.'*

‘Allow me to elucidate and I will unfold to you the tragic tale of what happened that fateful day in Mine One,’ Mulupo said sombrely, the formality of his expression offset by a number of hiccoughs caused by consuming too much wine too quickly.

Sumi leaned forward. It had been three months since that fateful day on the *Orani* when she had lost her husband and so many others she cared about. She had not seen a Spriggan since she had watched the Ryugin’s teeth slice down upon dear Kappo, and the sight of his brother Mulupo sent a sharp pain through her heart.

‘There is an irony to the fact that in one of the Myr’s most beauteous settings I witnessed the earth give birth to the least pulchritudinous individual I have had the misfortune to see. And as repugnant as this man and his followers were in an ophthalmic sense, their physical attributes were but a precursor to something much uglier. The minacious arrival of Caliban and his hordes –’

‘Whoa there, little fella!’ interjected Gunther once more. ‘I’m trying to understand what you’re saying, but if I concentrate any harder, my head will burst.’

‘Captain Ross,’ Mulupo said between hiccoughs, ‘if first impressions are anything to go by, I would postulate that in the unlikely event of the disintegration your encephalon, the scope of your cognitive process would change little.’

Gunther eyed the Spriggan suspiciously. He wasn’t sure, but something deep in his brain told him that Mulupo had just ridiculed him. The smile on the face of the Chamberlain reinforced this suspicion.

‘For the benefit of the stupes and dullards among us, I will speak in less abstruse terms,’ Mulupo continued, caring little whether any offence was drawn from his comment. ‘A year ago, the Kobolds of Sarras dug their way through the floor of their great mine and opened a breach to a subjacent realm from which erupted the chthonian creatures we have come to know as the Ghul. Although they look bestial, these subterranean reprobates are disciplined and well-organised. Caliban has trained them well.’

‘Master Spriggan, did you see him, this man of whom you speak?’ asked Sir Edgar politely.

‘Yes. He is Myrran, though his cinereous cutaneous condition would make him something of a pariah among us.’

‘You’re doing it again!’ groaned Gunther.

‘Caliban is a leper.’

Remiel Grayson sat forward and asked, 'Mulupo, could you tell us what happened that night in Mine One?'

'That is my intention, Father,' he answered whilst taking a glass of wine from a passing koopoo. He drank the contents of the glass and wiped his hand on his sleeve. 'Caliban's will was absolute. We were attacked without mercy. They were like a plague. I escaped in my skyshop but was incapacitated in the process. I imagine Sarras was overrun within hours. It probably took them a few days to infest the entire country. Caliban's orders to his minions were very specific. He wanted the Kobolds to be taken alive.'

'Why?' Gunther asked.

Maeldune waved the question away to put forward his own. 'What happened to the breach?'

Mulupo turned to the Maeldune and said, 'A year after Caliban's arrival, when your good wife came to rescue me, I returned to the site of the breach to pay my respects to a dear friend and associate who...'

For the first time in his life, Mulupo could not find the next word to say. The alcohol had stirred up in him emotions that made him feel unwell.

Jehenna, realising the Spriggan's difficulty to continue, interceded. 'The breach was completely filled in. It looked as if it had been closed many months before we arrived.'

Pylos shook his head trying to make sense of all he was hearing. 'I don't understand – why would they collapse the mine?'

'Perhaps there was no need to keep it open,' suggested the Chamberlain. 'It sounds as if Caliban got what he wanted from Camulos.'

'And what is that, Your Grace?' asked Pedaeus.

'The Kobolds,' replied the Chamberlain. 'It makes sense, doesn't it? Who better to open up other breaches than a race of miners?'

Remiel Grayson nodded. The Chamberlain was right. The unfortunate excavation of Mine One had presented his brother with a great opportunity and Caliban never squandered opportunities. But how had he compelled so many Kobolds to do his bidding? Remiel contemplated this as he watched a shatterbug flutter around the room before it eventually landed on his robe. The tiny creature's specular body shone in the warm light streaming in through the glass ceiling above. Remiel let the pretty bug step onto his hand and perch itself upon his fingers. The shatterbug seemed to enjoy sitting there and Remiel kept his hand very still to avoid scaring it.

The Cloud Chamber had gone uncharacteristically quiet as each delegate considered Mulupo's story. The Chamberlain stood, as if to make an important announcement. All eyes fell upon him as he clutched his hands behind his back and cleared his throat to speak.

'Mulupo, this egregious act will not go unpunished, but sadly there is no punishment that befits this attempted genocide. We will do everything within our power to hunt down the perpetrators of this indescribable offence against your people. It is our hope that the Spriggans may rise from the ashes. I have heard reports that there are groups of Spriggan traders abroad who escaped Caliban's heinous purge of Camulos.'

'That is my hope too Chamberlain,' replied Mulupo, lifting his head to respond to the Chamberlain's kind words. 'My cousin Camello once had a rather lucrative hold of the Helyan market. I do not believe he was in Camulos at the time of Caliban's incursion.'

Pylos nodded, happy he could support Mulupo's hope. 'A Spriggan caravan visited Sulis not two months ago.'

Mulupo's face beamed. 'That sounds like my cousin! He won't abide tropospheric transportation so he rambles about in a train of grizzum-led wagons.'

Pedaeus seized the moment to present the Helyan's official response to the Ghul attacks. 'Whether other Spriggans have survived or not should not alter how we attend to this matter. The attempted genocide of the Spriggans must be repaid in kind. It is the opinion of the Helyan Senate that we should not rest until every single Ghul is caught and killed.'

Next to Trypp, Ambassador Akampa Lodd stirred in his seat. 'Your philosophy is elegant in its simplicity Ambassador Rhodes, but it is not an ideal to which we all aspire.'

'I recognise that, Ambassador Lodd, but these are difficult times and I am not sure we can cling to such lofty moral precepts when the enemy is at the door.' Pedaeus spoke softly. He had a great deal of respect for the Saphyrran, even though in matters of warfare, they were diametrically opposed.

'It is in trying times that we must cling to our ethics more than ever. They are a lifeline in the chaos that would set us adrift,' Lodd rejoined. 'Whether it is in war or peace, life is sacred.'

'But the sanctity of whose life are we talking about here, Ambassador?' Pedaeus contended calmly. 'Surely you are not suggesting that the lives of the vermin Caliban has released upon our world are worth preserving? Caliban's forces are willing to shed the blood of your people without hesitation. Do they deserve to be the beneficiaries of your life-affirming ideal, when they so flagrantly flout it?'

Akampa's sad brown eyes reflected his awareness that the gulf between them would never be bridged. He had expected Pedaeus' call to arms in response to the Ghul attacks and he also knew that ultimately, the Helyan's stance would be the one the Assembly endorsed. Curiously, he did not begrudge the other delegates their inevitable support of a military solution. The Sapphyrro did not have any answers. Akampa could not offer anything that would stop the Ghul from continuing their attacks. All he could do was uphold the principles that had defined the Sapphyrro for thousands of years, and hope a day would not come when they had no choice but to compromise those values.

'Pedaeus,' Akampa said, his voice tinged with sadness 'I don't think there will ever come a day when our way of thinking will be respected by a Helyan.'

'On the contrary, Ambassador, we Helyans do respect your viewpoint absolutely. But life is no less sacred to us. Indeed—'

The Chamberlain raised his hand to stop the current exchange from developing further. 'Ambassadors, forgive me my interruption, but we have much to cover and little time for the interesting debate you have begun. However, I do agree with Ambassador Rhodes on one point — there must be an unequivocal response to the carnage witnessed in Camulos.'

Akampa nodded to himself and smiled as he heard the sounds of support for the *unequivocal response* echo around the chamber.

The Chamberlain noted the Sapphyrro's reaction and tried to accommodate it. 'No-one here wants to mete out revenge but we must do what we can to bring an end to the slaughter that is taking place across the Myr. I fear that the longer we delay our response, the more dangerous our enemy will become as he places more races under his thrall or damns them to oblivion.'

'What I don't understand,' Pedaeus said looking around the chamber as if willing to receive an answer from anyone who had one, 'is how Caliban could enslave so many Kobolds to his will. They are a noble people. I cannot believe they would agree to assisting this tyrant, even on pain of death.'

Gerriod Blake slid forward on his seat, and indicated his desire to speak. 'That I think I can answer,' said the mariner.

'Yes Master Blake,' said the Chamberlain, 'I believe the time has come for you to speak for your tale explains much.'

Although Gerriod was unaccustomed to public speaking, he held the delegates' attention like a seasoned orator. Although he could not

remember the day upon the lake that set in motion the terrible events that led to Caliban's ascension among the Ghul, his father had told him much and he had committed every detail of their discussion to memory.

He told them how his father had ended up in the Endless with Caliban. He spoke of Remiel Grayson and how he had abandoned his own brother, along with Gerriod's father, to the vortex at the heart of Lake Erras. He also described the vicious serpent with countless fangs that kept Gamelyn fixed to a crucifix in his subterranean grotto.

Not a person spoke as Gerriod recounted Caliban's rise to power in the Endless. As he spoke, the delegates gradually realised what sort of man they faced in Caliban: cruel, methodical, obsessive and brilliant. The Kobolds had been employed to unearth the monsters that lay incarcerated in the deepest parts of the world and these monsters – the Cabal, Gamelyn had called them – were but one weapon in Caliban's arsenal. Gerriod explained the role the creature called Succellos had played in the subjugation of the Kobolds. He also mentioned things he didn't understand such as the countless buzzing eggs that lined the path encircling the lake under the Worldpool. By the time he had finished speaking, the entire Assembly was not only better informed – they were anxious. They knew that Caliban would exact his revenge upon his brother at any cost, even if it meant the death of every single Myrran who stood in his way.

At the end of the tale, an uncomfortable silence lay across the chamber. It was mid-afternoon and the sun had commenced its journey towards the shining white caps of the Acoran Ranges. In an hour or two the shadows of those mountains would lengthen and slowly cover the brilliant garnet lake at their base. Outside the dome of the tower a number of churchwrens ducked and swooped as they feasted on the shatterbugs fluttering about the top of the tower. Remiel Grayson looked down at the shatterbug sitting on his hand. It slowly swept its fragile wings back and forth, content to stay where it was. It looked so peaceful. Remiel could not say the same about his heart which was beating like the drums of war.

Finally, when the Chamberlain felt that everyone had enough time to digest the mariner's tale, he spoke. 'Gerriod, did you actually see anyone else in the Endless, apart from your father?'

'I saw Caliban. He had captives. Not long after I had pulled myself out of the lake beneath the Worldpool, I saw two men the Ghul had captured. One of them was made to kneel before Succellos and –'

'You stupid animal!' Maeldune suddenly bellowed. He glared down at the red wine that was dripping from his expensive robes. At his feet, Tagtug cowered, lifting his thin arms in a shaky defence against the

Acoran's wrath. 'Tiberius, this Assembly is degenerating into a farce!' Maeldune snarled, lifting his gaze to meet the Chamberlain's. 'Look at what we have become! A meeting place for drunken Spriggans and clumsy animals.'

'Watch your tongue Maeldune,' Pylos said shifting forward on the bench. 'From what I have heard, the Mabbit saved the Spriggan's life. He is deserving of your respect.'

'Respect! What about respect for the proud traditions we have maintained here for centuries? Are we now to throw those all away and let this great Assembly be a forum for fisherman and merchants?'

The Chamberlain raised a hand to bring about an end to Maeldune's uncharacteristic behaviour. The Acoran had a reputation for having a cool, if not dispassionate temperament. He was a subtle man and was known to work situations to his advantage with guile and tact. His blunt attack upon the Mabbit, and his ensuing rant, took everyone by surprise. Gunther Ross had to bite his lip to stop himself from laughing at the Acoran's tantrum.

'Minister Maeldune,' the Chamberlain said sternly, 'all in attendance are here because I deem it necessary. Is that understood?'

Maeldune bowed his chagrined face before the Chamberlain. 'I am sorry, Your Grace. I am merely saying that we must be cautious. Today, we have opened our doors to strangers. We must be careful in whom we place our trust. If this creature Succellos is what the mariner says, we must be cautious. Caliban may have subjugated his father to his will. Perhaps the mariner himself is -'

'Very well Maeldune. You have made your point and almost offended everyone here in the process. Sit down, so that we may move the proceedings along.' The Chamberlain turned back to Gerriod with an apologetic look upon his face. 'Gerriod, I have a question that I am sure is on the minds of others here. In your tale, you mentioned Caliban was looking for the Ghaddar. Did your father say what the Ghaddar actually was?'

'He did not know, Your Grace.'

'The Caquikki knows what the Ghaddar are!' Sela exclaimed as she remembered what Lokota Fall had told them aboard *The Broken Promise* the day they left Terminus.

All eyes swivelled to the two large Caquikki lying on the floor with the tiny blue waves of the map quietly crashing upon them. The Chamberlain's piercing blue eyes joined the throng staring at the pair. 'Lokota?' he said, inviting the Ambassador of Caquix to speak.

Lokota raised a large hand to his face and lifted his spectacles from the bridge of his aquiline nose. His other hand reached into his waistcoat

pocket and extracted a small white handkerchief which he used to wipe the spectacles' round glass lenses.

'What I am about to say,' he said repeating the words he uttered that day back on *The Broken Promise*, 'is not fact. My reluctance to speak on it reflects the tenuous nature of the information.'

Sela, recognising the opening statements, groaned loudly and added, 'We know all that Ambassador. Perhaps we could skip the preamble and get to the action.'

Tawhawki fired the Tamuan a resentful look but said nothing, knowing that the Cloud Chamber was not the place to voice his dislike of the Tamuan Consul.

'Many millennia ago,' Lokota began, 'long before the discovery of Cold, or the founding of Cessair, many cultures reported the appearance of a new star that had appeared in the skies. It grew and grew until it could be seen by day. The Myrrans of that time worshipped this celestial object and even today there remains evidence of this event across our world. The reliefs in Johannan, the faded murals in the temples of Copacati, even engravings in great bones found in Arnaksak, they all tell the same story. The star fell to earth, exploding as it entered the skies. The largest segment punched into the Lake Erras. We believe that this falling aerolith created the phenomenon we know as the Worldpool... although I believe that the locals know the vortex by a more pertinent name – Caliban's End.

'As a professor of history, this event has been something that has fascinated me for decades. I have gathered scrolls and carvings that have enabled me to piece together clues about the significance of the aerolith.'

'Significance, Ambassador? What mean you? How does this rock from the sky relate to the matters we are exploring here? We were speaking about the Ghaddar.'

'Your Grace, please indulge me,' Lokota replied.

'I had more success following the Spriggan,' grumbled Gunther whose brain was so overwhelmed with information, he believed he had a migraine.

'I postulate that the falling rock was not a rock at all, but an egg of sorts,' Lokota continued, 'and from this egg hatched the Ghul, Cabal and hundreds of other things we haven't encountered yet.'

'Such as the Ghaddar,' the Chamberlain said triumphantly, happy that he had made the connection.

'No, not quite, Your Grace,' Lokota corrected him. 'We *have* encountered the Ghaddar before. Thousands of years ago, when the Morgai helped the peoples of the Myr imprison these monsters back in the deepest parts of the world, they were assisted by a race of

subterranean beings known as the Ghaddar. There are ancient writings that document this. Perhaps Caliban seeks the Ghaddar because he knows they will oppose the Ghul, a race they resemble in everything but their allegiance.'

'It is a pity that we cannot call upon the Morgai for help once more,' the Chamberlain mused. 'They could do much to help us in this fight.'

'My father mentioned the Morgai,' said Gerriod. 'He said they placed the mystical seals upon the breaches.'

'Yes and now it seems their magick has faded,' replied the Chamberlain. 'Caliban knows this and his soldiers rise up through these holes like rattu.'

'But why?' Sela exclaimed.

'Justice. Revenge. Retribution. Call it what you will,' Gerriod said sombrely.

'Revenge?' Sela cried. 'We haven't done anything to him! Why does he hate us so?'

Maeldune Canna risked a look at Lokasenna Hagen.

She gave no indication of the storm of emotions that whirled about inside her. So many times during the Assembly she had wanted to run across the room and plant her spike in the face of anyone who had spoken ill of her father. But she had controlled herself. It was not yet time to make her move – that would come in the days to follow.

Sir Edgar Worseley raised his hand, like a schoolboy wanting to say something. His golden vambraces shone brilliantly in the sun. 'I have something to add to the mariner's story, something that may help grant some insight into Caliban's oppressed state of mind. Three months ago I was journeying through the swampland of Mag Mel in the land of Tuatha. In the village of Marshmead I met an apothecary who played a part in the tragic events that have led us here.'

'An apothecary?' said Maeldune, his thin, angular eyebrows raised in surprise.

'His name was Garnett Shaw. He claims responsibility for making Caliban the monster he is today.'

Remiel Grayson lifted his eyes from the shatterbug and stared intently at the knight.

'Go on, Sir Edgar,' said the Chamberlain.

'Shaw informed me that Caliban's condition is not leprosy. He told me that it is a result of a potion he was commissioned to create.'

'But who would commission such a poison?'

'His twin brother. Remiel Grayson.'

A collective gasp resounded through the chamber.

Edgar continued. 'There's more to it. Shaw added something to the potion that would stop Caliban from ever trying to escape the leper colony he was to be sent to. Caliban cannot walk in daylight. It seems he has more in common with the Ghul than many of you knew. His skin burns in the sun.'

'That explains why he has not left the underground realm he now calls home,' Pylos reasoned. 'But what had he done to deserve such despicable treatment.'

'As far as I can tell, nothing,' answered the knight.

Behind the scarf wrapping his face, Remiel Grayson went to speak, but forced himself to stay silent. He had spent months considering his next move. He had put aside daily prayer and fixed his mind upon the dire situation at hand. Whilst the easiest thing to do was to declare himself, and have the Myrrans hand him over to Caliban, he knew his brother and knew that it would not stop the carnage for a single day. He was convinced that he could stop Caliban, but it would require keeping his identity to himself for a little while longer. It sickened him to sit there and pretend he was just a priest, but many things sickened him now. He could hardly look in a mirror without feeling nauseated.

'Well he has more than made up for it!' observed Ana Carrucan, the Queen of Acoran. 'I do not believe the wrongs that have been perpetrated against his person can justify the thousands of Acora who now lie dead at the hands of the Ghul.' Although she spoke with great intensity, her voice had a soothing, almost lyrical quality.

'We agree with Her Highness,' said Emperor Kimura, his voice a harsh croak when compared to the mellifluous voice of the Acoran Queen.

'But who is the real villain here?' boomed the Kheperan Ambassador, Hafaza Habid. He turned to the other delegates and invited their reactions. 'I agree that Caliban must atone for his crimes, but what of his twin? I must know what motivated him to do such a thing? I say this because if Caliban was innocent before he was poisoned... Well, who knows what evil any of us may be capable of if wronged in such a way.'

'I can answer that,' said the knight. As the sun outside moved down the sky, his golden armour became more and more radiant. He seemed to glow, and it gave his words a similar shine. As dark as his contributions were, they had the feeling of truth and that was comforting to most people in the chamber. 'Shaw told me why he had acquiesced to such a dreadful commission. Remiel Grayson had been haunted by dreams and visions and sought answers from a seer in Pelinore. Her name was Lilith Cortese and —'

‘She is Morgai,’ interrupted the Chamberlain. ‘Her name is known to me although I have not heard it spoken for many years.’

‘Apparently she foretold of a future that was so desolate and frightening that Remiel Grayson felt compelled to act.’

‘But poisoning his brother was a poor solution, wasn’t it?’ sneered Lokasenna. It was the first time she had spoken and her words were so embittered, they fell upon the chamber like sleet.

Bormanus Cole, the white-haired representative from Cephalonia agreed with her. ‘Yes indeed. All because of a few bad dreams,’ he said in his foppish way. ‘It’s indefensible. Surely, there was more to it than that.’

Sir Edgar nodded. ‘There was one other complicating factor. The twins’ father was Gideon Grayson. He was one of the Morgai.’

On either side of him Trypp heard numerous delegates breathe in deeply as they considered the significance of Edgar’s last statement. ‘I do not understand,’ Trypp said to his countryman. ‘Why is that important?’

Akampa’s keen mind put the puzzle pieces together for his young companion. ‘Upon the moment of a Morgai’s death, a child is chosen to inherit the great powers wielded by the parent. It would seem that Remiel Grayson feared what would come should his brother gain possession of powers that he could use for great evil.’

‘Or great good,’ noted Arinna Brine.

Edgar nodded. ‘I agree that what Remiel Grayson did was unconscionable, I really do, but I must add that Shaw informed me that he inflicted leprosy upon his brother because he could not bring himself to kill him. He considered it the lesser of two evils. It could be argued that he did what he did out of love.’

‘Well I hope no-one ever loves me that much!’ scoffed Gunther.

‘Relax Captain,’ jeered Bannick. ‘I can’t see anyone loving you that much... or at all for that matter.’

His comment earned him a few laughs around the chamber, but Gunther’s eyes burned with fury. ‘Oh, you’re quite the witling, aren’t you Bannick!’ he sneered across the room at the gloating Arnakki.

‘Enough!’ snapped the Chamberlain. ‘This is not the time for levity! In light of what he had seen, Remiel Grayson was faced with a choice,’ the Chamberlain said, trying to draw the many threads together. ‘Whether we agree with this choice or not is now inconsequential. We cannot change what has been done. The task before us is not to judge Remiel Grayson’s actions. Remember this was a deed that was committed over thirty years ago. We are here to decide what must be done now, to stop the barbarity that makes our lands bleed.’

‘Some bleed more than others, Your Grace,’ Lara said pointedly. Until now, she had been unwilling to speak in front of so many accomplished communicators, but as she had been listening, a feeling of dread had grown within her – the fate of the Pryderi children would be ignored if she stayed silent. ‘There are few Pryderi babies left in Morae.’

‘Babies?’ said Edgar, articulating the ignorance most of the delegates had regarding the situation in Morae. Lara could sense a kindness in the gleaming knight and his brief but genuine show of concern gave her enough confidence to continue.

‘For almost a year, the Pryderi have been held hostage by the Ghul. Our babies have been stolen from us. Those of us who have opposed the Ghul have either lost our lives or the lives of our children. We have been incarcerated within our own woods. Arinna and I risk the very lives of our babes by coming here.’

‘Your children?’ Edgar asked, obviously shaken by this news. ‘Where are they?’

‘Caliban has them,’ Arinna said unemotionally. Her face was a blank canvas. Lara had expected her to be a lot more vocal, but she had hardly moved throughout the proceedings. She seemed preoccupied. Lara made a note to herself to question her friend about this after the Assembly.

‘Why?’ Edgar persisted. ‘I can see why Caliban enslaved the Kobolds, but what reason could he have for the deplorable act of abducting babies.’

‘What reason did he have for killing all the Spriggans, or the people of Marshmead, or the –’

‘I beg your pardon, Your Grace?’ Edgar gasped. The Chamberlain’s statement was like a blow to the head. ‘With all due respect, the people of Marshmead live.’

‘I’m afraid I have dreadful news Sir Edgar. Three days ago we received word that the village of Marshmead stands no more. All its people have been slain. By the reports we have received it has been that way for a long time.’

‘How long?’ asked the knight, his voice devoid of the assuredness it usually conveyed.

‘Months.’

‘How can this be? When I left Marshmead...’ His voice trailed off to a whisper. Although his armour still glowed in the afternoon light, it seemed a shadow had fallen over Sir Edgar. His proud body sagged a little and he dropped his gaze to a point on the map where grey clouds had formed over Tuatha.

'Exactly how many breaches are we talking about Tiberius?' Will Stoops asked.

'It's a good question Will,' replied the Chamberlain. 'So far we have breaches in Morae, Nilfheim, Sessymir, Sulis, Acoran and Tuatha as well as a possible breach in the cliffs above Skyfall Town. There must also be a breach through which the sea-creature known as the Ryugin escaped; our learned Caquikki colleagues tell me that this hole in the ocean lies somewhere among the reefs off the coast of Helyas, in the Sea of Telamon. Bormanus has informed me of a breach hidden somewhere in the hills of Cephalonia and the Ankarans believe there to be a breach in the thick jungles to the north-east of the city of Copacati. Add to this the collapsed Sarras breach and the one the Tamuans brought down in the mountains to the west of their plains and the total comes to eleven. If you count Caliban's End we have twelve breaches, but most of these are either inaccessible to us or the exact location is not known.'

Lara Brand's scaly tail swished across the floor in an agitated fashion, sending the Morgai citadel atop the Isle of Grisandole into the grey ocean at the edge of the map. 'You're not looking hard enough! Morae is still under siege. We need support.'

With raised eyebrows, the Chamberlain turned to Lara. 'Miss Brand, in recent weeks we have commissioned a regiment of Pelinore's best soldiers to investigate matters in Morae. It is not easy. The Ghul just keep pouring into the land. We have lost over a hundred men in the Bregon Woods alone and not just to the Ghul. The number of marroks patrolling your borders has swelled over recent times. It seems every evil thing in the Myr is aware of the Ghul incursions and is ready to take full advantage of it.'

'Well, you must send more men!' Lara remonstrated.

Arinna put a hand on Lara's lap. They shared an exchange of glances and Lara knew that her adoptive sister wanted to speak.

'Lord Chamberlain,' Arinna began, 'perhaps you do not realise the peril of ignoring the signs of trouble in Morae. Since Lara escaped from the Ghul on the Isle of Grisandole, the number of Pryderi has fallen dramatically. I expect that by the time we return home, the witches of Morae will be all but gone.'

Arinna felt everyone in the chamber think the same thing at once. 'Killed?'

'They are not dead,' she continued. 'They have gone willingly into the Endless, at the behest of Caliban Grayson. Weakened by the loss of their children, many Pryderi have accepted Caliban's offer to reunite mother and daughter in exchange for their fealty.'

Arinna braced for the reaction. After a second of stunned silence had passed, a psychic barrage of criticisms and condemnation filled her head. The outcry that issued from the minds of the other delegates was brutal and uncompromising. Old prejudices were quickly revealed.

'Traitors!'

'Damned witches!'

'Pryderi filth!'

She said nothing in response to these harsh judgements. There was nothing to say. In the absence of other options, her people had chosen a side.

Outside her head, the chamber was silent as they waited for the Chamberlain's response. He was a lot more measured than most.

'Arinna Brine, Lara Brand,' he began formally, 'we cannot pretend to understand the pain the loss of your children has caused you and your people. And whilst we appreciate that those Pryderi who have joined with Caliban have done so out of desperation, they have by their decision made themselves enemies of the state. We cannot guarantee they will not be harmed should this conflict continue to escalate. To those who have remained in Morae, we say this – we will protect your people as best we can.'

Letting the comments settle on the minds of the delegates, the Chamberlain said nothing as he stood and slowly made his way to the centre of the room. He clasped his hands behind his back and scanned the faces of those present, like a charismatic schoolmaster about to deliver a speech. He stood in the waters of Lake Erras with the tiny swirling vortex of Caliban's End at his knees.

'Let us revisit what we know,' he said, his voice like the plangent pealing of a bell, signalling the significance of the moment. 'It is time to plot our course.'

All heads nodded.

'Fearing a lifetime imprisoned on the leper colony of Sanctuary, Caliban Grayson escaped into the realm known as the Endless via the vortex in the centre of Lake Erras and has remained there ever since. From his seat of power underground, he has coordinated attacks upon the Myr. His motivation is unclear but it seems it is bound up in his search for the brother who had damned him to this fate. I know some among you would suggest our first course of action should be to find this brother, but for all we know Remiel Grayson is dead. We do not have the time or resources to trawl the Myr to find him. It would seem that Caliban's attempts to draw him out of hiding have failed.'

'What sort of man could possibly sit back and allow for this situation to continue?' Pylos snarled.

Remiel sat stiffly as the Archbishop next to him ventured a response. 'Things are rarely so simple, General,' he said, his wide smile and beaming white teeth at odds with the solemnity of his comment. 'Perhaps Remiel knows that Caliban, a man willing to abduct babies and wipe out entire races, would not stop once his revenge is achieved. It would seem the Ghul enjoy the opportunities Caliban has given them. I cannot see them giving up this bloodletting when their master gains his prize.'

'I agree,' said the Chamberlain quickly, unwilling to let the rest of the chamber involve themselves in more rhetorical discussion. 'We could talk for hours. Let me express my thoughts in the most basic way possible. Caliban Grayson must die. I realise that some of you seek open war, but I do not believe this is an option we can pursue at this time. The Ghul attacks occur under darkness and we would be at a severe disadvantage should we commit our forces to night-time warfare. Should we send our forces into the Endless, we would lose the only advantage we seem to have over the Ghul and that is the protection of daylight. There are other problems associated with a direct assault upon the Endless: it would also be extremely difficult to lead an army through the subterranean labyrinth from which the mariner Gerriod Blake has returned. Also, it would mean killing the Kobolds. I have no doubt Caliban would place them in our way should we attempt a full scale attack.'

'What I am about to propose is audacious and those who are willing to accept my challenge will do so at great risk. But I also believe that you who are gathered here in this chamber are the Myr's greatest hope. You are the elite, those who dare to do where others wonder. You understand that in order to achieve the impossible, one must be willing to lose sight of the shore.'

'I am suggesting the formation of three companies – assassination squads, if you will – that will journey into the Endless to locate and kill the architect of the miseries we have endured this past year. The squads will take three different roads to avoid detection. If one fails, the other two may succeed. The companies will move in secrecy, avoiding Myrran contact where possible. If this creature Succellos does indeed have the power to subjugate others to her will, we cannot entreat the help of anyone outside this Assembly. We must mobilise quickly. I am proposing that the teams leave no later than tomorrow morning. If news of this plan found its way back to Caliban, all our efforts would be undone. We cannot allow failure – too much depends upon the success of this mission.'

'The first company will take the most dangerous route to our enemy. This squad is to travel to Brigantia, from there across the sea to Garlot

and from there over the mountains through Madron's Pass to Caliban's End.'

The delegates gasped. It was a bold stroke and in one as temperate as the Chamberlain it seemed like madness.

Gunther Ross could not contain himself. 'You're sending a team through the Worldpool!' he bellowed, his voice a mixture of incredulity and poorly-suppressed laughter. 'I pity the fools who sign up for that expedition!'

'Then pity yourself, Captain Ross, as you're one of them. The first squad, the team to be sent down the Worldpool will be led by the Minister for Justice, Maeldune Canna. He will represent me, and the peoples of Cessair.'

Pylos' long-standing dislike of Maeldune rose up and before he could stop himself, he gave voice to his thoughts. 'But he's not a soldier! He has no military experience!'

'And that, my dear Helyan, is why you will be accompanying him. Your prowess in the field will more than make up for Maeldune's rawness. Also accompanying the first team will be the Consul for Khepera, Sefar Hadith.'

All eyes swung onto the tall Kheperan who seemed to enjoy the gaze of all upon him. He smiled in acknowledgement revealing a glimmering gold tooth.

'The other places in the first team will be given to those possessing knowledge rather than strength. Mulupo the Spriggan will represent the peoples of Camulos. He will be placed under the care of Father Gideon who will represent Nessa.'

Gunther put his metal-plated head in his hands and muttered, 'A merchant and a priest! What hope do we have?'

It was a comment he intended to be heard. Whilst Gunther was relieved to have the armed might of Pylos and Sefar on his team, it seemed farcical that an Acoran politician, a Spriggan trader and a Nessian holy man had been placed in a military operation.

Surprisingly, it was not the Chamberlain who responded to Gunther's provocative comment – it was Remiel Grayson. 'I am more than able to defend myself... or do I have to ask you outside to prove myself?'

'Last of all,' the Chamberlain continued before Gunther could respond, 'representing the country of Tuatha will be Gerriod Blake. He has seen more than any of us and will provide invaluable insight regarding Caliban's whereabouts should the company be successful in its attempts to make its way into the Endless. As you know Gerriod's father

is Caliban's captive and it is my hope that this mission will also secure his release.'

Gunther bit down noisily on a sugar-apple. 'What, no women on the trip? It's a long way to Caliban's End. Perhaps the Acoran Consul could accompany us? Or maybe the Kompiran? Give us at least one nice piece of fruit to —'

The word *fruit* was still hanging in the air when it was split by three missiles. Jehenna Canna had raised a spring-mounted crossbow mounted on her forearm and dispatched a bolt taking the apple from Gunther's hand and spearing it to the wooden beam behind him. In the same instant Sumi Kimura let fly with a flying star which bounced off the metal plate covering the Tethran's forehead. The third missile came from Bannick, a half-eaten carpu egg, which hit Gunther square in the face.

The Tethran was so stunned by this reaction his mouth was still ajar and his hand open as if unaware it no longer held the apple.

Maeldune smiled slyly at his wife who was on her feet ready for any form of reprisal Gunther may offer. 'Dear me, Jehenna,' he said, 'what has happened to your aim? You missed his heart.'

She smiled boldly across at Gunther and then glanced back at Maeldune. 'My husband, a Tethran has no heart.'

Her eyes shone with defiance. She was indeed a magnificent woman to behold. Her pride was displayed like a coat of arms.

'Enough!'

Tiberius Llyr's blue eyes flared as if they were at the heart of a brightly burning flame. He glared across the chamber to where Gunther Ross was rubbing his forehead, feeling the dent Sumi's throwing star had made in the metal. 'Captain Ross, you will keep you unsavoury comments to yourself. May I also remind the Acoran and Kompiran consuls that weapons are not to be used inside the Cloud Chamber. May I continue, or does anyone have anything else to add before I detail the memberships of the other two companies?'

Tawhawki Fall lifted his hand into the air. The Chamberlain nodded, reluctantly giving him permission to speak.

'Your Grace, with all due respect, I must voice my concerns over the constitution of the first squad. You say that you are trusting some positions to knowledge and expertise. I apologise for being blunt, but what knowledge does a Spriggan have other than how to contort our language into shapes that no-one else can recognise? Your Grace, they are not as learned as they appear.'

Mulupo stood up and staggered across numerous countries to stand before the hulking Caquikki. 'We are clever enough to have discovered

how to build airships that stay aloft, something for all your books and your study, you have been unable to achieve.'

Tawhawki's face reddened. There were many Caquikki who saw past the ages-old rivalries that had existed between the Spriggans and the Caquikki, but he was not one of them. 'Had your people been more willing to share their knowledge, perhaps they would have received help when they needed it.'

Gunther raised as much of an eyebrow as the dented metal plate in his forehead would allow. 'Well that's rich, coming from the Caquikki!'

'Yes,' added Sela Noye before Tawhawki could respond. 'You are just as guilty of feathering your own nest. You have hoarded up all the world's literature, artwork and research in your precious universities. You arrogantly assume the role of the intellectual masters of the Myr, but you have done nothing to show any concern for nations other than your own.'

'That is not true! Our universities are open to all. It is the tyranny of distance that has isolated us, nothing more.'

'You should be the last to speak here,' Sela spat back, pleased that after an hour of listening, she had an argument to participate in. 'You have no understanding of our trials. Correct me if I'm wrong but the island of Caquix has not seen a single Ghul on its soil. You have not endured any hardships.'

'Bunch of prissy dandies,' sneered Gunther. 'Clip-clopping around as if you owned the place.'

Mulupo stuck out a finger and pointed it at Tawhawki. 'The Caquikki are mere sciolists. Real knowledge does not come from books. It comes from experience. From living with the thing being studied. From *being*. The Nessans know this. The Sapphyrro know this. Even the brutish Sessymirians know this.' Lokasenna Hagen and Ambassador Alberich Falskog stared sternly at Mulupo but said nothing. 'You may criticise our sesquipedalian ways, but at least we communicate with our fellow Myrrans.'

The Chamberlain led Mulupo's small, swaggering figure back to his seat before rounding on the delegates. 'Everyone, I fear this discussion is degenerating into personal and pointless attacks. Everyone has a place here. The squad memberships I am putting forward have been comprehensively considered. My advisors and I have spent many hours on these lists. What we require from you is not discussion of the applicability of individuals involved, but whether you endorse the plan at all.' He spoke with such clarity and conviction, even Gunther Ross felt a little chastened by his involvement in the argument with Tawhawki Fall.

The Chamberlain extended a hand and placed it on Lokasenna Hagen's shoulder. The Sessymirian did not move. She just looked out at the other delegates with a dispassionate stare. She knew what Llyr was going to say next. Maeldune had told her it would be so.

'The second squad will be led by the newly-appointed Sessymirian Consul Lokasenna Hagen.'

Lokasenna gave a stretch, lifting her spiked arm for all to see. It was a deliberate gesture to which she added, 'If anyone doubts my suitability to the position or would like to see how I measure up in battle, step forward now and speak your mind.'

No-one moved.

'I didn't think so,' she said quietly.

The Chamberlain was unprepared for Lokasenna's belligerent tone and blushed slightly as he divulged the other members of this squad. 'Sir Edgar Worsley will represent the people of Scoriath.'

Edgar's face shone almost as brightly as his armour. 'It is an honour that I will -'

'Thank-you Sir Edgar,' the Chamberlain said before the knight could get out another word. 'Time is of the essence but your sentiments are appreciated.' He looked across the room to where the diminutive Sumi Kimura sat beside her father. 'The nations of Kompira and Susano will be represented by Sumi Kimura. From the other end of the world, we look to Bannick Landen to represent Arnaksak. The last two positions of this squad I am giving to individuals who have already had a part to play in this tale. Both Lara Brand and the Mabbitt Tagtug have already encountered the Ghul and survived. I do not doubt that their contributions will be significant.'

The faces around the room suggested otherwise, but no-one said a word. The colour running out of Lara's face did not echo the Chamberlain's confidence. By contrast, the expression on Tagtug's face did not change. It did not seem he understood what he had just been signed up for.

'This squad will travel north, through Scoriath and across the Oshalla Ocean to the breach under Nilfheim.'

'But isn't that way blocked?' Lara asked. 'I thought the mine had collapsed.'

The Chamberlain turned to the young witch and nodded. 'We do not believe it will stay that way. On the day our Sessymirian delegates left Nilfheim, they received reports from the mine that suggested Caliban's forces were trying to reopen the breach. They will not take long to break through. They may have done so already.'

‘We had planned for the third squad to journey to the breach outside Lucien in Acoran but this morning we received news of the great losses the Acora have suffered there.’ He turned to Jehenna and asked, ‘What think you, Consul? In light of the massing of Ghul troops in this region do you think this a route we should take?’

‘It would seem that we cannot find or access the other breaches, Your Grace. I see no other option but Lucien. But it will not be easy. Our archers have killed many Ghul but the vermin replenish their numbers faster than we can take them down.’

‘If anyone can find a way in, you can, Jehenna,’ the Chamberlain said confidently. ‘It will come as no surprise to you all that I have appointed Jehenna Canna to lead the third company. I have asked Bormanus Cole to accompany this expedition. His homeland of Cephalaria has suffered greatly at the hands of the Ghul and I believe it should have representation upon the mission. Similarly, I am hoping that Kali of Kolpia will also agree to take up a position on this squad. The last three positions will go to the consuls from Ankara, the Tamu Plains and the Isle of Caquix, respectively, Rama Ta, Sela Noye and Tawhawki Fall.’

And so it was that the companies were formed. The Chamberlain stood at the northernmost point of the map and spread his hands wide, inviting responses. ‘Delegates, your thoughts?’

It was Pylos who spoke first. He stood up and bowed in a show of courtesy that the Chamberlain read as a prologue to a criticism. ‘Your Grace, I cannot help but think that this is a job for the Cessair Guard. You are sending many untried individuals on a mission that would fill even our bravest soldiers’ hearts with fear.’

The Chamberlain nodded. It was a reasonable comment to make. ‘General Castalia, the twelve members of the Cessair Guard will not be enough to do this. As you have seen, four members of the Guard have been placed into the squads – you, Sefar Hadith, Bannick Landen and Jehenna Canna – but I can spare no more. I have already deployed the others to various parts of the Myr to deal with the Cabal. I cannot wait for them to return.’

‘Your Grace, I have a question,’ said a quiet voice from the far side of the chamber. It was Sumi Kimura. ‘What do we know of the Cabal? As you are aware, one of them, the beast called the Ryugin, took my husband from me. It is likely we will encounter other monsters.’

‘After consultation with ancient texts, the scholars of Caquix have provided us with the names of other monsters. Reports suggest the

Ryugin continues to lurk about the Sea of Telamon, just as the Morrigu continues to wreak havoc upon the towns and cities lying on the shores of Lake Erras. The Ankarans have suffered repeated assaults by a shadowy creature once known as Katkochila. Our brave knight Sir Edgar slew Abaddon in the swamps of Marshmead. The name of the beast that helped round up the Kobolds with its webbing was Fulgora and it now lies dead outside the town of Kische. The tentacled beast that was eventually killed in the breach under Nilfheim was the Kaggen. Both Lara Brand and Kali of Kolpia have encountered Kleesto. We know there are more to come. Though it is not our intention to have the companies engage with the Cabal, it is likely that they will not have a choice.'

'That's wonderfully encouraging,' noted Sela Noye with unbridled sarcasm.

The Chamberlain ignored the comment. 'May I emphasize the fact that the companies have one primary goal – the death of Caliban. They are not to engage the enemy unless it is absolutely necessary. The removal of Caliban from his sphere of influence is crucial. If we cut off the head, the body should die. We believe the Ghul and Cabal threats will be easier to manage once we take out Caliban.'

'But how will we find him?' asked Edgar.

'The mariner's tale suggests that he will be found in the region of the Endless that lies under Lake Erras. That is where you will go. I know I have placed you directly in the path of danger but the truth is that we are all endangered these days.'

The Assembly was concluded. The sun in the western sky sat upon the mighty Acoran Ranges where the stubborn snows of last winter clung tenaciously to the backs of the mountains. Half of Lake Cessair rested in the mountains' shadow, but upon that part of the lake that lay closest to Cessair, the sun's warm light sparkled like a thousand sequins rippling across a brilliant red dress. A flock of Kolpian cranes took flight, their gigantic wings silhouetted against the kaleidoscopic light that coruscated off the lake.

Almost everyone had left the Cloud Chamber, making their way down the broad steps that encircled the outside of the tower. Pylos lingered on the landing outside the chamber, deep in thought over something Jehenna Canna had said.

'Our archers have killed many Ghul but the vermin replenish their numbers faster than we can take them down.'

Pylos' men had struggled to kill a single Ghul at Sulis, yet he had slain many. Likewise, the Acoran archers. There was something significant about this.

He turned to make his way back into the Cloud Chamber but was cut off by the tall figure of Maeldune blocking his way. 'Minister Canna, there is something else. I forgot to mention it in the Assembly but it may be important.'

'General Castalia,' replied Maeldune coldly, 'we cannot reconvene because you are forgetful.'

'No, I do not expect you to, but there is something Chamberlain Llyr should know.'

'General, you can tell me. As you well know, when the Assembly is not in session, I am the conduit to the Chamberlain. You can trust me to pass on your celebrations.'

The Acora were known for being sticklers for protocol so Pylos swallowed hard and spoke his thoughts. 'Minister, when Sulis was attacked I was able to slay countless Ghul, but most of my men could not.'

'You are truly an astounding warrior, General. I will be sure to tell the Chamberlain of your successes.'

Pylos was a little stunned by the tone Maeldune had taken with him, but he decided to think on it at another time. The important thing was to get his message to the Chamberlain.

'You don't understand. I am not trying to impress the Chamberlain. For some reason, I was able to do what others could not. I don't have any explanation for it but it must be important.'

'Well Pylos,' sneered Maeldune, 'I am so glad you are on my team. We are guaranteed of success.' The comment was so overtly sarcastic Pylos was dumbstruck. He wanted to strike back but the sight of Maeldune's wife approaching the pair made him reconsider his desire to reply in kind.

Tiberius Llyr clapped his hands once and the map dissolved through the paved floor of the Cloud Chamber like sand through one's fingers. A large trap door lay in the centre of the chamber floor. He clapped again and the door swung aside revealing a dark vertical passageway beyond.

'Stairs! You have stairs inside the tower!' Sela Noye exclaimed. She had hung back to ask the Chamberlain whether he could place Tawhawki Fall upon another team – the thought of spending countless days with the arrogant Caquikki made her queasy – and had stood to one side as everyone filed out of chamber. It had been a long day. Her

characteristic fractious state was frayed more than normal. The sight of the Chamberlain revealing a hidden passageway was the straw that broke the calumpf's back. 'I can't believe what I'm seeing,' she scolded. 'I crawled for five hours up the outside steps, terrified out of my wits that I would fall off the side and you have stairs inside the tower!'

Her murderous look did not seem to be recognised by Chamberlain Llyr who seemed happy to show off his private route to the Cloud Chamber. 'Actually,' he remarked proudly, 'it's better than stairs.'

Sela peered into the darkness. The Chamberlain clapped his hands a third time and hundreds of lights appeared lining a shaft that went thousands of yards down the centre of the citadel. The stairs before her led to a small landing ten feet below the trapdoor. Sela could see a wooden platform hanging over the shaft. The platform was connected to a pulley system via a thick, yellow rope. 'It really is quite remarkable. It's powered by Cold. With a pull of that lever over there, the pulley starts turning and the platform goes down as another comes up the other side. I don't fully understand the mechanics of it, but I love it. I always hated the thought of climbing the stairs.'

Sela gritted her teeth. Behind her colourful mask her eyes narrowed. In her mind's eye she could see the Chamberlain speeding to the top of the tower whilst she slowly crawled up the outsides, her knees shaking as vertigo pulled at her insides.

He glanced at her. 'Oh please don't be angry, my girl. Everyone climbs the stairs. Well, everyone, but me that is.'

Sela could not find the words to express her choler.

He could feel her tension. He smiled and placed a hand on her bristling shoulder. 'I think we can break with tradition just this once, Consul Noye.'

Her eyes lit up. 'Yes, Your Grace.'

The pair of them made their way down the short flight of steps and walked onto the platform. A railing was closed, a lever drawn and within moments they left the Cloud Chamber behind. All was quiet except for the creak of the rope, and the popping hiss of Cold in the engine above.

'By the way please don't mention this to anyone,' said the Chamberlain. 'It would get awfully crowded in here if word of this got out.'

Chapter Eighteen Cessair Tower, Cessair

Bannick leaned back on his chair and burped loudly. ‘Now this is the life, Pylos!’

He bit a chunk out of the leg of roast meat in his hand and washed it down with a draft of ale. The two warriors had wasted no time in getting down to the tavern on the 51st landing as soon as the Assembly had finished. It was a lively space, frequented by a wide range of people: off-duty guards of the tower, visiting diplomats, merchants looking for naïve buyers. The tavern specialised in Nessian wines and Tuirrenian ales but it was the huge Scorian barga turning on a spit in the centre of the courtyard that Bannick most enjoyed. He and Pylos had taken a table near the landing’s edge where the view was magnificent. The first stars were beginning to show in the sky and far below, the flowerfall glowed in the fields.

The open-air tavern, Smithy’s Bar, was run by a man whose name was not Smithy. It was said that just as many deals were made in the courtyard of Smithy’s Bar as were made in the Cloud Chamber high above. Tavern games were always in progress at any given hour, many of them involving weapons of some description.

The other thing that brought clientele to the tavern was its collection of barmaids. Smithy’s had gained a reputation for employing some of the sassiest, most beautiful women ever engaged in the fine art of placing jugs of beer on tables. It was no surprise that many soldiers and lonely politicians found their way here, but Pylos was surprised to notice the patrons at a table to his right: Maeldune, his wife Jehenna and the fat bureaucrat Porenutious Windle sat in a booth carved into the tower’s walls. Maeldune and Windle leant close to one another, deep in conversation, discussing something political no doubt. Jehenna was not involved in the discussion; she seemed content to gaze at the traffic of people who were wining and dining on the tower’s terrace.

In a dark corner near the entrance to the bar, the two Pryderi Lara Brand and Arinna Brine huddled over a complimentary bowl of bread that was sitting on the table when they arrived at the bar. The pair spoke in whispers, unsuccessfully trying to avoid attention. Despite Cessair’s cosmopolitan reputation, it had been many years since the people of the tower had seen a Moraen.

A waitress brought over the order Arinna Brine had made almost an hour before. She placed two tankards down on the table in a rough

fashion, spilling half the drink over the table. She gave the two Pryderi a haughty look and made her way back to the bar.

‘Clearly we have a long way to go before we are accepted into the wider community,’ Arinna observed, wanting to hurl a simple incantation at the barmaid.

‘What’s this?’ Lara said curiously, touching the foamy head of her drink with trepidation, oblivious to the barmaid’s rude behaviour.

‘It’s beer.’

‘Beer?’ echoed Lara, her voice wrapping itself around the word like a child picking up a newly-discovered toy.

Arinna gave a short laugh. ‘Yes, beer. Try it.’

Lara sniffed it, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

‘I’m a bit scared!’ she giggled.

Arinna laughed. ‘Here you are, about to go on a mission that will probably kill you and you’re scared of some beer.’

‘Oh, I’m scared of the mission too,’ she admitted as she pulled her head up after tentatively sniffing the ale, unaware of the dob of white froth sitting on the tip of her nose.

Arinna noticed the froth but decided it would be fun not to bring it to Lara’s attention. ‘Go on, try it,’ she urged. ‘Everyone else is.’

Lara quickly scanned the bar. Arinna was right. The beer flowed like the Wort River. She saw other patrons take long swigs of the tankards they held, wiping their mouths afterwards and exhaling triumphantly as if they had just done something heroic.

Lara lifted the tankard to her mouth smiling nervously. She slurped the drink and held the ale inside her mouth, unwilling to swallow until her taste buds accepted the arrangement.

They rejected it unequivocally. White spray erupted from her mouth and shot into the back of Maeldune Canna’s head.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Lara gasped, her face a picture of shame.

Maeldune Canna slowly pulled a pristine white handkerchief out of his pocket and dabbed at the ale dripping down his long, oily locks. ‘Miss Brand, I would suggest to you that if you are to imbibe liquids in public, you might like to choose refreshments more to your liking.’

A roar of testosterone-laden laughter exploded from a table on the other side of the bar. Gunther Ross and a group of border guards from Ganesa had sat down to a game of *friggu shock*. The game was very popular in Brigantia, Gunther’s home town, as well as in some of Cessair’s less-reputable establishments. A bowl was brought out from the tavern’s kitchen and placed on the centre of the table. The men pulled their chairs

closer to the table and surveyed the contents of the dish. Gunther called out to a barmaid, a stunning-looking Kompiran wearing a dress that would shame her parents, to bring another round of ales.

The bowl in the centre of the table contained friggs, an amphibious creature found all over the Myr. The game was simple. Each player took turns to take a grilled frigg out of the bowl where they lay basting in a green liquid. The frigg was placed in the mouth and eaten. Friggs were considered a delicacy on the western continent but very few people had the nerve to eat them. Male and female friggs could not be told apart even on the closest inspection. However, there was one significant difference: when the male frigg was eaten, an explosion of incomparable flavour consumed the devourer. It was impossible to bite into a male and not close one's eyes in gastronomic delight. The female was a different kettle of frigg altogether. The only thing that burst forth from the female was an electrostatic shock that threw most individuals to a paroxysm of incredible pain.

The Kompiran waitress put the tankards on the Tethrans' table. They were so absorbed in their game, they ignored her. But Bannick noticed her...

'I think I'm in love.'

Pylos smiled and shook his head. 'Do you ever think of anything else?'

'It doesn't require much thinking,' Bannick retorted.

Pylos didn't bother with pursuing the topic. He cut a slice of barga and dipped it in a bowl of carpu sauce on the table. Bannick was still staring at the barmaid. She had left the Tethrans and was taking an order from Porenutious Windle.

'So what do you make of all this, Bannick?' Pylos asked.

Bannick swung back to face the Helyan. 'About what?'

'About the Assembly. The Ghul. The Cabal. The mission.'

Bannick's face changed. The flippancy that characterised his manner was dropped. 'To be honest, it all concerns me.'

Pylos slurped his beer, wiped the froth from his upper lip and asked, 'How so?'

'I don't think we're up to it. I don't mean you and me – I mean the Myr. The Helyans, the Sessymirians and the Arnakki will cope. We have kept our blades sharp, but how will the other countries repel such an enemy?'

Pylos shrugged. 'I don't know Bannick. I'm still a little stunned by the squads. What's the Chamberlain thinking? I've got a Spriggan, a fisherman and a priest on my team.'

'You mean Maeldune's team!' Bannick laughed. 'Anyway, you think that's bad. I've got a novice witch and a Mabbit whose only unique skill is the ability to hop! We should be sending soldiers, but instead we're sending misfits. And why? For a gesture. A nod to Myrran unity. It's insane. Strip away the politics. Look at it from a soldier's eyes. We cannot hope to defeat the enemy this way.'

'Why didn't you say something in the Assembly?'

'Excuse me gentlemen?'

They looked up. The Kompiran waitress was standing by the table, an angel in a cheap, low-cut dress. 'Can I get you anything?'

Bannick's sobriety vanished instantly and a wry grin broke across his face. 'Well that depends, darling. What are you offering?'

She was not shocked by his cheek; this sort of dialogue was standard at Smithy's and the barmaids were instructed to encourage it. She leant forward placing her hands on the table. Her cleavage leaned out at Bannick and her black hair brushed across his hands. 'Just what's on the menu... although I'm sure a little extra can be arranged for the famous Bannick Landen.'

Pylos threw his arms up in disgust. 'Oh please. I think I'm going to be sick. Just get us some beer please.'

The Kompiran smiled and flirtatiously laid a hand on Bannick's shoulder as she moved to walk away. 'Right away, sir. Two ales.'

She swirled and Bannick's gaze fell to her legs. '*The great Bannick Landen*,' he murmured to himself.

Pylos groaned. 'Bannick, they're paid to do that. Anyway, she said *famous*, not *great*.'

'There's a difference?' Bannick smirked, delighted by his friend's irritation.

Another roar broke out from the Tethrans' table. Bannick and Pylos looked over as Gunther plucked a friggs from the bowl. The two men before him had both chosen well and were licking their palates savouring every moment. Gunther, on the other hand, was on a losing streak and two times out of two had picked a female. He held the friggs out in front of his face, speaking words too difficult for the Helyans to hear across the space. He popped the morsel into his mouth, bit down hard, and toppled off his seat as the electric shock coursed through his veins.

Pylos and Bannick broke out into applause over the Tethran's misfortune. Pylos looked over at Jehenna. She was smiling as she watched Gunther shaking uncontrollably on the floor.

'The guy's an idiot,' stated Bannick bluntly.

'What were we saying?'

'You were asking why I didn't challenge the Chancellor's plan.'

'And?'

'I just couldn't. I think I've done enough to the old man. It's been five years since I bedded his wife and there would be no point in me voicing my opposition to —'

Pylos burst into peals of mirth. 'I'm sorry Bannick. I just can't believe you use the phrase *bedded his wife* just now. Who talks like that?'

'Well, I suppose I do. I don't what to describe what I did in unsavoury terms,' he grinned.

'Whatever happened to his wife?'

'Rumours are that he had her abducted by Kompiran assassins and put to death on the Isle of Antaeus.'

'Really? I heard she was sleep-walking one night and fell to her death.'

'Perhaps she just threw herself over the edge when she realised how low she had sunk when she climbed into your bed.'

'Or perhaps it was the knowledge that once she had been with me, she knew nothing else would ever come close and she killed herself in a fit of despair.'

Pylos laughed as Bannick leaned back on his chair and clasped his hands behind his head in smug satisfaction. The Helyan gazed up at the living quarters towards the top of the tower and then looked down to the darkening ground almost 3,000 feet below. 'It would be a horrible way to go,' he mused.

'What? Falling to your death?' Bannick smirked. 'I can think of worse ways to die.'

'I'm not so sure. A fall like that would last forever. It's not like battle, where you have a fighting chance.'

'Your drinks gentlemen.'

The Kompiran brazenly stared at Bannick and said, 'I finish in half an hour, if you want to see what else is on the menu...' She walked off.

'Well, Pylos, it's good to be back here. I always miss Cessair.'

A small shatterbug crawled onto the table. Tiny gossamer wings of blue grey shimmered in the orange glow emanating from the creature's jewel-like abdomen. Pylos could hear the timpani of the creature's eight legs clicking on the table. Despite the bugs' mysterious heritage, almost everyone on the Myr saw them as a blessing, a beautiful adornment of the natural world.

Bannick brought his fist down hard on the shatterbug and splattered it on the oaken table. Sticky, viscous goo held his hand to the table.

'Can't stand bugs!' grunted Bannick as he peeled his hand from the table with some difficulty. 'My daughter has one of these for a pet and it's always –'

Pylos was not listening. He was watching Maeldune exiting the booth he was sitting in. 'What does she see in him?' he asked earnestly. 'She's one of their greatest fighters and he's such a... *bureaucrat*.' The word left a bad taste in his mouth.

Bannick downed the last of his drink and swung around to see Jehenna's long legs sweep out of the booth. 'You know Pylos, for a while there I thought you didn't like women.' His speech was slurred. Pylos noticed that his friend's elbow was sitting in a bowl of carp sauce.

Maeldune nodded farewell to Windle who scurried up the outer stairs. The Acoran turned and strode across the courtyard with the officious confidence that came from years of political power.

'Oh no, he's coming over,' groaned Pylos.

Jehenna stayed by the booth, aloof and proud.

Bannick smiled insincerely at the Maeldune. 'Minister, you're not going to tell us to get an early night are you? You know, *big day ahead tomorrow* and all that.'

Maeldune ignored the Arnakki's mocking tone. 'Oh quite the contrary, Bannick. I'd just like to wish you both well on our mission. This is important work we do.'

The drink had rushed to Bannick's head and he felt no need to mince words with the man standing before him, embracing fraternity where there was none. 'Maeldune, I may never see you again after this night, so let me speak clearly...'

'Sir, at this point in time, I do not think you possess the faculties to achieve that end.'

Bannick shook his head and turned to Pylos: 'What did he say? Did this thin piece of political...'

But Pylos' attention was elsewhere. Jehenna's gaze was on the glowing embers under the roasting barga and he was afforded the opportunity to look at her without her knowledge. Physically she was flawless but it was her bearing and not her beauty that had so ensnared

him. Her poise and dignity were as potent as any perfume from Khepera. She held herself defiantly, like the finest Helyan women. There was nothing submissive about her and yet Pylos believed he had discerned in her a gentleness that she would never willingly show in public. For many years he had watched her from afar. Her mannerisms, speech and disposition seemed as familiar to him as anyone he knew. And yet, he had never found himself in conversation with her outside the Cloud Chamber.

‘Excuse me, General,’ Maeldune fleered, ‘but when you’re done staring at my wife, I believe your companion has a question for you.’

But Bannick’s question had vanished and in its place a drunken fit of laughter. ‘*When you’re done staring at my wife!*’ he howled with joy, slapping Pylos across the shoulder.

Fortunately for Pylos, the ridicule was short-lived.

Out of the corner of his bloodshot eyes Bannick noticed the Kompiran barmaid standing by the steps, smiling, waiting patiently for him. ‘Gentlemen,’ he proclaimed. ‘I would love to stay and chat, but we’re up early in the morning, so I think it’s best I head off to bed.’ He stood to go and tripped over his own feet. Maeldune did not hide the disgust he felt for the Myr’s greatest hero, but Pylos jumped from his seat and extended a hand to his fallen comrade.

‘Ah Pylos,’ Bannick slurred as he placed his hands around Pylos’ neck. ‘Always there to catch me when I fall. My good friend, I’ll see you next summer. A steady hand and strong shield, General: good fortunes on the field.’

Pylos smiled, touched by Bannick’s use of the Helyan soldiers’ blessing, and amused by the Arnakki’s attempts to walk a straight line towards the barmaid. He had never seen his friend get drunk so quickly, but thought little more of it as he sat down and stared out across the moonlit lands below.

Bannick was vaguely aware of people staring at him, but he could not focus upon any of them, nor did he care to. All he could see was the curvaceous movements of the barmaid as she made her way down the stairs and into the passageway leading to her room.

Bannick was no stranger to intoxication but he had never before felt so sluggish. His limbs felt like dead weights. The flirtatious laughter had subsided and all noise had become distant and abstract.

She opened the door. All was dark inside the room. Bannick could feel his blood pushing its way through his veins, slow and laboured. The barmaid let go of him to shut the door and he fell to the floor, his arms

too heavy to brace his fall. His face smashed into the marble floor and a spout of blood burst from his nose as it broke.

Bannick's mind was churning. He now realised he had been drugged, but by whom and why? He had never met the barmaid before this night. He summoned up his strength and tried to lift himself off the floor but could not even raise his head.

His vision had blurred considerably but he could make out the barmaid's silhouette against the open window to his left. Moonlight lit up a patch of floor by the window, but the rest of the room was little more than a black shape.

'Oh Bannick darling, come and sit by me! The view is so splendid from the window.'

Bannick could not even open his mouth to voice his anger. Suddenly two pairs of hands floated out of the darkness. He was dragged over to the window ledge where the barmaid sat and propped up next to her like a stringless marionette. The barmaid's hands played with his hair and she nuzzled into him as if they were lovers.

'How appropriate!' came a voice from the dark. 'The Myr's greatest warrior and womaniser, brought down by a barmaid.'

Bannick could see the boots of the individuals who had carried him to the sill, he could see the barmaid's hand gently stroking his leg and he could make out a blotchy patch of blood that had dripped from his nose onto the floor. A purple gown was then lit by the moonlight streaming in through the window as Porenutious Windle stepped forward.

'Windle?' Bannick tried to say but the word was nothing more than a monosyllabic grunt.

'Well met, Consul,' Windle said as he lifted Bannick's head by the chin. 'In a few moments, Akemi here is going to take her arm from around your shoulder. Your head will fall back followed by your shoulders. Your heartbeat will increase dramatically, defying the drug that has slowed it down. Your gaze will sweep from sky to earth as you tumble through the air, commencing a 3,000 foot drop to the base of the tower. Your flight will conclude with the sound of your body breaking upon the flagstones below.'

Bannick's eyes widened as he felt the Kompiran's arm slide from his shoulder.

