

# When The Stone Shepherds Awaken



Book One  
The Sabienn Feel  
Adventures

Mark Barkley

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**Book One: The Sabienn Feel Adventures**

By

Mark Barkley

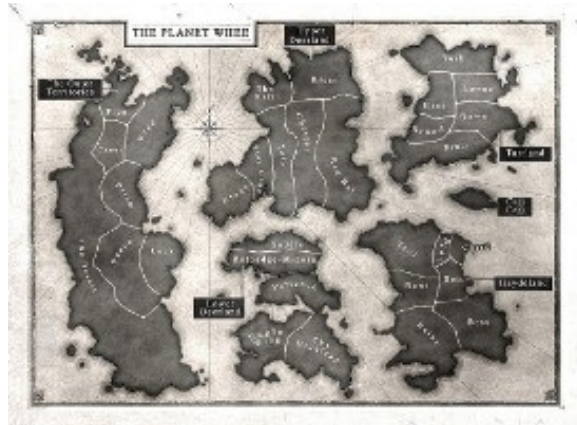
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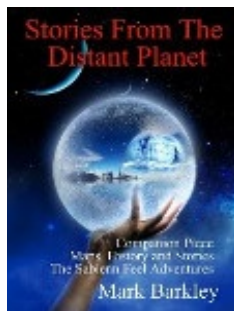
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## **Prologue – Only One Reality**

The planet Whee is a life-sustaining blue jewel spinning in a far off galaxy around its sun. It held two beautiful moons, one blue and the other green.

The eyes of humans were on the planet for colonization since leaving their base on the planet Chee, first removed from Earth.

Once landed in the new world, human Generals, Haydd, Turr and Deer drew lots to have land masses named after them. They then set out to control the world and all its human-like inhabitants already present.

The lesson that they learnt from their time on Chee was that too much technology was of no political advantage. On Chee, people had advanced means to move freely wherever they wanted, whenever they wanted, from land mass to land mass. They could be self-sufficient, anonymous and never pay a cent to anyone to lead a fulfilled life.

For the new world, there was a conscious effort to scale back technological advance. Movements were now slower and could be checked, people were accounted for and money could be extracted for government and its interests.

This is the world Sabienn Feel was born into. His life has known only one reality.

To be controlled and see it as totally normal.

# 1. The Black Wolf Tattoo

The smiling old man who was feeding the birds had fifteen minutes to live.

Sabienn Feel, a military cadet from the Academy, watched the uniformed officers in the black van watching the man throw bread. The old guy looked joyful and at peace with the life he was about to leave behind. *He's old*, Sabienn thought. *And even the Secret Police have fathers. Maybe it'll be thirty minutes.*

A flock of ghost finch swarmed on to the food he'd laid out. They were a designated pest of the realm and any care or compassion for these creatures warmer than a swift boot heel to mash their eggs was treason.

Then inexplicably after a few seconds of the birds eating, the old man shooed them away. "Fly! Use your wings." His arms pushed the pests to the sky.

"Are you insane, old man!" shouted Sabienn.

The two Secret Police officers alighting from the van saw Sabienn and waved him on as if to say, "There's nothing to see here."

It didn't matter to Sabienn. He'd quickly lost interest anyway. He was on a mission for one of the most significant days of his short military career.

*Today I'm a man. I get my black wolf*, he thought with excitement, turning away from the humdrum of the scene he'd just witnessed.

He peeled back his cloak and shirt to see the unmarked skin over his heart where the tattoo would grace and he smiled to the sky.

The red sun was already setting, the green moon was rising and the precious blue moon they worshipped was high and full in the crimson and peach sky. The finch rose into the air as a flock, upward and spiralling and shifting back and forth. Turning on a pinpoint, as if moving in one mind.

*Finally I'll be complete*, he thought proudly. *I get the wolf. And I get the love. The love of The Great Leader rising to the stage. And this shirt, I'll peel back and he'll see it. And he'll look down and he'll smile at me.*

Looking at his strong arms, even Sabienn had to admit he was a beautiful specimen of a man. His body was average height but he was fit and muscular. His skin was sun brown and his hair was dark, full and styled.

In the distance he could see the airships of war docked and hovering next to Salt Stadium, their gimbal turrets hanging like ominous udders and their beacon lights flashing fore-mid-aft. Light-light-light. Light-light-light. There were about



twenty ships with lights all out of sync and as a light show it looked like the twinkling stars in his heaven.

There was a space in the docking like a missing tooth of a fierce mouth reserved for the arrival of Blue Fire One and Blue Fire Two, the respective craft of The Great Leader and The Grand Inquisitor Profound.

*If I can only get close enough, he thought. His sweat might hit me.*

He shuddered with delight as his screen started beeping. Sabienn read the message, "Get your arse here. You're up." As he finished reading, the screen went back to the default photo of The Great Leader, grinning reassuringly back. He pocketed his device and started running the short distance to Arrakaz Neel Fine Body Art.

At the door, there were girls from around town, casually milling around and looking through the window. "Hey," a pretty girl called out to him, "What're you getting?"

As Sabienn entered the door, he looked back, sized her up and swaggered his head. "The black wolf, of course." She handed him a card with a number.

As he took the card, his heart jumped. *This is going to be tough, he thought. My sex life's about to go up by a factor of ten.* He'd seen it before with recipients being approached by girls in the street. Sabienn said to the pretty girl, "Thanks. You know, only one hundred black wolfs are given every year. Of all the thousands of cadets. Skill, devotion and discipline for the warrior. That's what it's all about. You do know that, don't you?"

"Could you give that to that man in there please?" the girl continued.

"Sure." His heart sank as she pointed inside. *Obviously it won't be ten overnight, he thought.*

Slouched in a chair at the front of the parlour with his shirt off was his friend that everyone referred to only as Sammo. He had just received his wolf on his chest and he was laying back smiling, ecstatic and spent, like he'd gone fifteen rounds with the heaven sisters and their tag team sex.

"Thanks for the message," said Sabienn. He looked on at his friend's dark hair and well-cut upper body lightly covered in sweat. It was a good theatrical display for the window audience and he passed on the card much to their glee.

"You don't want to miss out." Sammo said. "I'm always looking out for you, Deathwish."

Sabienn smiled at the mention of his nickname. *Good old Sammo. He gets the best marks, the best bulls-eyes and the best women. But how can you hate him? He's so likeable.*

On a couch in the corner was a female cadet with her back to him, modestly covering herself with a towel. She'd just received her wolf on the back and it

came up well on her paler skin. It was a simple design of a wolf facing you with its teeth slightly bared, not looking threatening but not looking happy. As one teacher put it, more a constipated look of concentration.

Looking at the girl's back, Sabienn held a brief thought. *Is she going to be lucky with the boys later? Hmm. Who cares?* If it wasn't about him, he wasn't interested.

"Next please." A short bald muscular man walked out carrying a sheath of papers. Arrakaz Neel was the most sought after body artist for Academy Salt. In order to give the black wolf, you had to be licensed and approved for all official markings of the realm. Sabienn had to beg to be squeezed into his schedule.

"Come in," he said and Sabienn followed him into the work area. "Take a seat. And you are.." He flipped through the papers. "You are.. Oh.. Are you Sabienn Feel?"

"Yes, I am." Sabienn took his seat with joyous expectation.

Neel threw the papers on to the table. "Stop wasting my time, will you?"

"What?" Sabienn was dumbfounded.

"It says here you're blocked. Pending review." Neel pushed forward the paper for Sabienn's view. His application had an attached piece of paper with a red stamp signed by General Krenn. "Come back when it's settled."

For Sabienn it felt like the floor had opened and his world was being flushed away. "No, I need this," he shouted.

"Thank you," Neel pointed to the door.

"No, I'm not leaving. I have the backing of my Captain. Captain Randd."

"And a Captain beats a General?" Neel started packing up his instruments. He turned his back. "You're wasting my time."

The thought crossed Sabienn's mind of walking out without his mark. *No mark! After telling my friends I'm getting it. Or to be in the stadium audience with no wolf for my idol. And looking around at my class pointing fingers at me. I must get this mark. Even if I have to break into the equipment and give it to myself.* "Sir, I just scraped a pass. I want what is *mine*. I'm not leaving."

Neel stopped and turned to him.

"You'll have to pry me from this chair with a crowbar," said Sabienn defiantly. "Go call Security. That's always good for business."

Neel turned and gave Sabienn a long hard look. Sabienn assumed Neel didn't want any uniforms poking their nose around.

"Cadet, you're clearly insane," Neel pulled up a chair and sat facing Sabienn and spoke candidly. "OK, the next voice you'll hear in your head will be mine. This is an official mark of the realm. Which means, if someone gets this.. And I have seen this. If someone *gets* this, and they're found not to deserve it, this will

happen.”

Neel grabbed Sabienn’s chest where the mark was to go.

“They will rip the skin off your body here to make sure all ink is gone. Then they reach in and rip out your heart underneath it. They hold it here then toss it into a bucket. I’ve *seen* this. A little thing flipping around in a bucket.”

“Give me the tattoo, sir.”

“Cadet, you are begging to die. Do you want this?” said Neel.

“Yes.”

“More than life itself.” Neel was definite.

Sabienn stared back with a steel gaze. “Yes.”

Neel looked into his eyes then stood up. “Fine. But I’m not taking the rap. Fill in a Form 19 Waiver. And for my signature, you’ll need a Form Two Zero Zero.”

“Two Zero Zero? Really?” argued Sabienn.

Neel waved to his door, “Goodbye”.

“OK OK,” cried Sabienn.

“And this note?” Neel ripped it from his sheath of papers and held it up. “Have you seen it?”

“No, sir.”

“Neither have I,” said Neel. He fed it to a shredder at the end of his office then placed the waiver and a pen in front of Sabienn. “Hurry up.”

Sabienn rushed through the usual ID, scribbling madly. Name, Sabienn Addlinn Feel. Date of Birth, Day 19, Month 5, Year 5000. Eyes, brown. Hair, black. Height, 178cm.

“Do I need to do this bit?” Sabienn held the form up.

“You want someone at your funeral?” said Neel. “Just hurry.”

The scribbling continued on Sabienn’s form. Mother, Sabienne Feel (deceased). Father, Addlinn Rayne, (deceased). There were a number of other fill-ins that he whipped through quickly. I waive my rights blah blah. I give permission to the realm blah blah. Should I not survive blah blah.

Sabienn signed his floral signature, the one he developed to get noticed, and dated the document Day Nine in the Month of Ten in the Year 5023 and pushed it across the table.

“And?” enquired Neel.

“The Two Zero Zero.” Sabienn reached into his pocket and pulled from his wallet two fresh one hundred kee notes which he proffered to Neel. *There go the celebrations for tonight*, Sabienn thought. *It’s going to be a sad old night borrowing off friends. And they’re already sick of my hand being out.*

Neel held the notes to the light to check they were authentic. “OK, get in the

chair.”

The pain was not as bad as he expected but he had to sit still. He wasn't about to comment or say anything smart. Neel was a picture of concentration with his instrument marking out the wolf. “Start complaining and I'll stick a dick in its mouth.” He spoke like he wouldn't need a second invitation. At this point the artist was in control and Sabienn kept his mouth shut.

“Finished.” After over an hours work, Neel placed his instruments down and took a photo with his screen. “Better take a record for the Form 19. Shame really. This is the best one I've done all day.” Click. “It'll be sad to see it in a bucket.”

Sabienn admired the finished artwork in a mirror. “I can't thank you enough.”

The gratitude fell on deaf ears. “Save it. I'm not interested,” said Neel. “Come with me.”

They walked to the front area where Sammo had dozed off in his chair. The girl had since left leaving the three on their own. As Neel passed, he kicked his friend unceremoniously. “Wake up. This is not a hotel.”

Neel withdrew from a cupboard a bottle of hard rice wine and three tiny plastic pink cups. “My daughter's dinner set. Perfect for you boys. You're a joke!” he spat to the side as he poured. “There are no cameras here. So I'll say what I want to say.” He passed out the cups. “The black wolf used to mean something. I've done this for thirty years. I've never seen a class like this. What is General Krenn thinking? I thought he was old school. Look at you two. Wrapped in cotton wool. Untouchable. The chosen of the chosen. All with your captains holding your hand. You can't put a foot wrong.” He lifted his cup to the caring and compulsory photo staring down from the wall. “The Great Leader.”

Sabienn and his friend followed suit. “The Great Leader.” They downed the contents of their cups and gagged a little on its kick.

Neel studied the pink plastic. “You pair make me sick. And you?” He stared daggers down on Sabienn. “Go call Security,” he mimicked unkindly. “I hope they cut your heart out. Little shit.”

He slammed the bottle on the table. “Take another boys. Then don't let the door hit you on the way out.” Disappearing to the back area, the pair looked at each other and refilled their cups.

“What was that about?” enquired Sammo quietly. “You got your clearance, didn't you?”

“Of course,” said Sabienn, keeping the mood light. He put his clothes on but left his wolf exposed. “Look at that beauty.”

“As long as you earned it,” said Sammo smiling.

Sabienn drained his cup and smiled back to his friend. “Later.” He was out

the door and stood on the street.

A bitter-sweet mixture of emotions filled him as he stood there. *As long as I earned it*, he thought and looked back at the door front. *Arrakaz Neel. Call me a little shit, you bald prick. And Krenn blocks me.* He looked down at the artwork he treasured now above all things. *As long as I earned it? You are rightfully mine, aren't you? Is everyone going to look at me like I'm incomplete?* Up the street there was rowdy behaviour. There were several men beating their chests. Everyone was in town to see The Great Leader. *I need a drink. And I need to hit someone.*

## 2. Jarrnee

Sabienn found the welcoming door of a bar with a rancid bad smelling wooden floor. He set up two shots of rice wine on the bar which he downed smartly, making him belch and stagger as it kicked like a horse. His head began to swim and he clenched and unclenched his fists.

On the footpath, Sabienn looked up and down. This was an area inhabited by the Turr people. He watched them on the street, pull hats down over their face to cover up. Their ears were a little larger and pointed at the top and in the bottom lobe almost triangular. *Define Turr*, Sabienn thought. *The people who live amongst us on the planet. Similar in physiology to humans. But will you ever become anything as noble as a human? Stupid Turrs. The Great Leader doesn't like you and I don't like you either.*

Sabienn walked by the shops, some with boarded up display. A few shops had already been sprayed with a large red "S" to symbolise their status as "Sharpies". Some merchants displayed the loyalty sign. A standard poster in patriotic colours which read "This shop supports locals. Buy Hayddland. All hail The Great Leader." They'd sticky-taped their allegiance to the glass in the hope it wouldn't get broken tomorrow.

He saw a number of shops had "For Sale" signs. The shops had been there as long as he'd been there. There was a milk shop with Turr dairy where he'd buy cheese, a tailor where he'd once had his trousers taken up and a trophy store where once he got a good deal on a chess tournament prize. All were gone.

*Why do you even bother opening your doors?* Sabienn directed his thoughts with contempt on some Turrs walking on the other side of the street. *Why do you swim against the tide? There's a whole lot of water coming for you. And I'll be on the wave. Right there at the front.*

Out of a grocery store, a mother and her little girl left quickly pulling their cloaks and hats over their heads. They rushed towards Sabienn who saw the girl. She was possibly five years of age and she lost her hat to reveal her curly hair and Turr ears.

Without much effort he changed course to stand in front of her and made hands like claws of a wild beast. His teeth were bared in front of her face. "RARHHH!"

He watched the girl's face turn petrified. Her big dark brown round eyes were in shock against her pale skin. Someone had already given the girl a "cut along here"; a black marker pen dotted line along the left ear lobe. It marked a desire to collect it when she was dead. She was in such a catatonic state, she began to pee herself down her legs.

Her mother swiftly gathered her hat and covered her ears and then picked her up and swept her away.

Sabienn watched them disappear up the street. *I've just made a little girl lose her lunchtime fruit juice. Right down her leg, he thought. On a scale of one to ten, how patriotic do I feel?* He didn't feel fulfilled. He just felt empty.

"Hey!" Sabienn turned at the voice to a lone witness of the event. Lone witness in that there were a few people in the street rushing past with their eyes turned but he was the only one who wanted to bring him to book.

"That's just a kid." It was an old man begging on the steps of a closed down store. He was dressed in the white robe of an aged care facility and where the sleeves had been pulled up, there were marks; dark black splotches on old leather skin. He had white receding hair and a beard with no moustache and was selling handmade cards and figurines of angels for one kee each.

"Did you say something, old man?" As Sabienn's full muscular youth bore down and towered over him, there was a brief uncertainty in the old man's eyes.

"I'm a veteran of the Bol War," said the man defiantly. Scars could be seen on his arms remnant of that conflict thirty years ago.

"Then you fought with The Great Leader," said Sabienn, offering a begrudging respect but he was in no mood to be checked. "Don't talk to me like a child."

"But that's what you are," said the old man. "Men fight wars to realize wars are not to be fought. You're not a man. Now, go away."

The blood rose in Sabienn's face and his fists clenched. Behind the old man in the front display of the closed down store, there was still a shelf of statues and figurines and porcelain pigs and pieces. The shop window had already been daubed with its "S" and there was a crack going down and across the large window pane.

With little effort, Sabienn brought the full force of his youth behind a punch and smashed through the window. The old man was now screaming as loose glass fell to the ground. Sabienn shook his hand of the blood on his fist and viewed the figurines before him.

He picked out one of an angel with her white widespread wings outstretched at her sides and reached in and grabbed it. Now covered in his own blood, he handed it to the old man who was now cowering for life at this explosive display.



“No hard feelings, old man,” said Sabienn through gritted teeth. “You’ve given great service to the Realm. But don’t ever speak to me like a child.”

“Help me,” the old man held on to the bloodied gift and cried limply to anyone that may listen.

Quickly Sabienn left the scene before any police could arrive. But his image was probably imprinted on some surveillance camera. *There’s another nail to my coffin*, he thought.

As he turned the corner, he could feel a whole bunch more nails being hammered. Before him were four people, one of whom he had been actively trying to avoid for days. As chance would have it, he ran right into him and was now face to face.

“What have we here? Dead man walking,” said the new arrival. Jarrnee Krenn was in Sabienn’s graduating group. He was the son of the Academy boss General Boxx Krenn, the man who blocked Sabienn’s tattoo.

Jarrnee wasn’t as tall as Sabienn but he had a similar build. What set him apart was his brown hair with multiple bleached streaks and a sparkling earring which made his head look like an exotic chocolate. Also the purple and white cloak he wore was from the fashion house “Place” and had its brand plastered over its back and up the sleeve.

He was flanked by three other classmates, Pattee Standd, whom he had his arm around, and the twins Shyne and Cole Dryde.

“Word gets around. You had to get the black wolf. Why’nt you show Pattee your mark?” Jarrnee continued pulling Pattee in closer to him.

It was an unusual partnership, Jarrnee and Pattee, and Sabienn could see she was not completely fluid with his touch.

“Please say you didn’t get it,” asked Pattee quietly.

Sabienn liked Pattee because they dated briefly. She was interesting, informed, and intelligent, gave him the best sex of his life and then dumped him.

Her figure was much to his liking. Short and stocky. Not fat but muscular, with ample breasts and hips. *And if it’s the Pattee I know*, thought Sabienn, *she would have been more interested in cuddling up to the office rather than the human it was attached to. And Jarrnee, of course, isn’t much of a human.*

“Why would she want to see my mark?” Sabienn said. “She’s already got a wolf.”

Indeed Pattee nailed her wolf with distinctions and credits. It was already instilled on that lovely back of hers behind that fickle little heart.

“Not the wolf,” Jarrnee continued. “Show her the other one.”

Not to be outdone in a challenge, Sabienn started unbuttoning his tunic with his bloodied hand. “Sure, Krenn. You show me your mark and I’ll show you

mine.”

“Oh when you take your shirt off Feel, you’ll see both,” called Jarnnee. “Because that wolf you have is mine. When your heart’s ripped out, that wolf will be *mine*.”

“Honestly,” Pattee’s tone was exasperated. “You’re like two peas in a pod. If you boys had hit the books when you had the chance, you wouldn’t be fighting.”

“I got my wolf fair and square,” Sabienn threw his tunic to the ground and looked Jarnnee squarely in the eye. “I was ninety-nine. And you were one hundred and one.”

Pattee tried to move between them, “You make that sound like it’s something to be proud of.”

“Even Fat-boy Willninn beat you,” continued Sabienn keeping his gaze on Jarnnee. “He was one hundred. Fat-boy! You remember Fat-boy, hey Cole.”

Cole Dryde stepped forward. “Oh, I wasn’t in this fight. But I am now.”

Now being drawn into the argument, the Dryde twins were identical in appearance being tall and fit, save for Shyne’s habit of bleaching his hair white to distinguish him from his brother’s black. They were also identical in ability in that as far as the rankings go for the black wolf, Sabienn was looking at number one and number two, Shyne and Cole respectively. They were athletically and academically untouchable and their marksmanship was pin-point. But their personalities could not have been more different.

“I don’t mind saying this, Feel.” continued Cole. “I don’t care who hears it. I hate your guts.”

“Oh drop it brother,” Shyne said. “That was ten years ago. Move on, will you?”

*Ten years?* Sabienn thought, surprised at the passage of time. *That long? I was such a jerk then. But if Cole keeps biting, I’ll keep throwing out that bait.*

The incident that Cole couldn’t let go was something Sabienn wasn’t proud of. Every person there knew of the incident. Every person there knew of everyone’s incident.

It harked back to the first year of high school when Cole was set upon by a gang of boys that Sabienn hung around. Because Cole couldn’t speak properly, they grabbed him and shoved his head in a school toilet. The last person to sit on the pedestal was Willninn Fateel, well-known for his consumption of garlic, spiced pig and black onions. Sabienn wasn’t the one holding his head down, but he was the one standing over him shouting “Freak! Freak!” It was an act Sabienn nearly got expelled for.

“You took out the silver medal in public speaking,” continued Shyne to his brother. “You should thank him for being a dick.”

“Thank you.” Sabienn accepted the slight in good faith. *As Shyne says I was a dick when I was a kid. Some may argue I still am.*

As compared to his intense and dark brooding brother, Shyne was an enigma of light. He had the number one spot for the wolf, so he was capable, but he was also bright, popular, breezy and easy-going.

Sabienn knew him well as the captain of their swim team and he’d joined him many a time in inter-Academy relay races. They were both strong swimmers but Shyne always brought the final leg home. He was a star performer in the pool and the pool parties afterwards because his long white locks attracted a lot of pretty girls. And Shyne made sure the others rode the coat-tails of his popularity.

“So where’s this other mark you keep banging on about, old boy? The one on his arm,” Shyne said, throwing down the challenge to Jarnnee to put up or shut up.

“Feel, show us your arm.” Jarnnee moved forward to grab Sabienn’s left forearm and pulled it extended to reveal the inner fleshy surface. But it was clean. There was nothing there.

“What?” Jarnnee was not feeling calm about this. “Where’s it gone? What have you done with it?”

“What do you mean, what’s he done with it,” Pattee said. “It was black marker pen, not a tattoo.”

“Well that’s a bit of bad, old man,” Shyne grinned with delight. “There’s been all this gossip over this alleged mark that no-one’s seen. Now it looks like there’s no mark, no evidence, no review. How’s old dad going to feel?”

“No black wolf,” Pattee offered blankly to her partner. “Not for you.”

“Shut-up!” Jarnnee was livid now. It was plain to see this partnership with Pattee wouldn’t last the evening.

“Wait a minute,” said Sabienn. “People are talking about this?” He stretched out his clean inner arm where once something had been written.

“Everyone knows you’re a cheat, Feel,” offered Cole. “I hope you die.”

Sabienn looked down at his arm. *If there’s no mark, there’s no challenge*, he thought. *And everyone’ll say behind my back, “There goes Feel the cheat.” But I know I’m right. I can fight this. And if I front the General, I can wipe the smirk off Jarnnee’s face.*

“Cole,” Sabienn called to his enemy. “You’d want to see me die?”

“Gladly.”

“Lend me your black marker,” said Sabienn.

“With pleasure.” Cole produced his marker he kept for Turr harassment and passed it to his foe.

“Say,” Pattee always called Sabienn “Say” when she was trying to be his

mother. "You don't need to do this. This's stupid. You're in the clear."

"No," Sabienn was insistent. "I want this challenge."

"Y'know I admire you, Say," Shyne was bemused. "Always willing to snatch defeat. Right from the jaws of victory."

Grabbing the marker, Sabienn placed back the letters that had faded from his inner arm.

SEMEN

"That's it?" Shyne squinted at the small letters. "This is a joke, right?"

"SEMEN," Jarnnee now seeing a chance through his opponent's stupidity leapt to his usual rant. "Why does Feel write this on his arm just before the War Criminals exam. Cole, you understand. Who are these people?"

"SEMEN. Short for Seem, Ell, Mee, Erp and Note. The butchers of the plain." Cole recited without emotion. "Escaped without trace."

"Well anyone can write SEMEN on their arm. Doesn't prove much." Shyne was in fine form with his argument. He had a good future as legal counsel if he set his mind to it. "And the usual mnemonic is MEENS. Mee was the leader."

"And if MEENS was on his arm, we'd know he was cheating." Jarnnee implored, trying to get purchase in the gravel of his argument. "So he writes SEMEN."

"And SEMEN is the order in which the arrest warrants came out," Cole smirked, happy to put the foe away. "Which was the question on the test."

"Yes, and you came up to me, with my sleeves rolled up," Sabienn said to Jarnnee. "You see SEMEN on my arm. And you tell me that question could be on the test. Yes or no? You'd be on camera. Yes or no?"

"Yes," said Jarnnee.

"Well how'd you know it was on the test?" said Sabienn.

Jarnnee stopped to think where this train of thought was going. "From previous papers."

"No it wasn't," Sabienn pushed on. "It was a new question."

"He's right y' know, Jarnnee," Shyne was revelling in Jarnnee's discomfort. "Ha! Did you have a little sneak preview of the test, old boy? And you still lucked out at one hundred and one. This gets better and better."

"Shut-up!" Jarnnee was fighting for words. "But you wrote SEMEN on your arm."

"I like writing SEMEN on my arm. It's my body," said Sabienn feeling the tide of opinion move his way.

"SEMEN's a word like any other, Jarnnee," said Pattee, trying hard to calm his growing frustration.

"Oh!" Jarnnee turned on her. "And you'd know all about semen, wouldn't

you?”

The three men around Jarrnee went quiet at the ungallant back-handed insult given to someone they considered their sister.

“Oh, Jarrnee,” Pattee was as sweet as a peach. “Promises, promises. Don’t talk about things you can’t deliver.”

“Ouch,” smiled Sabienn.

Jarrnee was wild and animated now. “That’s my mark! You cheated!” cried Jarrnee.

“You cheated first!” Sabienn countered.

“Come on, old boy. Hold back here.” Shyne’s attempts to steady the situation were useless.

“Mine!” Jarrnee rushed forward and was now gripping the skin of Sabienn’s tattoo.

Sabienn felt the scratching of his nails digging into his mark. He knew nothing about tattoos but was really worried the inking may get damaged or his perfect mark would look deformed.

“Get out, you prick!” Sabienn pushed Jarrnee back and felt the blood rise in his face and fists.

Jarrnee threw a punch which Sabienn easily got inside of to push an elbow into his throat and grip the back of his neck with the same left arm. He then came around his opponent’s back and put a choke-hold on with his right forearm. They both fell to the ground and Sabienn pulled him in between two garbage bins, threading among cardboard lying there.

The others were now shouting for him to come to his senses. He felt Shyne’s boots kicking him on the shins but he held on.

*Eight seconds*, thought Sabienn. That was generally regarded as the limit for a choke-hold. Anything beyond could cause permanent brain damage or even death. *But I don’t care.*

He made up his mind he was just going to hold on. One second gone. *All the troubles you’ve caused me, you little bastard*, he thought. He made up his mind that he was going to end them. Two seconds. *I’m sick of you Jarrnee, sick of your dad, sick of everything.* Three seconds.

“Stop!” cried Pattee, beside herself with terror.

“Get off!” Cole kicked Sabienn repeatedly.

The others were now pulling out bins and cardboard. But they still couldn’t reach him. Four seconds. He was prepared to hang on for as long as it took. He felt Jarrnee’s struggle trying to get fingers into his eyes but he pulled his head closer to his back. Five seconds.

There was still fight in him but any move he made Sabienn countered deftly.

*Take your last breath. Six seconds.*

Bang!

A shovel was pushed through the top and hit Sabienn on the forehead. It cut the top of his brow and made him see stars. Jarnnee took control of the brief release in pressure to break free of his hold, and started thumping Sabienn's chest in retaliation.

"You're finished! You little shit! You're gone!" cried Jarnnee. He gagged and coughed and drew in precious air as he pulled himself to his feet and started kicking his assailant's shins.

*Who was that?* Sabienn's mind was wild. He chambered his fist ready to plant it between the eyes of whomever it was that hit him with that shovel.

Sabienn pulled himself out of the entanglement of the cardboard and pulled himself to his knees. He saw the shovel in someone's hands and made a lunge towards them.

It was then his eyes lifted and he was looking into the radiant face and deep brown eyes of Joallee, Jarnnee's younger sister.

"That's enough now," she said calmly, still with a steely grip on her shovel.

Sabienn looked up at her and melted. He went limp like a puppy.

### 3. Joallee

Seeing Sabienn's deflation, Joallee tossed her shovel aside and tended to her brother. She was perfectly qualified to do so as she studied Medicine at Anise, the student med school.

It appeared that Jarnnee suffered nothing more than a bruising of his neck, to go along with that of his ego. But he was still seething. "You're finished!" he said to Sabienn.

In fact Sabienn looked on at his fashionable purple and white "Place" cloak still draped around him and saw only his own blood staining the white patch on its left shoulder. There was no arguing who was the worse for wear.

"Pattee? Cole?" Joallee had an air of calm control. "Can you walk him to emergency please? Just for a check."

Jarnnee was helped up to his feet by Cole and Pattee who together walked him away from the situation, swearing and threatening. The girls looked at one another and there appeared to be a brief roll of the eyes.

It was now Sabienn's turn to receive some patch-up work as a small packet of aseptic supplies were produced from her cloak pocket. The antiseptic stung as she started mopping up the wound she caused on his head. She then tended to the scratches on his chest.

"Sorry for the inconvenience," Sabienn did his best to sound conciliatory.

"Don't lie." It was a blank response.

She pulled a small shard of glass from his right knuckles and dressed them as best she could. As she did so, Sabienn stole some quick glances down her neckline at her small but enticing breasts as the cloak parted at the top. He effectively crossed his legs to prevent further embarrassment.

"All patched up, old man." Shyne helped his friend to his feet. "Let me buy a dead man a drink."

"I'm not going to die," said Sabienn.

"Oh come on, Sabienn," said Shyne. "You were cheating. No-one writes SEMEN on their arm. And you're on camera. The General's not going to let that go. Oh and have I forgotten something? Oh wait. You almost killed junior. Good move, old man."

"But I'm right," pleaded Sabienn.



“Did you hear a word I said?” insisted Shyne. “The General’s gunning for you. And what the General wants, he gets.”

“Let’s all go,” said Joallee, threading her arm through Shyne’s to hold his hand. Sabienn felt a pang of jealousy but his friends, with his white hair and her mousy brown, did look beautiful together. A fact he couldn’t deny.

They walked for five minutes indulging in small talk and headed for a local watering hole and club many of their friends inhabited called “Queen To Rook Three”.

As his friends chatted, Sabienn looked at the doorman with trepidation. “Can we find somewhere else?” Sabienn pleaded.

“Nonsense,” Shyne said, “They know me here.”

“They know *me* too,” said Sabienn. “I used to work here two years ago.”

“Oh, I know,” replied Shyne. “You got the sack. I know you, Say. Everyone knows you. A cheat and a thief. We still love you.”

It was still early but there was a large crowd taking a meal in before their pilgrimage to Salt Stadium. The doorman stood arms folded and bored. Until he saw Sabienn. Then the hand went up. “You two, come. This man, no.”

“Oh come on,” Shyne unfolded himself and offered grand arguing gestures like the lawyer he should be. “This man will be dead in two days’ time. His heart will be ripped from him and shoved in his face. Surely your establishment can allow me to buy him a beer. It would be the only decent thing to do.”

Slyly in his hand, Shyne proffered a ten kee note which the doorman accepted furtively. “I’ll vouch for him, old boy. There’ll be no problems.”

“Sure.” The doorman stood back to let the three pass, but still shot Sabienn a poisonous glance. “Nothing’s too good for the Diamond.” Shyne seemed to revel in his nickname.

Joallee left temporarily to check in her cloak, leaving the boys on their own.

“You know I saw you looking at her cleavage,” Shyne said. Sabienn was expecting a punch in the nose. “It’s OK,” he continued. “You can be one of the first to know. We broke up last night. The field’s open, old boy. But treat her right.”

Both men looked on at her at the counter. A surge of hormones rushed through Sabienn’s veins. *Joallee’s on the market*, he thought. *Can I believe what I’m hearing?* He touched his wallet in his back pants to make sure there was the reliable bump of an army issue rubber there fresh in its sealed packet.

“Beautiful girl,” Shyne continued. “But kind of weird. Broke up because she says, “She knows me”. If she knows me, what’s not there to like. Enjoy your last two days with her. Get a table. I’ll get some drinks.”

Inside the club, the tables were three-quarters full and he managed to slip into

a booth at the back. There was the general good cheer and hubbub of a crowd in good spirits.

After checking in her garment, Joallee slipped into the booth seat beside Sabienn. She appeared nervous and looked to see where the cameras were in the room. There was a camera to the rear of them but the back of the booth shielded its sightline.

Carrying a tray with two beers and an orange juice, Shyne returned and distributed. His arrival at the table seemed to cause a stir at a table of females nearby, sending quick glances and smiles his way.

“Well”, Shyne lifted his glass. “Cheers.” They all clinked glasses. “From Doc and the Diamond to our friend, Captain Deathwish.” He raised his glass to Sabienn. “The nicest man I’ll never know.” They each took a draft of liquid. “You know, you should make up with Cole. Its bad energy to die with enemies. He’s not that bad.”

“I’ll think about it,” Sabienn took a sip. “But I’m not planning on dying. Randd’ll get me off.”

“Pure Deathwish. Keep thinking that way.” Shyne turned to Joallee. “Doc, I don’t know if you heard this one. We had PE class with Beefhead. He wants respect so he’s waving a pistol around. Points it at Sabienn. “Have I got a bullet or a blank?” And Say says, “Pull the trigger and find out.” He didn’t know what to do. We’re gonna miss you, Say. You’re crazy. Everyone likes you. Does anything for a dare.”

Joallee placed her orange juice down. “He does everything for a dare. His black wolf’s a dare. He’s a pleaser.”

“Oh you *know* him too,” Shyne looked into her eyes. There was obviously still a bit of niggle in their break-up.

Shyne placed his glass down. “Cole wants to change his nickname. After something The Great Leader once said. He’s now the Hot Cold Coal. He’s intense, that boy.” Once again he turned to his ex-partner. “But you’d know that too.”

Shyne picked up his glass, drained it then placed it back down. “If you’ll excuse me.” He stood to leave. “I have some business to attend to. So old boy, I’m not very good at goodbyes so.. Goodbye.” With that he left and walked across the room.

Sabienn looked to Joallee at his side. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to die.”

“I’m not worried,” she said. “I think your chances are better than you think.”

“Why d’you say that?” Sabienn said.

She looked him in the eye. “Because I know you.”

Sabienn smirked. “You know nothing about me.”

“Uh-huh.” Joallee sipped her juice and placed it down. “How many women have you had sex with?”

“Wh..?” The question had his hormones in a speedway. He quickly checked the bump of the ready-to-use rubber in the back of his pants. *Say something sophisticated*, he thought. *Don’t look inexperienced.*

“Well .. FFF .. Twenty.”

“You’ve had three,” she said. “Pattee Standd down by the gun range. And two women unknown by the beach.”

“What?” He was shocked. “Are you keeping a book on me?”

“I keep a book on everyone,” she said, sipping her juice.

Sabienn stared forward, “Well how many..?”

Joallee cut him short. “You’re too much of a gentleman to ask that.” She smiled and took another sip. “I like you, Say.”

“I like you too,” said Sabienn. “I mean, I hate your dad. And your dad hates me. But at least you’ve got a father. And your mum’s a treasure. What’s she see in him?”

She stayed quiet sipping her drink. She obviously had an affection for her father but Sabienn knew him as a ruthless and brutal man.

Sabienn continued, “I never knew my mum and dad. You know that. Taken in the bus crash. Along with Pattee’s and Shyne’s. Sometimes I wish I was you. Just have a mum and dad. Just to know where I came from.”

Joallee drained her juice and slammed the glass down. “You need to wake up. You’re in a sleep.” She looked around. “There’s statistics on file. For the stretch of road where the bus went. What was the safety record for that year?” She looked him in the eye. “One hundred percent.”

“That can’t be right.” Sabienn was staggered.

“Look it up,” she said.

“I don’t get it.”

“I like you, Say.”

“Well I like you too,” he replied.

They sat in silence staring ahead.

“Why’re you saying these things?” Sabienn said.

She sat in silence for a while. “I’ve said too much.” She threaded her arm into Sabienn’s and held his hand. “Promise you won’t tell. About what we’re saying.”

“Of course,” he said.

He looked in her eyes and felt sorry. *She’s beautiful*, he thought. *But deluded. Why would she rail against every truth I’ve been given for my whole life?* He lifted his fingers to push her hair back.

“Why don’t we go to the beach? It’ll clear your head,” Sabienn said.

“No,” she said quietly.

“Why?”

She looked straight at him. “Because I know you.” He fell back in his seat and pulled his hand away from her. She continued in earnest. “The question is do you know you? Who are you, Sabienn? Look, I’d better go. Just promise me one thing.” She got up to leave and leaned in close to him. “That you’ll wake up.”

With that she left him stranded in his thoughts. Sabienn felt disoriented and irritated and in a place where he shouldn’t be. Everyone around him was happy and involved in small talk over small things. *All I want to do is hit someone now. Why should other people be happy?*

Carrying his beer he walked across the room and saw a cadet he was acquainted with in one of the lower classes. Sabienn only knew him as Robo and he was drinking and laughing with friends.

“Hey, Sabienn,” said Robo. A brief greeting was given as he pushed himself into their company.

“Hey, I’ve got one.” One of Robo’s friends put his glass down and put his hands over his eyes. “A Turr mine-sweeper.” He started tapping the ground ahead with his right foot. Everyone giggled including Sabienn who giggled a lot more than the joke needed.

“Hey,” said Sabienn. “What’s the difference between a Turr and a bucket of shit? The bucket.”

Everyone giggled politely, a little more laboured than natural. It just wasn’t a funny joke.

“I’ve got one,” Robo said. “What’s a Turr say after sex? Thanks mum.”

More giggles but Sabienn was in a strange rapture over the joke. He was laughing but there wasn’t a trace of humour in his act.

“Hey steady on there,” Robo tried to settle him as they were attracting glances.

At the end of the bar serving customers, Sabienn saw the co-manager of the club, Eel Turk. He was a Turr offering quiet conversation to two Turr men and polished his wine glasses in deep thought.

“Hey Eel!” Sabienn shouted across the room attracting his glance.

“That’s enough.” Robo felt the eyes of the room descend upon him and his friends.

“No no!” Sabienn pushed him aside. “Eel! My friend’s got a great joke!” The crowd were a little subdued now and watching to see what happened next. “What’s a Turr say after sex?” Turk slammed his glass on to the counter and came around to shut the situation down. “Thanks dad!” Sabienn continued, raising his glass in mock salute and drained its last draft.

Before Turk could arrive, Sabienn felt a firm grip on his left arm. “How the hell did you get in?” It was Turk’s partner and the other co-manager, Raydlinn Fyde. He was human and the burly security boys that flanked him very much were human as well.

“Can’t I see my old boss?” Sabienn barbed him.

Eel arrived and stood face to face with him. “Feel, I want you out of here. But before you go, one last time, tell me what you did with them?”

“With what?” said Sabienn.

“Don’t play games,” Eel continued. “I’m talking to you like a man. The things you took from the safe.” Sabienn feigned puzzlement as Eel added. “You took a pair of earrings and a notebook that belonged to my mother. Now they’re worthless, to anyone else.”

“I didn’t take anything,” said Sabienn.

Eel grabbed his shoulders and shook him. “What’d you do with them? What did you do?”

“I didn’t steal them.” Sabienn kept up his surly act. “You stupid Turr. Why’re you in my face? Why’re you talking to me?”

Pushing him back, Eel Turk spat at the floor in front of him. “Get this piece of shit out of here.”

“You weren’t much of a boss,” Sabienn pushed back into his face. He could see his old boss up close and saw remnants of a “cut along here” on his earlobe. “Making me clean toilets. Making me work back with no pay. Always slagging me off. You’re one of the reasons I hate you people.”

“Get him out!” Eel turned to walk away.

Fyde now had a firm grip on his arm and was leading Sabienn towards the kitchen door.

Sabienn offered a parting shot. “The table’s turned Eel. We’re gunning for you,” He made a pistol with his fingers shooting towards Eel who was looking back. “We’re gunning for you, sharpie.”

They crashed through the door, grazed the hot stove and pushed through the back door into the rear alley. No-one was around.

Sabienn’s back was pushed up against the wall and Fyde laid some fists into his cheek. He pummelled while the boys held the arms then pushed Sabienn to the pavement. The cadet took two kicks to the ribs before Fyde stopped and stood back. “Thieving shit.”

The assailants withdrew to the warmth of the club, leaving Sabienn to lift himself and sit against the wall.

With his eyes staring at the ground, he heard footsteps coming towards him and wondered if there were going to be further kicks to the body. But a familiar

voice greeted him. “Hey, man. You look like shit.”

Looking up, Sabienn gazed upon the chubby face of his room-mate at the Academy, Wylio Wyde. By contrast with Sabienn, he was fully decked out and neat in his crisp dress uniform. It was the one ordered for tonight for all those attending the night rally. The tunic of charcoal with the cream left lapel to mark their status of belonging to Salt Academy.

“Thanks.” Sabienn appreciated the comment on his appearance.

“Get up, man,” said Wylio, who was unusually no-nonsense. “I’ve got instructions. Captain Randd wants to see you at his home. He’s not happy.”

*Captain Randd, thought Sabienn. This day gets better and better.*

## 4. Captain Randd

As they made their way back to Salt Academy, Sabienn borrowed from Wyllo his clean handkerchief and tissues to clean up the blood from his face.

“How’re the ribs?” enquired Wyllo.

Considering he’d taken quite a pummelling, Sabienn walked freely. “Not bad. How’d you find me?”

“I was told to look where you shouldn’t be. Did you get it?” Wyllo looked to Sabienn’s chest.

“Check this,” said Sabienn, pulling back his cloak and shirt to reveal his treasured mark.

It was clear that Wyllo enjoyed the whole theatre of the reveal. “Wow. What a hot wolf. Man, that’s cool.”

“Neel said it was the best one he did all day,” said Sabienn, now tucking his tattoo away to keep it warm.

They’d reached the outskirts of Salt Academy. Its lawns and gardens were impeccably manicured. Young cadets were marching up and down the parade ground in the way that both Sabienn and Wyllo had done a million times.

“Let’s get you cleaned up proper,” said Wyllo, steering his friend toward the dorm. “D’ you think there’s going to be a war?”

“A war?” The comment came out of left field for Sabienn. “I hope so.”

“Why?”

“Why not?” said Sabienn. “We’ve trained our whole lives for war. We’ve been five years at Academy. If there’s going to be no war, what’ve we trained for?”

“But why fight?” Wyllo’s comment was calm and philosophical.

“Why not?” Sabienn looked to his friend. “War is the ultimate test of a man. A man becomes a man. And in fifty years’ time, we’ll polish our medals. You see the old soldiers telling stories of the Bol War? I’ve seen those guys. Just to have other people know bullets flew over your head. Real bullets. They look like giants. They stood the test. That’ll be us.”

“But man, aren’t you scared?” asked Wyllo.

“I don’t fear any man alive.” Sabienn’s chest was out.

“What about any man dead?” said Wyllo.



“What?”

“D’ you fear any man dead?” said Wyllo matter-of-factly.

Sabienn was feeling this conversation was getting weird but looked to his friend whose appearance had turned pale and unwell. “Are you OK?”

“I feel like I’m gonna hurl,” said Wyllo. “I’ve felt off since I came from the Dee.” Wyllo was the only person Sabienn knew who called Grand Defence Beach, the Dee. “If I say something, you won’t think I’m crazy?”

“No more than normal,” said Sabienn.

Wyllo’s face was dead serious. “I was down at the Dee. The water was great. There’s no-one on the beach. There’s no-one in the sea with me. And I hear voices.”

Sabienn thought he’d play along. “What’d they say?”

“It’s crazy,” said Wyllo, sensing he wasn’t being taken seriously. “There are dead men in the sea. And they want me.”

Sabienn shook his head. He knew Wyllo liked a drink but he couldn’t smell anything on him. “Dead men can’t hurt you, Wyllo. Dead men are dead.” Sabienn’s attention span could only stay so long for things that were not about him. “Let’s get you to the bathroom and get some water on your face. Whatever you do, don’t go to the doctor. She’ll keep you home from the Stadium.”

“I know,” said Wyllo. “I want to see The Great Leader so bad. Are you going to the Dee after?”

“I’ll be there,” said Sabienn.

In the dorms, the pair headed to the common bathroom where Sabienn found a basin to clean his wounds. Wyllo found a nice toilet to sit beside and hurl his lunch up.

“Oh, man,” said Wyllo, wiping his mouth. “It’s my best uniform. I’ve got chuck on the lapel.”

“Use some of my wipes,” offered Sabienn. “In the usual drawer.”

“Thanks. I’ll stay here for a minute,” said Wyllo, but added sternly. “Get to the Captain. Go straight there. I was supposed to walk you over.” Wyllo was genuinely worried about disobeying his order. “The bus leaves at six for the stadium. Save me a seat.”

Sabienn was about to reply when Wyllo made another lunge for the bowl next to him to empty more of his stomach. Without another word, Sabienn went to his room.

The room was clean and orderly with his and Wyllo’s bunk immaculately made. The caring gaze of The Great Leader looked down from a portrait on the wall.

He laid his uniform out on his bunk. The order was charcoal dress which was

good because he wanted his lucky tunic, the one he'd sat his exams in. But there was a sauce stain on the lower left hem. With a wipe from his dresser, he cleaned it as much as he could.

There was a wet patch after the clean. *Don't let me down, lucky tunic*, he thought. *This won't be the first wet patch I get tonight. Come on, wolf. Get me lucky. Those ladies'll be fighting me down on the beach. That's the kind of an invasion I can handle.*

Sabienn wiped down the cream left lapel to tidy up the colour more. Every academy on Hayddland was going to be present at the stadium. Every academy had its own colour lapel. *Cream's my colour. Old Salt Academy.*

He didn't want an undershirt. He needed to unbutton his tunic to show and flash around his new mark. There'd be a chill tonight so he knew he was going to feel it.

With that, he dressed quickly and made his way to Captain Randd's living quarters. *If he's home, Tesser must be sick again*, Sabienn thought, fondly thinking of the Captain's daughter.

She was a popular kid with the members of his class because she was seven years old and full of spirit. Her parents even let Sabienn tutor her history, even though he was probably the least qualified to do so.

On his way to the area where teachers had their living quarters, Sabienn stopped at a fruit stall to buy a bag of oranges and dates, the ones she liked.

The compound for the teachers held single level style group housing each with its own small private courtyard. As he reached the door of the Captain's house, his wife was pulling on a cloak to leave. Ambell Grayne did shifts as a nurse at the same hospital Joallee studied at. She was always quiet and pleasant to him and he was never unwelcome.

Sabienn stepped in as she pulled on her bag. "Must go, dear," she said, as she was leaving. "From what I hear, it's lucky you didn't get the wolf." She offered air kisses and departed.

"Thanks." A look around the unit showed it was simply furnished for simple pleasures. There were cloaks, shoes, a little pink umbrella and three suitcases next to the door.

His attention was swayed by the bouncing ball of joyous energy skipping through the corridor that was Tesser Grayne. "Sabienn, do you have something for me? Did you buy me anything?"

He held the bag out for her face to light up. "Now don't eat them all. Save some for lessons. Is your Daddy home?"

They walked to the living area, once again with simple furnishing and warm family photos on the wall.

“Daddy’s in the study,” said Tesser. Sabienn placed down his bag of fruit and lined up three oranges on the table.

“OK. Three oranges.” He points to each in turn. “Our planet Whee, then there’s Chee and then there’s the good old Earth. How old are you, Tesser?”

Tesser pointed to each in turn and sang her rhyme. “Seven Whee years, is seven Chee years, is six Earth years, these are the birth years.”

“Very good. How old am I?” said Sabienn.

“Twenty-three Whee years, is twenty-four Chee years, is twenty-one Earth years, these are the birth years.”

“Good. Now date for dates.” He held up a date in front of her. “The Thousand Year War? Beginning?”

“Fifteen thirty,” said Tesser.

“End?” asked Sabienn.

“Twenty-four sixty.”

She was given her date which she gladly chomped on as she answered the rest of her test. For each question she was given a date which she lined up on the table.

“The Purge? Beginning?” said Sabienn.

“Twenty-four sixty,” said Tesser.

“End?”

“Twenty-four sixty five.”

“The Three Brother Prophets birthday?” said Sabienn.

“Nine thirty-three.”

“Death day? The Great Blue Prophet Tenber and the Green Prophet Danber?” said Sabienn.

“Nine seventy-three.”

“The Red Prophet Hulber?”

“Nine eighty-five.”

“Good. Very good.” Sabienn passed an extra date which was gladly received.

“OK. More events,” he said. “Curl War, beginning?”

“Forty-nine twenty.”

“Penn War, beginning?”

“Forty-nine thirty.”

“Bol War, beginning?” said Sabienn.

“Forty-nine ninety-two,” said Tesser.

“Are you torturing my little girl again?” Captain Seely Randd entered the room. He was a tall fit man of about forty years with greying temples and wide brown eyes. His figure was covered in his old staff cloak. Sabienn could sense that his manner towards him was tense.

“She’s sharp. Much sharper than me.” Sabienn offered to lighten the air.

“Everyone’s sharper than you.” Randd’s reply was without humour.

“I have two dates left.” Sabienn said to Tesser once more, holding the fruit in his hand. “Birthdays. Orlo Cupp?”

“Thirty-two thirty-three.” Tesser was still excited to get more.

“The Great Leader?”

“Forty-nine sixty.”

“OK,” Sabienn held up his hands. “I’m cleaned out. You’re too good.”

“Look Daddy,” Tesser pointed to her oranges. “The Earth, Chee and Whee.”

Randd picked up one of the fruit. “I’m feeling a little peckish, dear. Would you mind if I eat the Earth?”

“Of course,” she said. “I hope it’s not too dry?”

At that moment their native man servant Cheerful appeared to take freshly made bread from the oven. The heavenly smell of the oven’s contents filled the room and made a welcome distraction from the conversation.

“Cheerful?” said Randd. “We’ll take coffee in the courtyard for two please.”

“As you wish, sir,” bowed Cheerful.

Sabienn looked with interest upon Cheerful. *He’s alright*, he thought. *For a native*. “The bread smells fantastic,” said Sabienn to Cheerful. “I wish I had those skills.”

“If we could send you to the servant schools of Prism, Cadet,” offered Randd, “it would be a relief for us all. Thank you, Cheerful.”

Sabienn tried hard to keep the mood light. “Captain, we missed you at class. Why don’t you just let Cheerful look after Tesser when she’s sick?”

The comment was greeted with an uneasy silence. Cheerful looked at Randd filled with fear and Randd stared down Sabienn.

*Oh no*, Sabienn thought. *I put my foot in it there*.

He knew most of the teachers kept servants. Some weren’t treated as fairly as Cheerful. But he just remembered to leave a daughter home alone with a man servant, although nothing may happen, was frowned upon. And careers were often based upon being frowned upon.

Cheerful did his best to make the moment light. “May I take leave to visit the markets later, sir?” The man servant’s head was bowed in the appropriate manner.

“May I go with Cheerful?” requested Tesser innocently. Sabienn knew she had an affection for the servant as together they occasionally manned the hospital charity stalls with her mother and Joallee. “Only if your father wishes,” was Cheerful’s response.

“No more than one hour please. You’re supposed to be sick,” said Randd.

"I love you, Daddy." She rushed to hug her father. "I love you, Cheerful." She ran to hold his hand. "I think your life is so unfair. One day I want to do more for you." With that she skipped off to gather her cloak.

*Kids, thought Sabienn. They come out with the funniest things.*

"Coffee will be served immediately, sir," said Cheerful to Randd with a bow. "Would you like some bread?"

"Please." Randd gathered a folder and lead the way to the courtyard where they took a seat in the shade of a tree. He flipped through his folder in silence before closing it.

"You got your tattoo." Randd rubbed his eyes in exasperation. "I told you not too. Expressly."

Silence descended as coffee and bread was laid before them. Sabienn didn't hold on ceremony and ripped into a slice from the plate. He was ravenous.

"Captain, the tattoo's mine. I deserve it," Sabienn said in between gulps. "You said so yourself I had an 80-20 chance of beating this."

"Shut your smart mouth, boy." Randd was in no mood to be snowed. "I said an 80-20 chance of losing support. You always hear what you want to hear." He reached into his folder. "Did you see this?" It was the piece of paper with a red stamp signed by General Krenn that Arrakaz Neel had waved before Sabienn's eyes.

"No," said Sabienn looking to the floor.

"This is serious now. This came down this morning. This is a red line. You're blocked. No tattoo until the case is settled. Who gave you the mark?" Randd's voice was becoming unsteady with suppressed rage.

"Neel," said Sabienn quietly.

"Arrakaz Neel," spat Randd. "The sooner that man's head rolls the better. And you filled a Form 19 Waiver?"

"Of course," said Sabienn.

"Then you *did* see this," Randd held up the Krenn document again. Sabienn lowered his head like a naughty puppy that had been found out. "Cadet, you are a cheat, a thief and a liar. The Prince of Liars. Now let's talk about today." Randd opened his folder and removed a sheet of paper. "I have Cole Dryde to thank for a lot of this. You should be grateful. He was pleading me to be lenient. Let's see."

*Cole Dryde, Sabienn thought. Pleading to be lenient? That prick of a bastard. He'd do anything to sink that final nail.*

Randd read from his sheet. "The unlawful receipt of an official mark of the realm. Penalty if convicted. Death. Oh what's this? Intimidation of an old man. A seller with a licence. A recipient of the Star of Honour."

Sabienn was shocked. *That old guy*, he thought. *A Star of Honour? He was too puny.* The Star of Honour was a medal of bravery just under the top award of The Blue Star.

Randd continued, “Smashing private property and theft. Penalty if convicted. Five years in Mint.” Sabienn winced at the thought of doing time in Mission Mint the notorious central prison of the Realm. The Captain continued his grim tally. “Oh, this one should work in your favour. Attempt on the life of the only son of General Krenn, Principal of Salt Academy. We can only be thankful you didn’t take his only daughter down to the beach and hammer her in the dunes. Have we missed anything here?”

Sabienn held his breath for a moment to see if being cleaned up by the bouncers at Queen To Rook Three had been added to the list. He just didn’t know how much information the Captain had.

“No. That sounds good,” Sabienn replied sheepishly.

“And what’s my defence, Cadet? What is it I have to argue to save your worthless life?” continued the Captain, “That the mark, our friend SEMEN, was no longer to be seen. It was faded. Gone. But, of course, you duly rectified this. Putting it back in indelible black pen. Can I ask you a question? Are you brain dead? I mean are you seriously dead between the ears? And why am I the only one here worried?”

“But I’m right,” protested Sabienn.

“Well then defend yourself,” said Randd.

“I can’t. I need you, sir.”

“Then help *me* to help *you*.” pleaded Randd. “Stop being an idiot.”

They kept their silence for a moment and each took some coffee.

“So what are my chances?” said Sabienn quietly.

“Who are you, boy?” Randd turned his head away from the cadet to stare at some plants in his courtyard.

*Who am I? What the hell is this fascination with finding out who I am?* Sabienn’s thoughts left him irritated. *How can I tell anyone? I haven’t a clue who I am myself.* The coffee must have been strong. When Sabienn sipped another draft, he felt detached and calm. When he finally spoke it was like he was almost bullet-proof. “I don’t fear death. I don’t fear anyone alive. I don’t fear anyone dead. When I die I’ll see my mother and father.”

Randd was stunned by the comment. He kept quiet for what seemed like a minute. “General Krenn has kept some things of your mother and father,” he finally said quietly. By the way he spoke, it wasn’t information he was feeling easy about passing on. But he had softened from his earlier stance. “Look. There are..” He stopped the sentence to check his words. “You have.. friends. Not

without influence.”

“I have friends?” Sabienn was dumbfounded. “Who?”

Randd stared down at his papers. “That’s all I’m saying. Conversation closed.” He snapped out his words and checked the timepiece on the wall. “Your bus leaves for the stadium at six. Go. You’ll be late. Come back at ten. We need to speak more.” As he spoke, he wasn’t so much showing his charge the door as actively pushing him out it. “Ten,” snapped Randd. “Don’t be late.” The door closed in Sabienn’s face and he wandered to the footpath.

*What is it with everyone?* His thoughts were tumbling. *Why can’t anyone be straight with me?* There was then the realization that filled him with excitement. *In an hour’s time, I’ll be in the presence of The Great Leader.*

He peeled back his clothes to gaze at the black wolf on his chest that some say he shouldn’t have got and some say he didn’t deserve. Sabienn imagined The Great Leader standing in front of him, and he brandished his mark proudly. *When you see this, oh Great One, he thought. Know this. This is for you.*

He viewed his timepiece. It was late. With a spring in his step, he started running back to the dorms. The buses would be waiting.



## 5. Captain Cayninn

When Sabienn got to the bus queue, he noticed his friend Wylio Wyde was nowhere to be found. Even as some were entering the bus, he managed a quick run and look around in his room and ablutions area. But no Wylio.

His room-mate's last words to him were to save a seat. He wanted to do the right thing by his friend as he knew what it meant to him. When he came back, his group were all given the go ahead to move on to their bus.

Captain Anner Cayninn, a matronly teacher and guardian of many of the female cadets, was moving them through the door like her little chicks into the hen house. She checked their dress uniforms that they were neat and in order.

The Captain was of medium build but had the largest well-formed breasts Sabienn had ever seen on a woman. Tonight she was wearing a tunic to impress. Some sizes too small pulling her body into an unnatural capture. As Sabienn made his way to the front of the queue, he couldn't help but notice that there was a button in the centre of her chest straining to pop.

"Captain?" said Sabienn. "Cadet Wyde's missing. Have you seen Wylio?"

"I have no information on Cadet Wyde," Cayninn said, anxious to keep the line moving. "Was he ill?"

"Just a little," replied Sabienn.

"Well then there's your answer, Mr Feel," she said quickly. "You know the edict. We'll be in the presence of the greatest man on the planet. No illnesses, no viruses. Put your belt on properly through your trousers. And where's your undershirt?"

"I wanted to show this." Sabienn unbuttoned to reveal his wolf.

She pulled him aside so that he could only hear. "Who gave you this? Arrakaz Neel?"

"Yes, Ma'am," said Sabienn.

"How much did you pay?" she said sternly.

"200."

She sighed to the distance. "This will be the last time he puts us at risk. Does Randd know?"

"I've just seen him, Ma'am." Sabienn was trying to sound like everything was sorted.

“You’re blocked, you understand?” Cayninn said. “That means fifty-fifty you die.”

“Captain Randd gives me eighty-twenty,” said Sabienn.

“Randd’s a fool. And so are you. Go.” She pushed him along.

Entering the bus quickly, Sabienn found a seat and held the one next to him free for Wyllo’s eventual arrival.

He looked up and down to see the bus was in good cheer and anticipation. Normally their bus trips would take them to the places of history they’d come to adopt as the hallmark of their heritage. Like the war graves of the Thousand Year War and the battle fields of the Bol War.

This trip was different. *The Great Leader*, he thought. *I will see the glorious sunrise come up at night.*

It would be the third time Sabienn would have seen him as he made his personal visits rare. But he was always on his screen giving productivity numbers or the news on ever increasing advances of the Realm.

Captain Cayninn took the microphone as the door closed.

“Check out the button on Cannon’s tits.” Sabienn overheard a male cadet’s voice behind him whisper. “If that blows someone’s going to lose an eye.” The comment was greeted with tittering from some of the cadet’s friends. Sabienn had to smile as well. Captain Cayninn was tonight living up to her nickname. Captain Cannons.

Cheerfully she continued. “OK. There’s been a change of plan. Tonight we are going to East Falls. We need to study the slime of the speckled glow worm. That’s right, on the roof of the cave.”

“What?” There was a notable deflation in the joy of the group.

“Hope you brought sample bottles. Oh no no. That’s right. That’s not tonight. Tonight we are..” She checked a paper and feigned fumbling, “Um.. Tonight we are.. Tonight we’re going to see THE GREAT LEADER!”

The bus erupted into cheers and whistles.

When the exuberance died down a little she brought her papers up.

“OK. A little house keeping. Who are we? What’s our Academy?”

“Salt,” all came back.

“What was that?”

“Salt!”

“Can’t hear you?”

“SALT!”

“Thank you,” she said satisfied. “All academies will be there tonight. There will be Academy Pepper. Now, Pepper. What are they? Are they a bunch of wankers?”

“Yes,” cried the group with laughter.

“What are they?”

“WANKERS!”

Pepper Academy was placed to the west of the plains they called Fields of The Slaughter in the Province of Nawt. Most of the attendants went on to fill the ranks of the STL, the Realm’s Secret Police. Sabienn had heard their black lapels gave them a taste for wearing black all over.

It was also true that the bigger boys of Pepper who worked out in their gymnasiums were usually snapped up by the bodyguard details. The Ten-69 who looked out for The Great Leader and the Ten-68 which guarded The Grand Inquisitor Profound.

“Who knows anyone from Pepper?” called Cayninn, still trying to keep it light.

“Hey, I do,” said Sabienn raising his hand.

“Please share, Mr Feel.”

Sabienn got to his feet to look at his class mates. “Well I was at a tournament at Pepper. And there was this cute girl.”

“Bet you blew that one too, Deathwish,” shouted someone from the back and the bus laughed.

Sabienn ploughed on regardless. “No, I was chatting and her CO came up. And he said, “J-J, you’re a spice. Stop talking to a seasoning.” And I said, “If The Great Leader says I’m a spice, I’m a spice.” I should have got a hundred push-ups in the courtyard. But he could have been accused of doubting the big man. The Great Leader named the Academies. That could have meant a bullet for him. We both stared at each other and walked away.”

Cayninn rolled up a piece of paper into a ball. “Well thank you for regaling us with your,” she threw the rolled ball at him, “sexual exploits, Mr Feel. So everyone. Academy Cumin. How do we feel?”

There was a general murmur and one brave soul at the front offered up a hiss of disapproval.

Sabienn knew the Cumins were generally regarded as tough but fair competitors and produced great soldiers. Their academy was inconspicuously nestled in the mountains down in Hayddland’s south in the area known as The Cradle of The Resistance in the Province of Boss. It was widely appreciated that their badge of honour which they wore with their yellow-brown left lapels, was their endurance.

“Anyone know a Cumin?” called Cayninn. “Don’t be shy. It won’t get back to them.”

A girl piped up at the front and stood for all to hear. “I remember last year I

had a tournament in the Cradle. All the cadets were on parade in serried ranks sitting cross-legged in the courtyard. It was bleak and cold and the rain was piercing. But these guys and girls sat in full gear and jackets with rain dripping off their hats. Somewhere in the deep shadowed recesses under their brims were their eyes. As I passed them on my way to the function I wondered if they had eyes at all. Maybe they only sensed their surrounds. After five hours of their hospitality, hot coffee and sweet bread, I trudged back to the dorm. They were still there. In the darkness illuminated by street lights. Like immovable statues waiting to greet the sun when it rose in the east.”

Her story had the bus enthralled in silence. She turned to Cayninn, “Just remind me not to piss them off.” The comment brought relieving laughter.

“Thanks for sharing, Sandee,” said Cayninn to her microphone. “And Academy Coriander? Someone must like them?”

The bus erupted in scattered words of abuse. “No way! Those jerks! Those idiots!”

“Anyone share?” invited Cayninn.

Sabienn’s friend, Sammo, stood to cheers, particularly from some of the girls in front.

“I think I can speak for all when I say, they are complaining, whining, surly idiots.”

All cheered. It seemed everyone had an opinion on the Academy which was in the north near the Deerland graves in the upper reaches of the Province of Teel.

“I was just looking at this Coriander guy,” continued Sammo, “and suddenly I was in a fight. He said I looked at him in the eye too long. But guys, I made sure I left a bit of my own blood on his green lapel.”

“Good for you, Sammo,” cried someone.

“And man, are they filthy players or what?” said Sammo. “We had a tight scrap in football and these hands are feeling around. For an aromatic herb, I can tell you they’re fingers smell like shit. Because it was all ours. And there was this girl, she came up and said, “Salt. Your destined career path. Inbred, unintelligent, slow-minded beach bums.” And I said, “Coriander. Your path. Artists, historians and non-productive admin. Destined to be nobody. Enjoy.” She didn’t like that.”

The whole bus erupted in cheers.

“Thank you, kind sir. That was a beautiful share,” said Cayninn. “Now all Academies will be there. And all eyes will be on us. What one of us does, everyone wears. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“Can’t hear,” she said, craning her ears.

“YES.”

“So no fighting, no swearing, no spitting and no smart-arse comments. Understood?” Cayninn was definite.

“Yes.”

“Now they may knock you,” she continued. “I know when I was you, I got knocked. It hurts, I know. But you’ve got to be bigger. You’ve got to be better. You’ve got to..” She stopped mid-sentence as a soul at the back was tittering with his friend. “Mr Keel? Something funny? Care to share?”

All eyes turned to the back of the bus to Storkinn Keel. He was a short harmless guy Sabienn rarely associated with but everyone accommodated for his entertainment value. Sabienn still remembered Keel transferring beer labels to library books which nearly got him suspended.

“Ma’am.” Keel steeled himself for his delivery. “I was just thinking of your knockers.”

School-boyish stifled guffaws could be heard over the silence. Cayninn brought the microphone to her mouth.

“Ladies and gentlemen. I give you Storkinn Keel,” Cayninn announced triumphantly to the bus. “Our class clown. Now I’m in a very good mood tonight. But what shall we give him? Suspension or humiliation?” She waited briefly before continuing. “No, let’s try humiliation. Mr Keel, have you ever seen a dog chase a bus? And the dog finally catches the bus? But he doesn’t know what to do with it? That’s you handling knockers.”

The whole bus erupted into applause.

“But we’re not knocking you or anything,” she said. “You’ve just earned yourself a hike. Off the bus please.”

“But Ma’am I can’t walk that far,” said Keel.

“Off!” Cayninn was pointing to the door.

The bus began to chant, “Hike. Hike. Hike.”

As Keel got up to walk, a lone voice at the back shouted, “Hey, Stork. That was gold.” Even in his hour of humiliation, he still had support.

On his way to the bus door, he passed Irma Sayne who was a committed teacher pleaser. She felt the need to chip in, “Hey, Stork. Go back to Catering Corp. See you on the bottom.”

His response was swift and to her face. “Hey Sayne, my friend’s call me Stork but you can call me Mirror. And Mirror says you’re ugly. And, oh yeah, if I see you in the canteen queue, I’ll give you the special sauce.” He touched his nostril and blew a tiny spatter on her. Hardly anything hit her but she recoiled in horror.

Cayninn turned to her group finally after Stork had alighted and the door closed. "Alright! Next stop, Salt Stadium. Who's excited?"

"Yay." The bus was alive.

The batteries brought the engine on the bus to full charge allowing it to silently make its way to the Academy's main access road. The roadways were choked on the way to the stadium but they sailed through on a designated bus lane. Sabienn knew that every person, that is every man, woman and child, were required to see The Great Leader in person at least once in their life.

Their bus passed cars packed with kids and their stony faced parents, all there to perform their patriotic duty. Road crews were running up and down getting replacement batteries to stalled cars.

It was a surprise to Sabienn that some of the faces of the people were downright unexcited. *Thank goodness there are children there to report their mums and dads if they're unpatriotic*, he thought.

Closer to the stadium, the stream of people wrapped in their hooded cloaks were being searched by an over-officious security detail. Men, women and children were patted down and had their belongings scanned. Someone had their face up against the fence with their arm twisted up behind. There was obviously going to be no incident on their watch.

Policemen were waving illuminated traffic batons separating the vehicles coming in, directing cars this way, coaches that way. Their bus stopped briefly as their driver had an exchange with the warden.

Out the window Sabienn got a better view of the warships hovering in all great mass and menace with swirling flocks of ghost finch trying to gain purchase in their smooth skin. He caught a glimpse of Blue Fire One and Blue Fire Two now docked in their allotted space. The fierce mouth was complete.

The warships on either side were embellished with fierce design. One, The Wolf's Lair, had a wolf's teeth on the bow bared for ripping. Next to it, The Cat Spur, had a wildcat's claws bared for tearing painted on the side. But both Blue Fires were completely white, like transport craft. What made them different was the intermittent shimmering light display boiling and swirling up and down their bodies in red, blue and orange. Steadying wires and gantries and hydraulic lifts like a living web tenderly tended their entrapped submissive giants.

There was clearance from the warden and the bus was on the move. It steadied its course to the access that would take them to the bowels of the complex.

An audible gasp came from the passengers. None of them had been in this off-limits area. They'd been to the Stadium many times but only witnessed sports stars and popular musicians disappear into the jaws they were being

swallowed into. It had only been a dream to get this far.

“Wow!” Sabienn’s mouth was gaping in absolute awe.

## 6. The Warm-Up

The bus came to a stop deep in the bowels of the stadium and as the occupants alighted, the noise hit Sabienn like a crashing wave. At its capacity it could hold 80,000 people and the arena at that moment must have been nudging the full mark.

But the people were not acting like 80,000 separate beings. They were more like a single organic unit. A compliant animal, seething and heaving in its calls and breathing.

In single file they mounted the concrete steps leading them towards the animal. As they broke through the surface into the night air what greeted them made them stop and stagger. It was everything. The light, the sound, the smell and that physical feeling in the guts of being searched by an insurgent vibration.

Sabienn looked on at the stadium, decorated with the symbols of his tradition and ancestry. The glorious Hayddland flag, blue emblazoned with its rampant black wolf. There were flags of Deerland, who fought with the Haydds in the Bol War, on prominent poles with their orange sun on the red background.

There was a bonfire of burning aromatic logs at the furthest point from the stage with cordons to lead the faithful for the ritual book burning after the speeches. Some avid onlookers took a Turrland flag and set it aflame with torches. The Turrland flag, as Sabienn, a good Haydd, knew it to be, has the unimpressive grey wolf poncing about on an uninspiring green background.

“Don’t stamp it out. Let it burn,” shouted a man on stage. “Let the wolf feel the fire.”

*How could they get a Turrland flag? Sabienn thought. Everyone wants a Hayddland flag to wave and a Turrland flag to burn. How’d they get those flags? At the height of the ceremony season, do you think I can get a good Turrland flag to destroy? No way. I just can get a crappy traced and coloured in one. Then you have to go find paper large enough to make it on. And when you burn it, it’s gone in seconds. There’s no challenge. Where’d they get those flags?*

“Music please.” The man on stage waved to the conductor. It was at The Great Leader’s insistence that many of the instruments of the Earth that Sabienn’s ancestors left thousands of years ago were revived and once again made popular giving rise to the realization of the item known as the orchestra.



The sound swelled into a melody everyone knew. “Ladies and Gentlemen, Alessis Seel!” said the MC. A figure appeared in a hood and cloak, initially seeming startled and out of place. As she arrived at the microphone, the cloak dropped to the floor revealing a stunning dark haired woman in a blue gown. The vision of her on the big screen drew gasps from her admirers.

“To The Great Leader.” She launched into the slow and stirring rendition of “Onward to Victory”. Immediately behind her the well-known painting “The Great Leader Gazes Upon Prism Gorge and Contemplates His Return” filled the screen of the stage behind her. It was one of the more inspiring of the portraits and considered a national treasure. The Great Leader has his back to you as he stands in front of a mountainous gorge of Prism in the Outer Territories. His noble face is in right profile as he contemplates returning to lead the revolution.

At just that moment the class was on the move again. Every one walked single file through the animated crowd. They just kept moving down and down into the moving mass on the field. Sabienn’s eyes were wandering, surveying the field and for reasons unknown to him his gaze set upon certain people.

To the left were the contingent from Cumin. They were a quiet and sober gathering. His gaze picked out one cadet. He seemed taller than the rest but he had the strangest hat he’d ever seen. It was a wolf head with a sharp snout pointing out over his nose made of some unknown black material. He seemed like a strikingly well-proportioned giant and it didn’t seem to go unnoticed by the female next to him.

To the right he could see the gathering from Coriander. And although they all seemed to be on their best behaviour, his eyes set upon a single fellow. He was sitting on another friend’s shoulders with a sketch book and pencil making a draft of the painting behind the singer. He had curly brown hair and an intense gaze and appeared to be instructing his friend to stop moving.

*Why am I so interested in these two?* Sabienn thought. He had a gut feeling that they were going to play a part in his life. But the feeling was quickly washed away with the excitement around.

The strains of the song were quite loud now. They halted their travel just metres from the stage. He could now clearly see the cake-on and cracks of the make-up on Alessis Seel. He swore that if she’d mopped her brow and swung her hand out, some of her sweat would hit him in the face. He couldn’t believe how close he was.

The stony-faced security patrolled up and down the small no-man’s land between the stage gods and the audience animal. To his far left there were people on crutches and in wheelchairs with what appeared to be severely deformed arms and legs. Some held portraits of the man they were all here to see. Sabienn had

never seen such deformities in people. *You people are such a drain on the public purse*, he thought. *How long do you expect to live? Still, if anyone will heal you, it'll be The Great Leader.*

The singer led the crowd through another two more numbers before handing the microphone back to the master of ceremonies. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is time!"

There was a palpable push of energy. "YAYY!!"

"Who've we come to see?" said the MC.

The chant began. It heaved like a bass breath rhythm. Slowly at first.

"THE...GREAT...LEE...DUH!! THE.. GREAT .. LEEA .. DUH!!

It was like a swelling ocean made up of single droplets but being swept into a swirling storm. It got faster.

"THE GREAT LEEA DUH! THE GREAT LEEA DUH!

And faster.

"THE GREAT LEA DUH!! THE GREAT LEA DUH!!"

Then as quickly as the wave pushed through it dissipated into a cacophony of laughs and cheers and whistles and clapping. It regrouped and waited for someone to start the chant again.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen" continued the master of ceremonies. "I will now like to introduce to you the esteemed members of the Committee. Our governing Masters. The Seven Champions of the Revolution. But first, can you please join with me. Quiet please, at the back. For Cupp Creed and Cupp Ratio."

The crowd fell silent to perform their recitation like a duty.

The man spoke and the crowd repeated each line after him.

"Always remember.

To be born a Haydd

Is to be born Chosen

A Haydd

Is the Chosen of the Chosen

A Haydd

Bows to no-one

And to this end

There is a Ratio

If precious blood is spilled

If one Haydd is killed

By one not chosen

The Ratio of Revenge

Is the life of One Deer

If One Deer is at fault  
The lives of Two Turrs  
If One Turr is at fault  
And the lives of Five Natives  
If One Native is at fault  
Swear this  
By the Great Prophet  
Of the Blue Moon.  
Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.”

The crowd roared with approval.

“Without further ado, please welcome to the stage. The Leaf of the Forest. The Minister for Transport. Marshall Kuneer Leel!”

Sabienn watched as warm applause greeted a small beetle of a man who clearly did not want to be there. He was short, squat and balding and marched quickly to a chair on the stage.

“The Rock of the North Wind. The Minister for Resources. Marshall Trinienn Bayne.”

The same applause greeted a man who was in marked contrast to the first. He was tall, skinny with wavy grey hair and opened his arms to accept the crowd’s warmth. No-one had come to see this man but he seemed to be basking in the deeds of the past and milking them for all the importance he could get. He appeared to believe the crowd’s response was genuine appreciation rather than a polite acknowledgement.

“The Standing Stone of the West. The Minister for Education. Marshall Gerrand Tipp.”

Another tooth pick of a man marched out hardly acknowledging the applause but looking furtively around the tops of the arena. He almost seemed like he was sweating in fear of his life.

“The Spring of the Mountain. The Minister for Health. Marshall Toblinn Kyde.”

Another portly gentleman waddled out in a badly fitting uniform barely acknowledging the crowd. He looked spotted, splotched and pale and a bad advertisement for a Minister for Health.

“The Beacon of the East. The Minister for Works. Marshall Jorriss Lipp.”

Now this man was fat. Sabienn had heard people call him “The Beacon of The Eats”. He walked slowly but acknowledged the crowd. He did that act where he pointed to someone in the audience he’d never met and looked surprised and pleased that they’d turned up.

Sabienn looked around at his friends. Some had tears rolling down their cheeks that they were witnessing deities on stage. Not everyone shared his view point or his weird humour.

The five gentlemen on stage had every right to be there. They were carved into history as being among the Seven Champions of The Revolution. They'd spent two years in a cave with The Great Leader in the mountains. Huddled in the chill of The Cradle of The Resistance as he fought the dreaded Turr in the Bol War.

*They are just so unimpressive, thought Sabienn. Where are the records of outstanding acts of bravery? Even my archenemy, General Boxx Krenn, the principal of Academy Salt, has more stripes on his glory sheet than these administrative clerks. These just kept the supply chains rolling. Still that was important.*

The air suddenly felt as if it had just got colder. The crowd sensed the appearance of the next gentleman and an eerie hush descended upon them.

"Ladies and gentlemen." You had the sense from the master of ceremonies that if he flubbed this introduction, it could mean his life.

"The Most Honourable. The Most Venerable. The Most Illustrious Wizard. The Grand Inquisitor Profound. Murrlock Hyde."

The MC bowed and scraped away as a tall dark hooded figure strode plainly and purposefully to the centre of the stage. The crowd clapped mechanically and dutifully as few people had seen this gentleman but his reputation as a ruthless right hand preceded him. And no-one wanted to be seen to be clapping a split second longer or shorter than required.

As he reached the spotlight, his hood went back to reveal his shaved powerful head.

There was a notable gasp from the audience. To their relief he raised his hand to cease the applause.

What was notable was that he appeared dressed so plainly, just in a dark cloak, yet the man's aura hit Sabienn standing in the audience as if he'd waded into thick soup. The tall muscular frame stood straight and confident. His dark brown eyes surveyed the audience and rested on members of the Academies. He surveyed them with what appeared to be pride and love.

Before coming to this event, Sabienn had preconceived ideas of the GIP. A teacher once took him aside once the subject of this gentleman was broached and he said plainly. "Never never call the Grand Inquisitor Profound "gip" as in "hip". Unless you wish to feel a bullet in the back of the head. It's always G.I.P. G.I.P. Like expressing surprise at your own urination. Gee I Pee." Everyone laughed at the time. No-one was laughing now.

As the GIP's gaze moved through the crowd, Sabienn could swear that his eyes then rested on him and he held his stare and smiled warmly and lightly. As if to offer his unqualified and undying approval.

*He's looking at me!* A chill flew up the back of his spine and his body tingled. *He's smiling at me.*

As he looked into his eyes for what seemed like a lifetime he felt his dark energy surge through him. But it wasn't the nervousness of someone about to mispronounce his title. It was the invincible umbrella of his protection.

To The Great Leader, who had known the GIP for sixty years, he was the calculating cautious brain behind his impulsive charismatic genius. This man could fill a stadium with energy that engendered fear and servitude, yet was so largely uncelebrated. And everyone knew of him but his image was rarely published.

Something took hold of Sabienn that he couldn't hold back. It was almost like part of him held a well with water that belonged to this man. And as if there were gas in his bottle pushing the fluid to gush froth through the neck, he vented. "YAY!"

His was a lone shout in a sea of anxious eyes. Everyone looked at him as if to say "What? Are you crazy?" And for them it had brought an unwelcome attention to their section of the audience. His friends moved away from him and disowned him as it was better to lose a favoured limb than lose the body. He was left in an island of space, alone in the crowd.

The GIP's eyes moved towards the disturbance in the audience and he looked towards Sabienn. Their eyes met. The GIP raised his cloaked right arm and pointed towards Sabienn and his friends gasped. He was being singled out for summary execution.

Then as quickly as he raised his arm to point, he punched his heart in his chest twice then returned to pointing. It was the salute of the empire.

As if all time and breathing had stopped for Sabienn, he saw the gesture and was taken by a burst of ebullience. He punched his own heart twice and pointed to the GIP. "YAY!" he cried.

And as if there were a shared well within the ranks of the Academies standing once dormant in the audience, a large portion responded, "YAY!"

There was respectful but heartfelt clapping from the Academies. As if taken over by an unknown spirit, Sabienn found himself stripping down the buttons of his tunic to reveal the ink he'd just received. The spotlight of the stadium hit him and his image was catapulted on to the big screen behind the stage. He pointed to his wolf, then punched it twice and pointed with passion to the GIP.

It was then the audience gasped in utter disbelief. The image of the GIP filled

the screen and he bared his white teeth in a smile and began to laugh. Sabienn could have sworn that he even saw a tear in his eye. The crowd now erupted, the pent up anxiety rushing forth like the breach in a burst dam.

Before Sabienn's eyes, in the centre of the stage, Murrlock Hyde, The Grand Inquisitor Profound, one of the most powerful and most dangerous men on the planet, the Chief of the Secret Police known as the STL, the dreaded "Square The Ledger", the man guarded by the robot-like thinking thugs of the Ten-68, sworn to die in a second on an order from this man, raised both his arms in appreciation of the applause with tears rolling down both his cheeks.

He moved to take the seat on the right hand side of the big empty chair on stage.

It was now time. The moment they'd been waiting for.

## 7. The Sunrise At Night

The MC sheepishly made his way back to the microphone but found he was among friends again. The chant commenced even before he spoke.

“THE...GREAT...LEEAA...DUH!! THE.. GREAT .. LEEA .. DUH!!

The chant became louder and faster.

“THE...GREAT...LEEAA...DUH!! THE.. GREAT .. LEEA .. DUH!!

Suddenly a spotlight hit a point in the back of the stadium. Sabienn saw there was a single figure standing on a platform at the rear, elevated enough so everyone could see. His image hit the big screen on the main stage and the crowd went crazy.

But the adoring animal steeled itself for one more session of chanting.

“THE...GREAT...LEEAA...DUH!! THE.. GREAT .. LEEA .. DUH!!

The single figure was quickly flanked but not overwhelmed by his bodyguard detail, his loyal Ten-69. The man stood stony faced and resolute looking forward not appearing to acknowledge the adulation around him yet being aware of his surroundings. It seemed like he floated yet stayed pinned by mere gravity.

It was The Great Leader.

The face was as perfect as the image Sabienn first saw as a baby when he became cognizant of all that loved him. His full head of hair, stylish and handsome. The full moustache, brave and masculine. His ramrod vertical command probably nudged 200 cm.

When the chant lulled, the MC pushed on, his voice choked with emotion. “Ladies and gentlemen. How can I present you my world? The source of all my light. My beginning and end. Ladies and gentlemen. The Sunrise at Night. The Great Majesty. The Great Holiness. I give you, The Great Leader. Orr Benn Kee.”

On cue, the stadium erupted into a rousing revolutionary march. Cannons fired mock rounds, one for each of the Seven Victories of the Bol War. The noise now combined with the crowd pushed Sabienn’s eardrums into the threshold of pain.

The Great Leader was now on the move, god and entourage descending a staircase from the platform down into the people.

The Ten-69 were flanking him ever vigilant, eyes darting left and right and

trying to keep up with his cracking pace. A channel was kept clear for his path through the stadium, held back by levees of security functionaries. Hands, heads and arms reached out and called for him to touch them and heal them of their ordinary existence. But he kept walking, head forward acknowledging no-one.

Sabienn could see The Great Leader was guiding everyone to safety *despite* themselves. There was no malice or arrogance in his eyes, just absolute purpose.

As he passed by where he stood, Sabienn gazed on him. The Great Leader was attired in an impeccably pressed charcoal uniform just like his. There were no garish embellishments like the tin-pot generals of Turrland with their stupid flappy epaulettes and medals and chains. There was no need for this man to thrust his authority on to people through his garb. For he was one of them.

Sabienn was alive with sensation and his nostrils suddenly became full with the smell of gunpowder from the cannon, the aromatic pine of the bonfire and the unmistakeable odour of humans with sweat and urine.

Stairs had appeared to take the deity up to the stage and he mounted them in his steadfast march without missing a beat. His security column peeled left and right and scattered through hidden passages under the stage to the back. They had seconds to get to a watchful position at the stage rear in case someone had to jump out and take a bullet. Some peeled to join the guards in no man's land all in constant contact with their concealed communication.

The Great Leader stood in the centre of the stage and turned to his people. He held his hands on his hips and viewed the audience. Not with contempt but more "How are my children today?"

He was carefully requested by the MC to consider the lectern with its bullet-proof shield. A request he summarily waved away.

"THE...GREAT...LEEA...DUH!! THE.. GREAT .. LEEA .. DUH!!

The chant was deafening now.

Minions assembled a microphone stand in front of where he stood.

"THE...GREAT...LEEA...DUH!! THE.. GREAT .. LEEA .. DUH!!

He tapped his chest twice then pointed directly to the back of the stadium in the salute of the realm.

"THE...GREAT...LEEA...DUH!!

He saluted the right side.

"THE...GREAT...LEEA...DUH!!

He saluted the left.

"THE...GREAT...LEEA...DUH!!

He raised his hands to quiet them and as if a blanket was thrown on a flame they hushed into reverent attention.

Seconds passed that seemed like an eternity. He gazed forward until the



moment was right when all trickle of chatter had gone.  
Then he began.

“Brothers, Sisters.  
You and I have nothing  
You and I will be nothing  
You and I are nothing  
Without this land.  
This land becomes us  
And we become the land.  
This land looks after us  
Takes root for the fruit we eat  
Takes root for the fibres we wear  
Takes the corner stone for our shelter.  
This land becomes us  
And we become the land.  
Near five thousand years ago  
Humans came from across the stars  
And landed just north of here  
On Quarantine Rock.  
Each year we celebrate  
At the rock in its park  
In Foundation City.  
We celebrate the coming of us.  
This land becomes us  
And we become the land.  
What came forth  
From the belly of the craft  
Were animals and plants  
Skill and goodwill  
The familiar.  
Everything we enjoyed  
To eat, to grow and look after  
From the planet Earth  
To the planet Chee  
And from that planet  
To where we are today  
This beautiful planet Whee.  
Whee Elcharon.

This land becomes us  
And we become the land.  
When I was a young boy  
I had some wise advice  
From a wise person  
My mother.”

Sabienn turned as a murmur of enjoyment trickled through the crowd. The great man picked up on this and continued.

“Always listen to your mother.”  
This drew laughter but they were still in the palm of his hand.

“She said, the animals had changed.  
A chicken wasn’t a chicken  
A cow wasn’t a cow.  
They’d mixed with the animals on Chee.  
They’d mixed with the animals on Whee.  
And when we were on Chee  
Humans mixed with the andromedans.”

Sabienn knew that when the ship landed on Whee after coming across the universe, those that were andromedan or humans mixed found comfort in numbers in Deerland. There was a murmur at the back from the friends from Deerland. Some waved a national flag which The Great Leader saw and called to.

“Please  
Wave the flags high”

Sabienn turned to hear the cheering from the Deer section.

The andromedans he’d met were tall and darker with lovely soulful brown eyes. Sabienn liked them but unlike their own Blue Moon Prophet, the Deer worshipped the third brother prophet who they believed ascended to the sun. It earned the Deer the nickname, “crispies”.

“Please,” The Great Leader waved the excitement down.

“And when we came to Whee  
We met the nebulans.”

There was a notable hiss in the crowd being shushed down. Sabienn knew he was of course talking about the Turrs.

“They themselves were travellers  
They arrived a thousand years before us.  
And where we now worship the Blue Moon Prophet  
The true Prophet  
The nebula worships the second brother  
The false Green Moon Prophet  
Yet both brothers were human.”

The Great Leader paused to let the comment sink in.

“The Turr is confused.”

The comment drew a titter of derisive laughter. The great man continued.

“And of course before everyone  
We had the natives  
Our pack-animal companions.”

*The natives, thought Sabienn. Apart from Cheerful, I wouldn't piss on them if they were on fire. Slow-witted, lazy and untrustworthy. That's what they are.*

Sabienn knew the natives looked like the humans and could take sacred seed but had dim promise, sheltered eyes and light skin. The great man continued.

“Never forget the natives  
Over two thousand years ago  
They swept through the world  
It was The Purge  
All human records  
All human history was lost.  
But for word of mouth  
We'd have nothing today.  
And never forget the natives  
Who sided in the last war  
With our enemy.  
Remember the natives for their betrayal.”

There was applause and some shouting from the audience which died down quickly. The Great Leader waited before speaking.

“So  
We are the humans.  
And some humans mixed with the Turrs.”

Sabienn’s blood boiled. *I hate the Turrs. I loathe them*, he thought. *Why betray your own species?*

The Great Leader continued, “And some humans mixed with the natives.”

*How could you make love with something between animal and vegetable?*  
Sabienn’s thoughts echoed the great man’s disgust.

“But what my mother said  
And she said this in our kitchen  
Turn to the spice rack  
For there’s nothing more Earthly.  
There were no spices on Chee  
And none on Whee.  
The gene pool of the spice  
Was as pure  
As it was when bathed by the sun on Earth.  
Look to the spices  
They were pure.  
Our pure spices have taken root in this soil.  
The land becomes us  
And we become the land.  
Spices  
Coriander, pepper and cumin  
Turmeric, mint and ginger”

He paused and there was a rustle in the Salt camp. They suddenly had the suspicion they’d been disowned as a spice. *Maybe he thinks we really are a seasoning*, thought Sabienn with despair. The great man continued.

“Have I forgotten something?  
Oh, of course”

There was a brief pause.

“And salt.”

The tension broke in Sabienn’s camp that they were still within his sphere of

love.

“My apologies.  
How could I forget?”

There was laughter now. The salt people were happy.

“Old salt  
The salt of the Earth.  
The land becomes us  
And we become the land.”

In Sabienn’s mind after several repeats of this phrase and although he would never question the mind of The Great Leader, he didn’t have a clue where this speech was going. But it was such a joy to be able to watch him speak.

“Spices.  
Spices are pure.  
They are what I named my Academies  
They are what I named my Missions.  
And as spices are pure  
So I’ve required it of my people.  
No inter-species marriage  
Tight border control  
All refugees put to the sword.  
We decide who comes here  
And how they arrive.  
Strict adherence to Cupp Ratio  
No exceptions.  
We keep this core  
This core of purity  
For this people  
For this land.  
And by all the readings of the Blue Moon Prophet  
The land destined for *us*  
The land chosen for *us*.  
We the people  
We the humans  
We came here

Across the vaunting reach of space.  
We stand here  
Not by chance  
But by divine providence.  
We are the chosen  
The chosen of the chosen.  
And this land becomes us  
And we become the land.  
Five thousand years  
We have given blood to the soil  
At the time of birth  
And at the time of death.  
From this soil  
Crops gave us food  
Gave us clothes.  
The food we eat  
Went back to the soil  
With our waste  
With our bodies.  
We gave food for the worms  
To give food for the crops  
To give food for us  
So the cycle.  
The land becomes us  
And we become the land.”

The Great Leader paused for a moment and Sabienn could sense his mood become more intense. The great man continued.

“So what does this all mean?”

Another pause.

“This land  
Our land  
Has been scarred by war  
For thousands of years.  
But this last one hundred  
Has seen the greatest turmoil.  
Just on one hundred years  
We suffered the Curl War.

The Turr army invaded  
And took the north  
The Province of Ledd  
And the Province of Chard.  
After four years of war  
They were repelled to the sea  
And we took what was rightfully ours  
The island of Cajj Cajj.”

Sabienn held his breath. *Was this about Cajj Cajj?* Cajj Cajj was a diamond-shaped island which lay in the Knife Reef Sea between Hayddland and Turrland. It was a rock in the ocean currently in the greater empire of Turrland.

“One million humans  
Were put to the sword  
In the killing fields of Chard.  
We honour those people  
Those lives  
The blood of men, women and children.  
The blood in the soil  
Now grows the vine  
From blood to red wine.  
We become the land  
And the land becomes us.  
And to the credit of the leaders  
And in particular  
War Leader Orr Ghee Penn  
After six years we replied in kind.  
Replied with force  
To enforce Cupp Ratio.  
We entered Turrland  
In the Penn War  
And took two million ears.”

Sabienn knew to verify a kill on a Turr, a left ear lobe is cut and sent back to what was once called Central Records but is now known as Mission Cardamom. It was to ensure the Cupp Ratio was strictly and fairly enforced. The Great Leader continued.

“And it was in the Black Forest of Turrland  
The legend came to us  
Of the black and the grey wolf.  
The black wolf mother  
Defending her young  
Against the two fierce greys.  
The two fierce greys she fought  
Defeated and killed  
But she died of her wounds.  
Penn witnessed this.  
The black wolf became our symbol  
We protect our own.”

He paused again and returned with more fire.

“We should *always* protect our own.  
When I think of the pain  
The hardship  
The terror  
In the living memory  
Of many of you here,  
I feel my heart  
Exposed and raw  
And my shame  
Eating like a firestorm within.  
It is now nearly thirty years  
Since the end of The Bol War.  
And when the flames cleared  
And the dust settled  
And the losses tallied  
On the western plains  
The Provinces of Teel, of Nawt, of Reins,  
The area we now know  
As The Fields of the Slaughter  
The final count of human loss was  
Four million.”

He paused to feed on the first ripple of emotion.  
“*Four* million.”



Another pause. More noise.

“And I am the first to say  
We were badly led.  
War Leader Jobann Ween  
Was in office at the start.”

There were a few hisses in the crowd.

“Ween was, as you know,  
Indecisive and inept.  
His opinion of his own abilities  
Was less than the reality.  
He lived up to his nickname  
Ween the Incompetent.  
His tenure saw the attacking armies  
Land on the shores of Hayddland  
With our best generals languishing  
In the dungeons of Mission Mint.  
And it was his decision  
To pull the defence line  
East of Teel, Nawt and Reins  
Which left the enemy have full rein  
For unspeakable atrocities.  
The provinces were abandoned.”

There was an emotional cry from the section of the stadium allotted to those provinces. Sabienn knew people from there that still felt keenly let down. The Great Leader addressed them directly.

“Yes, good citizens. You *were* abandoned.  
Leader Ween let you down.  
And over Ween’s dead body  
Came War Leader Dresdinn Keep  
In office at the end.”

There was another uneasy murmur as they heard the name of Leader Keep, the man Sabienn believed stuck the knife into Ween’s back while in a garden. The great man continued.

“To Leader Keep’s credit  
He released the good generals  
And the Turr were defeated  
And driven from the country.  
But his actions in the Peace Treaties  
Sickened me to the guts as a man.  
Leader Keep will always be known  
As Keep the Corrupt.  
Good citizens, I was there.”

There was a cry of excitement from the audience that the man before them had been part of history. He continued.

“All countries  
Hayddland, Deerland,  
And the defeated Turrland  
Met on Cajj Cajj  
We met to rewrite the maps.  
We met in our victory  
To make the vanquished pay.  
As your General at the time  
I fought hard, citizens  
But Leader Keep was weak.  
I fought hard  
For more territory  
In the Outer Territories  
The native protectorates  
Seized from the Turrlanders  
The State of Prism  
In its thirty year agreement  
As our spoil of war.  
But Leader Keep said no.”

“No,” echoed a part of the crowd in sympathy to the big man. He continued.

“But I fought  
And Prism became ours.  
I fought hard

Against the moratorium  
The twenty-five year ban  
On our weapons and rearmament  
Given to Hayddland and Turrland  
We the victors  
Treated like errant school-children.  
I fought hard against this.  
But Leader Keep said no.”

The crowd erupted again momentarily.

“And citizens  
Believe me when I say this  
I fought hard  
When it was decreed  
That Cajj Cajj  
And all gained territories  
On the Turr mainland  
Hard fought and won by us  
Were *given* back  
To the new government of Turrland.  
I fought hard against this.”

The murmur in the crowd was swelling as the man continued.

“Good citizens  
As your General at the time  
This was beyond belief.  
Why go to war  
Why have an enemy attack us  
Why suffer immense hardship  
Why defeat your opponent  
And see that *they* get the rewards?  
I fought hard against this  
But Leader Keep said *no*.”

The crowd became animated again and The Great Leader waited for the wave to pass.

“And when I asked questions,  
Questions of Leader Keep  
Such as  
“Why are your building companies  
Ready to rebuild Turrland  
Before your own homeland?  
Why do you put money before honour?”  
For this I was rewarded with exile  
To the territory of Prism.”

The screen to the rear of him was filled once again with the famous painting, “The Great Leader Gazes Upon Prism Gorge.” It had the effect of tumultuous applause.

Sabienn turned to see the compliant audience jubilant and loud. He along with others there knew that when the great man finally returned victorious from exile, he never forgot Leader Keep. It was The Great Leader’s pistol bullet that entered Keep’s head after the smoke cleared from the firing squad.

The Great Leader waited for his cue to talk.

“I fought hard  
But Leaders Ween and Keep let you down.  
Citizens  
When I think of the old men and women  
Taken from their Home  
In Nervis, Teel  
In the dead of night  
And after their nurses were shot  
They were forced to kneel  
And were clubbed in the head.  
They would have looked to this blue moon”

He now pointed to the heavens at a majestic blue moon overhead.

“And said, “Who will come for me?”  
“Who will help me?”  
I think of the mother  
In Hill, Nawt  
Same town as our friends here  
From Pepper Academy

She was taken at night  
And told to dig a grave  
For her daughter.  
She would have looked to this blue moon  
And said, "Who will come for me?"  
"Who will help me?"  
And I think of the children  
Found hidden in a basement  
In Korne, Reins  
They were taken at night  
And made to kneel  
To take a bullet in the front of the head  
To see who would pee first.  
They would have looked to this blue moon  
And said, "Who will come for me?"  
"Who will help me?"

He paused to sense his audience.

"And who *did* come for them?  
Who *did* help them?  
Their anguished cries  
Their hopeless screams  
Their pitiful pleas  
Went unanswered."

Another pause and the crowd stirred as the great man repeated.

"*Unanswered.*"

Sabienn could suddenly identify the noise he was hearing. It was weeping from the Peppers.

"Nothing I can do  
Nothing I can say  
Nothing in this world  
Will allow *me*  
To turn back the clock  
And put the offender to the sword."

As he spoke, Sabienn watched The Great Leader's fists come up by the

microphone stand and deliver a controlled rage in a manner he'd never seen before.

“What I *can* do  
Is pledge  
That every breath I draw  
Every sinew in these fists  
Every pulse of this blood  
Be put to them.  
And I  
Orr Benn Kee  
The Leader of the People of Hayddland  
Pledge  
To give them  
Revenge.”

A pent up yell came from the Pepper Academy as The Great Leader repeated his pledge.

“*Revenge!*”  
The chant began.  
“THE...GREAT...LEEAA...DUH!! THE.. GREAT .. LEEA .. DUH!!  
As quickly as it began, the chant was killed with a raised hand.

“I pledge  
I am the passage  
I am the agent  
I am the angel  
Of revenge.  
Revenge  
Sits in my gut  
Like a rock  
Like a hot cold coal  
Like an ice red ember.  
Burning me  
Searching me like a torch  
And puts light on my torture.  
And this blood  
This vein  
This pulse

Which pushes fire and ice.  
I will gladly  
On my death  
Shed to the last drop  
Drop by drop  
Into this soil  
Where their blood lies.  
Every last drop  
I would *dearly* shed.  
The land becomes us  
And we become the land.  
This land  
Our land  
Our people  
I pledge!”

The stadium erupted in applause. The people were shouting, clapping and crying. The chant returned vigorous and deafening. Sabienn, now with his tunic open and wolf exposed and saluting with the rest, tried to make his voice the loudest of the chorus.

“THE...GREAT...LEEAA...DUH!! THE.. GREAT .. LEEA .. DUH!!  
“THE...GREAT...LEEAA...DUH!! THE.. GREAT .. LEEA .. DUH!!  
The hand rose again to still the crowd.

“Please  
Please  
Please  
In the darkest days  
Of the Bol War  
Deep in the caves  
Of The Cradle of the Resistance  
Near where our friends here  
From Cumin Academy live  
There was a small band of fighters.  
The seven  
You see here on stage  
Lived in that cave  
With a few others  
We were sisters and brothers

We faced the Southern Surge  
The Break-out of Reins  
The Turr Insurgency  
Into the Boss Hills  
We held firm  
In the darkest hour  
To defeat the enemy.  
From that small band  
We grew to what we are today  
A standing army of two million  
And an airship command of two hundred.  
We've achieved much in a few years.  
We have a thousand graduating officers  
From all our Academies  
Ready to lead  
And in whatever capacity you choose  
I wish you the greatest success.  
I'm proud of each and every one of you.  
To the people  
Stay calm and stay focused  
Await orders.  
Do nothing  
Until I instruct you.  
What I must require  
Is that you listen to me  
That you follow me  
And that you obey me.  
Obey me  
And tomorrow belongs to us  
This I pledge.  
Thank you."

The stadium exploded with adulation. The Great Leader stood centre stage and soaked up the applause. He stood for what seemed an eternity, unsmiling but waving and saluting. Then at the urging of minders, he descended the staircase to walk back into the stadium and was ushered into the back of an open car.

"THE...GREAT...LEE...DUH!! THE.. GREAT .. LEEA .. DUH!!"

From its back, he stood and saluted the crowd going crazy. The car ran a lap around the outside track of the arena pointed to an exit and was gone.



Just as quickly as the sun rose at night, it set and disappeared.

## 8. Raajaa Deel

The MC took to the stage and reclaimed his microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen, The Great Leader has left the stadium. All hail The Great Leader!”

The crowd were still in fine form and continued the chant.

“THE...GREAT...LEE...DUH!! THE.. GREAT .. LEEA .. DUH!!”

Sabienn saw that in the excitement, it was lost on all in the audience that the six other Champions of The Revolution had left the stage.

As he watched the blank stage where the Masters sat, a voice came in his ear. “You like to play dice with your life?” Captain Cayninn’s face was still white with shock. “First the wolf and now this. Shouting at the GIP.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“You’re on report, Feel?” she said.

“I didn’t do anything, Ma’am.”

His protests were useless. Cayninn was at her self-righteous best. “After the burning, take a walk back to the Academy. We don’t want you on the bus,” she said.

“I’m seeing Captain Randd at ten,” Sabienn added. He needed to let her know he was a team player.

“He’ll be informed.” As quickly as Cayninn arrived she left, wending her way through the crowds who were still shunning Sabienn and viewing him with suspicion.

*“I didn’t do anything wrong, he thought. What is it with everyone?”*

He went walking to the rear of the stadium to line up with the rest for the book burning. The stadium lights dimmed a little as the bonfire was well alight now, radiating the faces of the people like glowing ghosts. The smoke was rising to the stars in their cloudless sky. And as if it were becoming a disturbing habit for him, he was blindsided by another voice in his left ear. “Hey, you are such a suck.”

Sabienn turned to the hooded figure next to him with the very familiar odour of horse manure. As the figure lowered its hood, it continued, “You total sell-out.” It was his friend Raajaa Deel. “I thought you said you weren’t going to get the wolf.”

“Times change,” Sabienn slipped into the back of a slow moving queue and

Raajaa joined him. “How’d you know I got the wolf?” Sabienn was astounded.

Raajaa eyed the crowd. “Everyone knows you’ve got the wolf.” He then pointed to the stage. “You were splashed on the screen.”

“Oh shit!” Sabienn had a sudden realization.

Sabienn knew Raajaa for five years, ever since he’d been at the Academy. But Raajaa was not from the Academy but Anise, a local University of Technology. He studied electronics and he was the only person Sabienn had ever seen remove a tracking device from a hand-held screen, so he couldn’t be monitored by communication blimps. It was an action punishable by having your hands cut off. But he didn’t care.

“Great speeches, hey?” said Raajaa. “Good to see you’re marching blindly with everyone else.”

“Keep your voice down.” Sabienn was attracting enough stares as it was.

“I love that story about the black and the grey wolf, don’t you?” said Raajaa.

“This is not the time, Raajaa.”

“Completely implausible but great delivery,” said Raajaa, not caring if his voice was heard. “It’s just a shame there are no black wolves on Cajj Cajj or Turrland.”

“It could happen.” Sabienn saw some hooded figures turning looking nervously towards their conversation and he just wanted his friend to shut-up.

“Of course they could meet one another.” Raajaa looked serious. “Their bloated carcasses could bob up against one another in the Knife Reef Sea. They could gum each other to death.”

“Just shut-up please.” Sabienn’s nerves were stretched.

“Oh but I’m with you, man,” continued Raajaa. “Marching mindlessly. Of course it’s the truth. Who am I to say it’s not?”

Sabienn, now a black wolf of the Realm, wanted to dissociate himself from any “dangerous talk”. Talk that the government or The Great Leader may be wrong. It wasn’t against the law but if word got out that you indulged in it, you were roundly set upon by the crowd.

They had finally made their way to the attendant handing out the books. It was just another overworked government prole mechanically picking out books from a bucket about five at a time tossing one each to the people in the queue.

Raajaa finally kept his mouth closed, pulled his hood over his face and edged his way ahead of Sabienn in the line. As Raajaa collected his book, an old history school text book, he shouted to the attendant. “Sir! Sir! Burning embers. You’ve got burning embers in your hair!”

The attendant dropped his books and patted down his head in a panic. As he recovered and picked up his books, Sabienn looked ahead to see his friend had

disappeared. His not being there, gave Sabienn a little relief.

A book was shoved into Sabienn's hands and he viewed the cover. "The Age of No Questions" by Dr Naymee Tock, Fram University, Turrland. Just the cover grabbed his interest but as he went to open it, he found it taped shut.

The attendant offered his required safety warning, "Stay behind the cordons please. If you can't throw that far, someone will throw it for you. Keep the line moving please."

Sabienn felt a tap on the back and turned. It was Raajaa pulling his hood back holding up a children's book.

"Hey Sabienn, it's "Mrs Brow Lost a Cow." I'm glad, this's gonna burn. I'd hate kids to become bovine revolutionaries."

"That's not the book you got," Sabienn said. He remembered the older thicker brown book being pushed into his friend's hands.

"You mean this one?" Raajaa produced the old battered book probably over twenty years old from the folds of his cloak for Sabienn's viewing only. The blood drained from Sabienn's face. This was now an act punishable by death.

Just ahead, less than five seconds away, were the soldiers patting people down to see no-one was committing the same act they were doing now.

"Quick, turn your back to me." Raajaa grabbed Sabienn and within the concealment of his cloak rammed the book down the back of his military trousers. "Open your belt up more."

Sabienn was on the point of panic. If he complied, he was complicit and he was gone too.

"Open it, Sabienn. You don't want to see me die?" said Raajaa.

He adjusted his buckle and the book slid in to his back but was still hanging out. With less than three seconds he unbuttoned his tunic and let it flap over the back giving the most basic of cover. This was not good.

"Next." An over-officious sergeant pushed himself right into Sabienn's face. "Cadet, you look a mess."

"Sorry, sir. It's just a little hot." Sabienn was not well.

"I'm not a sir," said the sergeant. "Button up your tunic and show me your book."

"Book? Oh." Sabienn lifted "The Age of No Questions" still intact.

"Pat him down." The sergeant ordered his underling. "Why're you so nervous, Cadet?"

Raajaa piped up with some helpful information. "Sergeant, he was a little faint."

"When I want you to talk, I'll ask," the sergeant replied mechanically.

"He just got the wolf," Raajaa continued, "He just needed to cool down."

The sergeant noticed the mark on his chest as the hands of his subordinate were working their way up Sabienn's legs.

"OK, move on. Let's keep it going. Next." The sergeant waved them through.

The hands came off Sabienn's legs just as they were about to pat the book. He was still sweating in the realization that the mark, that may eventually get to kill him, saved him this time.

The pair were pushed through closer to the bonfire and Sabienn was livid. "You bastard!"

"I saved your life." Raajaa quietly retrieved his book and stowed it into his garments. "This is the thanks I get."

"You nearly got us both killed. What's wrong with you?" Sabienn had buttoned himself up and was hand brushing his uniform into military smartness.

"What's wrong with *me*?" said Raajaa. "What's wrong with you? Look at you. You've changed. Who are you, Sabienn?"

Raajaa suddenly found himself pushed to the throwing cordon. With little effort he flung his book and watched it cartwheel into the flames. "There you go Mrs Brow. Burn with Sabienn's free thought."

Sabienn followed suit with "The Age of No Questions" and moved aside. He watched as their places were taken by more rowdier and enthusiastic participants who saw the flames expunging all the evil from the empire.

Away from the activity, they found themselves a quiet area where they could stand and talk.

"Cheer up," said Raajaa. "Whatever happens, you'll always be like my brother." He grabbed his friend into a man hug. "Come to the beach."

Once the beach was mentioned, Sabienn thought of Wylio Wyde. *Poor Wylio. He missed The Great Leader and would be sitting at the Dee so pissed.*

He needed to get away from these people in the stadium. Raajaa led and he followed, to check on the welfare of Wylio.

Sabienn and Raajaa walked briskly to Grand Defence Beach which was close to the stadium. Raajaa stopped briefly at a shop on the beach front and bought chicken rolls and coffee for both of them.

"My treat," he said, handing food to Sabienn. "After the trouble I've put you through."

Sabienn took his food and looked up and down the beach. There was no sign of his friend Wylio.

Looking out to sea, the waters were a little calmer than normal though the wave crash was still loud. The two moons bathed the waters blue and green and there were lights like blue lightning flashing beneath the waves in the distance.

"Lighten up," said Raajaa. "Your friend will turn up." There was a sitting

place up in the cliffs that they began to walk to. It was where they always sat to look out to sea and think.

“Do you realize?” said Sabienn. “We’ve just breathed the same air as The Great Leader. The Great Leader himself was bunkered down on this beach.” He pointed to the shore. “The Turr forces landed on the beach there.”

“I know,” replied Raajaa without interest. “I sat through history too.”

“Look at these rocky cliffs,” said Sabienn. “This is where you should put your troops. But Leader Ween ordered his troops to entrench in the dunes, down there.” He pointed. “It was stupidity. Suicide. Ween’s “look them in the whites of their eyes” order. It’s a wonder The Great Leader came out alive. That man on stage tonight was here.”

Even now, Sabienn looked up the beach at the dormant excavator doing restoration work on the beach. They were still digging up metal fragments of that bloody conflict. Cartridges, casings, helmet fragments, tags and grenade pins that were deposited here thirty years ago.

Sabienn and Raajaa walked up into the cliffs pushing through the beach brushes to their vantage point. It wasn’t their place alone as could be attested by the stray soiled condoms strewn around the perimeter. In fact two of those were probably Sabienn’s.

“I’m sorry I put you through that tonight,” Raajaa said. “When I saw the book in my hand, I thought “No Way!” It’s a text book I had when I was a kid.”

“Where is it?” Sabienn was taking short welcome drafts of coffee after ripping off the wrapping of his food.

Raajaa looked around to see the coast was clear and pulled the book from his cloak. “Got a torch?” Sabienn had pocketed a small torch for the evening and reluctantly handed his across.

Raajaa looked at its front and back covers then opened to its contents. “I can’t see any difference.” He flipped through its forbidden pages.

“If it is The Great Leader’s will that it’s forbidden, then it’s forbidden.” Sabienn said.

As he spoke, Sabienn went to a spot and started digging in the soft soil to retrieve a metal biscuit tin. He brushed the dirt away from its lid, emblazoned with a glorious photo of The Great Leader in dress uniform under the title Victory Biscuits and a small slogan at the base “Obey Me”.

“Well listen to you,” said Raajaa, still flipping through the pages. “We’ve come so far together. But now we’re really parting ways. You’ll be off to war soon. You heard the numbers tonight? One million, two million, four million. What’s the next in sequence? It’s not war if it’s maths.” He settled down to quietly read some pages, occasionally biting into his roll and taking sips from his

coffee.

Sabienn's interest turned to his biscuit tin. The lid came away without much effort to reveal secret stuff he couldn't keep in his room. There were letters and photos from other friend's girl-friends. There were plastic wolves and mountain lions he kept from his youth. There was a plastic knight chess-piece a girl had given him saying make believe it's from your mother. He twirled the piece in his fingers, kissed it then placed it back. There was a woman's handkerchief that he brought to his nose to sniff still fancying the girl whose perfume was still embedded.

Underneath the items, he pulled out a small black felt box and a green notebook. He opened the box to reveal the earrings of Turk's mother, blue round studs probably of a stone maybe plastic. Grabbing the notebook, he flipped through the pages. The entries were in a Turr written style but he could understand most of the text.

It was the usual stuff a mother would write but in short cryptic notes. "Had breakfast. Boy threw up. Changed favourite dress to second best. You know the one."

He hung on to the book transfixed by its commentary. *Why does an inferior like Turk get the sweet caress of a mother?*

"Look at the sky," said Raajaa. It awoke Sabienn from his thoughts. Raajaa's forbidden book was open in his lap but he was looking upward. "Look at the stars. Up there somewhere is Chee. And further on, Earth. We came across space with our ambitions, hopes and dreams. But somewhere in our DNA was its infected pestilence. Its jealousy, greed, and fear. Maybe everything's my fault. Take a look at this." He invited Sabienn to look at a page in his book.

He pointed into the book and continued.

"Here's something that's right here. The Legend of Corporal HSO." He pointed to the writing in the book and then to a billboard in the distant car park marking the legend that occurred here on Grand Defence Beach. Sabienn knew the story backwards. It was the story of Corporal HSO who fought with The Great Leader on the ill-fated defence of the beach. When a Turr grenade landed near The Great Leader, the corporal left his trench and threw himself on the grenade thus saving his commander and comrades and propelling himself into history. It was an act of selflessness, heroism and self-sacrifice offered up as an example for future warriors to emulate.

"I remember when you could actually joke about HSO," continued Raajaa. "You were pretty funny. You remember you said, 'Corporal HSO? Who calls their kid HSO? Unless it's embarrassing. HSO. Probably Horseface Sickbag Onion.'" They both found the memory amusing. "And you said like The Great

Leader. "Horseface Sickbag Onion! Throw yourself on that grenade!" And you gave this salute." Raajaa mimicked a very stiff and starched salute. "Certainly sir! Gladly. Belly flop or swan dive?" That was you, man."

They both smiled at the memory.

"That's gone now," Raajaa continued.

"I can't say those things anymore," Sabienn offered quietly.

"I know," Raajaa started cleaning up wrappings and papers and stowing them in to his cloak. He was particular about keeping the secret area tidy. "It's sad." He reached into his pockets, "Oh, I nearly forgot. For old times' sake."

In his hands he had a packet of Supreme Order Fruits which he opened for Sabienn to forage. He loved the strawberry ones.

Supreme Order Fruits were chewy sweets but of more interest to the children who ate them was the paper that covered them. Complete with its portrait of The Great Leader and "Obey Me", the wrapping came with an order and a scenario for them to act out and role play. It was even able to be swallowed like the real order. The kids loved them and they fuelled their devotion to the leadership.

As Sabienn chomped away at his strawberry sweet, Raajaa selected an orange flavoured one.

"What's yours say?" Raajaa said, as he unwrapped his. Sabienn read his order.

"I, The Great Leader, Orr Benn Kee," Sabienn read. "Issue a Supreme Order to." There was a blank space to insert your own name. "Sabienn Feel. To hunt down spies taking refuge in Farm X of the Teel Valley. Report their position then kill all traitors." With that he followed his swallowed sweet with the paper wrap which he made short work of dutifully digesting.

"This is mine." Raajaa chewed on his sweet as he read. "I, The Great Leader, Orr Benn Kee, do blah blah and so and so. Seek an enemy Turr convoy on Chard Road. Kill all soldiers and capture the commanding officer for interrogation. Like that's gonna happen." He folded his paper and placed it in his pocket.

"You have to eat the paper." Sabienn already knew the response.

"I've told you I never eat paper," said Raajaa definitely. "I never have, never will. I'll throw up. Are we done here? I need to kick out the bums."

Sabienn knew Raajaa's father kept horses and had a healthy business taking tour groups for horse rides in the country side. At night his stables became a magnet for the homeless to bed down for the night on soft hay. Raajaa had to gently shift them on.

"Go on. Give me a minute with the book." Sabienn was curious as to why there was a problem with this text.

"You're living dangerously," Raajaa walked to the track to take him down to



the beach. "Just bury it back there. I'll be back tomorrow to burn it. I promise." With that he left his friend.

The book felt heavy in Sabienn's hands. It looked harmless enough that he could probably easily explain it away to anyone that might just chance upon him reading it. But for him it was dangerous. He flipped through and let his torch illuminate its pages. He found one that appeared to have been dog-eared.

The page held explanatory text of the Champions of The Revolution and there were portions marked out with black marker pen. Something caught his eye. It seemed the censor may have been in a rush as there were some anomalies.

In the text, he read "Eight Governing Masters." The rest of the sentence was blanked out. *Eight?*

Further on there was an initial "R". The rest of the name was covered. And more curious, the words "brother of" to someone whose name was completely obliterated.

*There were eight Champions of The Revolution? No way. It's seven. There were always seven. Always.* He tossed the book down in front of him. *It's a misprint. That's why it's banned. The sooner it burns the better.*

He quickly tidied up his biscuit tin and buried it along with the forbidden book. And with careful sweeps of his hand, he tidied the area that only he and Raajaa were familiar with.

With this task completed, he stood up and saw the sea. It was calm and beckoning and he had time to spare before trudging off to Captain Randd again.

He made the way down the well-worn path to the sand. *I need the water. I need its cool safety and solitude. I need to become clean and go into hiding beneath its waves. So Captain Randd can't find me. What have I done with my life?*

The clothes dropped to the sand and he stood in his trunks. There were wounds on his body and open cuts that he knew were going to attract the shardee, those bloodthirsty little parasite fish no larger than a finger.

Sabienn pushed into the water with the waves crashing against him and submerged himself way under. Coming up slowly he pushed the wet hair back and felt calm. He allowed himself to float on his back before finding his feet on the pebbled sand and looked towards the land with all its problems. *I am one with everything. I'm just as significant as the pebbles beneath my feet. Or the trees on the shore in the breeze. Everything is talking to one another.* The sea was relaxing him muscle by muscle.

In his calmness, all went silent but for a faint and distant whisper.

He looked around. "Who's there?" Once again a little louder a voice came and he waited. *Nothing*, he thought.

He submerged again on a long breath and broke back through the surface gasping. The voice came back, more insistent. It wasn't a question. It was an instruction. "We .. choose .. you."

He heard it as clear as if a bell rang. "Who's there?" It rattled him.

Silence.

"Show yourself," he shouted to the unknown. He nervously scanned the surface of the water for anyone lurking beneath.

Submerging himself and looked frantically around. *It's my imagination. That Shyne must have slipped something in my drink. Why would he do that? Why would he..*

"We ... Choose... YOU!" That wasn't his imagination. That wasn't some substance. He was completely cognizant. He was wide awake and scared and hearing voices below the water. Suddenly his face was in pain and his eyes filled with red.

As he pushed himself up to the air, he found five shardee attached to his face, tearing at the wounds on his cheeks. Their fluorescent red eyes made them look like some creature of evil. They were the bane of the planet.

It was a quick push back to the sand, brushing the fish like leeches from his face. They were disgusting little things. *Fish can't talk*, he thought. *What just happened?*

He slumped himself knees first down on to his clothes. The feeling he had was strange. It was a tingling beneath the skin.

*What's going on?* There was a feeling like a tornado entering his body downwards through the crown of his head. Stars filled his vision and he lost consciousness and fell to the sand.

When he opened his eyes his mouth was full of sand. It felt like he had been out for an hour. His watch showed it was less than a minute. His body must have been jittering in a fit as his head had been pushing sand ditches.

*What's happening to me?* He was disgusted with himself because he'd never had a fit before. *My medical record's sound. No-one must ever hear of this.* Luckily there were few people on the beach to witness his shameful display of physical weakness. *I'm off to war soon. I don't want to be marked as disabled. I need to perform and be trusted. How will The Great Leader see me?*

Feeling confused, he went back to the water and cleaned himself up. The water drained through his cupped hands and he watched it fall. He viewed the black wolf on his chest in its perfect design. It was still a source of great pride for him but all these things had happened since its receipt.

*It's Arrakaz Neel. He's used the poisoned ink. Why would he do that? Is he working with the General? No, that can't be right.*

This stuff he had to get out of his mind. He had to be at his best today. He had to meet the Captain and put his game face on.

On the beach, his uniform came back on quick smart but he was going to need a shower back at the dorm. His torch came out to light the way.

As he made his way back up the beach, there was a construction area on the beach. A new beach walkway was being made and solid foundations were needed for the causeway. An excavator lay idle in the sand and Sabienn had the urge to steer himself towards it.

Its bucket was filled with sand and more war fragments of metal. It was surprising that this stuff was still turning up being buried for so many years.

His eyes probed around the bucket and settled on a hand-grenade pin which he picked up. It was a standard Turr issue weapon and one that he believed deserved respect as its attachment may have cut short the lives of his father's friends.

In his hands it felt warm. It felt easy in his grip. It felt tingling. It felt.. *Oh, my goodness!*

Sabienn's vision went blank and then reappeared.

When his vision came back, he was in a battle. It was the light of dawn.

"Get down! Get down! Get down!" He heard the command. He recognized the Turr tongue.

Soldiers fully fitted in combat gear crouched behind jagged obstacles in the sand. Landing craft off shore were spewing forth their cargo of invading hordes. Turrs waded to the beach and started running up the sand.

*Sharpies! I have to get a report through,* Sabienn thought in panic. *We're being invaded.*

Instinctively, still gripping his grenade pin, Sabienn crouched behind an obstacle but stood to get a better view behind its cover of what was around him.

Suddenly a sharpie was pointing a rifle at him, aiming to end him. "No!" His heart was racing in this split second of death.

Bang, bang, bang. The bullets passed right through Sabienn. Just as quickly return fire passed right through him from behind and split the soldier's abdomen apart right in front of him. The Turr was pushed back to fall in his own mess and the incoming tide.

*This is not real,* Sabienn thought with a little relief. *This is a vision. I'm here but I'm not here. Wow! I've never seen a man die like that. Right in front of me.* His pulse was racing as if he were in the heat of battle. It was still very real to everyone around him. And the sound. The screams, the shells exploding and the gunfire were deafening.

*This can't be happening?* He was now on the beach some thirty years ago

watching the invading Turrs start the Bol War but no-one could see him, no-one could hear him and in no way could he intervene.

Like a ghost he moved up the beach among the enemy, observing. The tide had turned red with the blood of the invaders. *So Turrs have red blood too.* Bodies were lying and moving in the tide causing a frenzy of carnivorous fish.

Grown men were dying at his feet as he moved without walking across the landscape and along the waterline. He had a good understanding of the Turr tongue and could recognize men when they were calling out for their mother. It came from the mouth of a man trying to keep his belly intact.

He moved up the beach and came alongside a Turr foot soldier, pinned down by fire. His troop were digging in to the sand with their helmets to get some cover. There were senior officers pointing up the beach planning the strategy of overcoming the opponent.

Sabienn looked up the beach towards the Haydd trenches a stone's throw away. He was dismayed at the placement of the trenches. Even in his basic knowledge of military tactics, it was ridiculous.

The trenches were placed in the top dunes offering basic cover. A coil of barbed wire which could be easily breached offered the most flimsy of protection.

*It's just like the history books. All the diagrams,* he thought. *Leader Ween's Supreme Order to stay on the beach. Get back to the cliffs!*

The soldier beside him pulled a grenade off his belt and removed its pin. He stood and lobbed it with all his might and crouched back down.

Sabienn had the grenade in his sight. He moved up the beach watching its arc against the grey sky, like a man about to catch a flying ball. His eyes kept it in view as it descended and lobbed itself right into the Haydd trench hitting the sand with a dull thud.

At that moment, he was there in the trench amongst his people and saw the faces of the defenders. Some of them may have been friends of his father and mother. And the faces looked in horror at the intruding object.

The first to stand up was a corporal. *Oh, my goodness,* Sabienn thought. *It's HSO. But he's puny. He's nothing like the legend. Where's his muscles?*

The corporal pulled off his helmet and moved toward the expectant grenade. With an L-turn he then moved towards the rear wall of the trench and tried clambering up.

"AAAHH!!" HSO's scream sent shivers down Sabienn's spine.

He reached the top of the trench and started running back toward the higher rocky ground, away from the fierce battle to his rear. As an observer, Sabienn stayed with HSO when suddenly four bullets hit the corporal in the chest

opening him up and thrusting him back lifeless and on to the ground. The shots came from the cliffs. Sabienn looked up to where the shots came from and saw a recognizable helmet. He couldn't believe his eyes.

*Bullshit! They're crispies. Deerland regulars.* Sabienn looked up in the cliffs at troops that were supposed to be their allies. Deerland regulars weren't required to fight but they were up in the best vantage point on the beach. *Barrier troops. Is this a joke? They're shooting anyone who retreats.*

At that moment, he was then back in the trench and a captain moved toward the unexploded device. It was definitely The Great Leader, much younger and full of life. He looked dynamic then even without his moustache. Swiftly he picked up the grenade and tossed it out towards the water.

*History sure would have changed. If that hadn't been a dud grenade.*

Next The Great Leader was on to his communication, seething and boiling with rage. A head bobbed up in the cliff with a receiver to his ear. Sabienn couldn't make out completely what was said but it appeared that the then Captain offloaded the most vitriolic spray at his counter-part nestled up in the safety of his rocks, punctuated with middle finger gestures. The head bobbed back down as if to digest the abuse and suggestions offered. Suddenly the head reappeared, waving arms to troops on both sides of him. A thumbs up appeared.

"Move back!" shouted The Great Leader. "Move to the cliffs!" To allay the fears of his men, the then Captain led the way making a tactical withdrawal from the trenches. Through a worn path under the cover of friendly fire, his troops made their way up to the rocky placements to set up their machine guns.

Sabienn was suddenly up in the rocks now to witness The Great Leader grab Captain Thumbs Up by the throat with a beefy right hand. Quick words were exchanged but the noise of battle muffled them. He couldn't make out every word spoken but he did hear Thumbs Up say, "OK, OK. He fell on the grenade."

Thumbs Up and his men gathered themselves and left single file away from the battle.

"You'll pay for this, you Deerland bastards!" shouted The Great Leader, viewing the retreating allies with disgust. "You'll pay!"

With the tactical advantage of the rocks, his men spread out and kept the invaders at bay on their particular stretch of sand.

After what seemed like an eternity of pitched battle, the then captain sent a communiqué to his superiors, "Mission accomplished. Request permission to reinforce forces to the north." The reply, "Granted." And he was out of there. The Great Leader led his troops away and through the path the Deers retreated along.

*Wait a minute!* Sabienn was having difficulty getting his mind's mouth

around the words he was thinking. *This was a Supreme Order. They don't get much bigger. Even a Leader Ween order. It must be followed. Or risk death.*

He watched the heroic figure of the man he worshipped move up the path and turn to his men. "You shut up about this! All of you! Not a word. Understood?" "Yes, sir," came the enthusiastic acknowledgement. Every man there was bound by the order. So loose lips would mean certain execution.

Just as suddenly as he was transported back, he returned to the present. It was the dark of night again. The metal of the pin still tingled in his hand and everything was quiet. The only noise now was the breeze picking up, rustling the leaves in the trees, and the listless to and fro of the tide. *What the hell was that? Was that real? Did I imagine that?*

He was now standing on the sand facing the billboard in the car park celebrating the sacrifice of Corporal HSO. The street lights illuminated everything that he knew to be true.

The billboard painting showed a romantic view of the battle, far removed from the scene he had just seen.

There was The Great Leader as a captain, complete with a moustache now, standing without cover firing a pistol toward the water. He had a caption, "Hold the Line. Never Retreat." And there was HSO, looking like he'd punched in about nine months in a gymnasium, with legs like he could bench press a cow, grandly throwing himself on the grenade, glowing in the sand like some egg of evil unleashed from hell.

The enormity of what he was thinking suddenly hit him. *This is a lie. This is not true.*

He tossed the pin in his hand into the sand. It betrayed everything he held true and he didn't want anything further to do with it.

His watch showed he needed to push on. There was so much he was unable to understand. But there wasn't time now.

He needed to see his Captain.

## 9. The Unreliable

Back at the dorm, Sabienn showered and changed into normal fatigues. The weather had turned brisk so he laid out a cloak on the bed for his meeting. His room-mate Wyllo was nowhere to be seen. It was as if he hadn't returned since their last meeting and his back-pack was missing.

It then occurred to him that Wyllo had been speaking to him about voices he had heard in the surf. *Maybe it was the same thing I heard*, he thought. *I need to see him.* A pen was grabbed from a dresser and a hastily scrawled note was made. "Wyllo. I need to see you. I need to talk to you about the Dee. Sabienn." It was ripped from its binding and placed on Wyllo's bed.

On his way to Captain Randd's office, he passed some friends, now all returned from the majestic experience of the stadium. To each he asked if they'd seen Wyllo but they hadn't seen him since earlier in the day.

He cut a path through the mess hall to get to his destination, but stopped to survey the heads sitting at tables taking late night coffee. Still there was no sign of Wyllo.

The mess hall was notable for average yet filling food scooped onto large plates but really good coffee served in generously sized mugs. At the moment it was full of people hunkering over mugs still looking warm in the glow of being transfixed by a deity.

The room was also notable for its Honour Board. It stretched almost the full distance of the western wall and detailed the achievements and failures of Academy graduates for the past one hundred years.

He must have passed by and sat near this thing a million times but today, as with other strange things that had happened, he was paying particular note to it.

*What is it about this board? There's something here that needs to speak to me*, he thought.

The board was immense and with pride of place on the far left side was the column, "Blue Star Recipients" showing attendees of the Academy that achieved the highest honour in military valour and conspicuous bravery, "The Blue Star".

Their names were inscribed in blue print in several columns and several ill-fitting and badly matched wooden panels.

The most notable recipient of course was the man whose portrait adorned the

opposite wall. The Great Leader attended Salt Academy before the name change. His photo in the mess hall showed The Blue Star prominently on his uniform, a simple dark blue five-point star with light blue ribbon.

The Blue Star column also held the name of Corporal HSO (Posthumous). Sabienn remembered his vision of him was less than gracious but he didn't begrudge HSO's mother and father receiving the fifty thousand kee purse that went with the award.

There were other columns for "Performance in Art and Sport" and "Science" in red print and green print respectively.

The final column was one where no-one sought to see their name. It was called "The Unreliable" and was a roll-call of shame branding their names indelibly in history in yellow print.

It was impressed upon Sabienn at an early age of the necessity for obedience and the following of orders. It was the trademark trait of the Haydd and a Supreme Order is the greatest order of them all.

Someone who failed to carry out a Supreme Order through a direct act of disobedience dons the mantle of being Unreliable. They bring shame upon themselves and their family.

The punishment for being Unreliable was always execution and your name in yellow for history to see. Your family is then shunned and banished and job prospects for children and siblings are minimal. And not only for the family, but for the relaying officer who passed the order on and his family. It is often thought there may have been disobedience because the receiver of the order didn't completely understand the order. This then would be the fault of the superior officer who didn't adequately explain it.

Sabienn's eyes ran down the list and he always landed on one name in particular; probably because it was so unusual. Sergeant Oololo. It was unique in that it had four "o"s.

*Oololo*, he thought. *Today of all days. Why do you interest me?* Oololo's name was popular with the diners. Sabienn himself remembered being in competitions to fling round food like sliced onions and tomatoes at the name to land it in its "o"s.

He left the mess hall for the short walk to Captain Randd's quarters where he had his earlier visit that day. As he rounded a corner to view the entrance, he was stunned to see three people illuminated by the street light at the front of the Captain's premises.

Sabienn could make out a man who may have been the Captain.

"Captain Randd," he called. "Is that you?"

The Captain responded nervously as if he were preoccupied with something



that required his full attention. “Go away,” he called to Sabienn. “I can’t see you now.”

As he spoke, Sabienn recognized a woman there with them. “Is that you doctor?” said Sabienn.

“Not now, Cadet,” came the reply from the woman. She was equally unnerved by something.

Doctor Freya Leel was one of the Academy medical staff whom Sabienn knew as she would always tend to his injuries and ailments.

“What’s going on?” called Sabienn feeling confused. “We have a meeting, Captain.”

Randd left the group he was with and walked briskly to Sabienn. “You need to go now, Cadet. Go!” He was using his body to try and block Sabienn’s gaze of the situation.

“Sabienn,” called the voice of the third person. “Is that you?” Sabienn was shocked to hear Wyllo Wyde’s voice.

Catching a brief glimpse around the imposing body of his Captain, Sabienn saw his room-mate illuminated in the street light. He was standing next to the doctor with a downcast expression wrapped in a cloak. He could see that Wyllo must have had his back-pack on under his cloak which was unusual. It bulged at the back under his garment.

“Wyllo, are you OK?” called Sabienn.

“It’s terrible,” Wyllo’s voice was weak. Although he couldn’t completely see his face, he seemed upset and distressed.

“Get back,” said Randd. He physically pushed Sabienn back which left him aghast. The Captains were never allowed to touch the students.

“I need to see him,” insisted Sabienn. He called around the blocking body of the Captain. “Wyllo? I heard the voices. I heard them too. At the Dee.”

“I’m sorry,” Wyllo replied distressed.

“What’s wrong, man?”

“Sabienn,” Wyllo said, almost crying. “I’m unreliable.”

Randd gave shouted instructions to the doctor, “Take him away.” The doctor quickly led Wyllo’s cloaked frame away to an awaiting vehicle. The Captain was now physically restraining Sabienn from getting close to his friend.

“I need to talk with him,” Sabienn called. “I need to see him.”

The vehicle with the doctor and his friend slid away into the night. It wasn’t until then that the Captain backed off from his student. He was pale and shocked like he’d seen a ghost. Sabienn was stunned at Randd’s complete change of demeanour.

“Go,” Rand managed to gather his senses to think clearly. “I’ll see you

tomorrow.”

“But will it be OK?” Sabienn wasn’t sure if his mentor was listening.

“What?” Randd’s mind was elsewhere.

“My tattoo,” said Sabienn. “My case.”

“Go,” Randd was now losing his temper. “Go!”

With that Sabienn was pushed away again and Randd retreated quickly to his quarters. The door slammed closed.

There were a few seconds of disbelief but after Sabienn gathered his thoughts, he ran up and down the road to look for the vehicle. There was no sign of the doctor or Wyllo.

*What’s happening? His thoughts tumbled. This whole tattoo thing is not looking good. And what’d they do to Wyllo? I bet Krenn’d know.* He looked at his watch. *He’d be back from the stadium. He’d still be up. He’s not that bad a guy.* Sabienn began to walk the short distance to Krenn’s quarters and his Museum. *He’ll listen. If I talk man to man. And he has things of my mother and father. Surely I have a right to see that stuff. If I’m about to die.*

After a few minutes running, Sabienn found himself at the doorway of the Krenn Museum of Artefacts. He carefully pushed in the unlocked door and walked in to view once again its bizarre exhibits.

Such was General Krenn’s belief in his place in history that he made a room to celebrate his many exploits. Sabienn looked around the room filled with artefacts like native bags, hats, dolls and cooking utensils. There were also dead animals. Mountain lions, monkeys and grey wolves that he had shot and had stuffed into poses a lot more threatening than the ones they had been killed in.

He stood in front of a glass case holding several grey and moulding cloth sacks and carry bags marked “General Native Rubbish”. One of the small carry bags had a tiny “7” in ink at the top. *I didn’t even think natives could count*, he thought.

The carry bag was displayed next to a rather ornate Turr assassin’s blade. A small concealable knife that released by bolt action a blade as thin as a toothpick. It was intended to be held concealed in a hand up against a victim’s neck into which the blade would spring forth. The handle also contained a small compartment with screw on cap to house a suicide pill if required. It was an ancient instrument of more ceremonial significance than practical use. But the green jewelled inlay in the handle held him transfixed for a moment.

“Do you like it, Mr Feel?” Sabienn was so enraptured in the object he hadn’t noticed the General come up behind him. General Boxx Krenn was tall with grey hair and his eyes viewed him with tight brown penetrating slits of contempt. The mere presence made Sabienn start. There was an aura of very dark energy with

this man. *What was I thinking? This was a bad idea*, Sabienn thought.

“No, please.” Krenn seemed strangely accommodating. “It is a beautiful weapon. I call it Bucky. Do you call your weapons names?”

“No, sir,” said Sabienn nervously.

“Well you have one day to try.” He lifted the glass lid on its hinge and removed the blade to hold in front of Sabienn. “See the release here?” Holding it up to the cadet’s neck for a second, he pulled it away just in time and released the blade. The razor sharp tooth-pick blade shot out from its hilt two centimetres in front of the cadet’s eyes causing him to jump in fright.

“Don’t be scared,” continued Krenn. “This isn’t the blade I’ll kill you with.”

“Sir, there’s been a misunderstanding.” Sabienn was ruing the impulse that brought him here.

“Of course. You’ve done both of us a favour,” Krenn continued sardonically. “Trying to kill the boy. He needs to harden up. Fancy letting himself get into a choke hold. To you, of all people. He should have slotted you in self-defence.” The General brought the blade back up to Sabienn’s eyes and let it spring forth, making him jump. “When you die, he’ll get a wolf. That should man him up. So, thank you.”

It wasn’t a way Sabienn wanted to be appreciated. “Sir, can we just talk?”

“Talk?” Krenn popped up with mock interest. “Of course. Please take a seat.” There was a lounge setting with two comfortable chairs to which they both repaired. The chairs were in front of a low table with a shrunken skull on it.

“But please,” Krenn continued, “May I speak first? I’m glad we could talk. It gives me a chance to say how I feel about you, Feel. You *sicken* me. I absolutely *loathe* you. When this tattoo review came up, it was as if the stars had finally come into alignment in my favour for once. No, killing you will be something I will *really* enjoy. Where’s my manners? Coffee?”

“I’m sorry about Jarrnee. And I think Joallee is a lovely person.” Sabienn was clutching at debris in the vortex he was being sucked into.

“Are you canvassing here? Is it Father of The Year time again?” Krenn was enjoying himself.

“No, no.” Sabienn looked down on the little skull on the table looking back at him. “I just wanted to know if you knew my parents.”

“Why?”

“Because it was something the Captain said.” Sabienn pondered on whether the skull asked better questions. “You had things that belonged to them.”

“Oh, did he say that?” said Krenn with slight annoyance.

“I’ve been thinking,” Sabienn continued. “If I die tomorrow, I don’t know where I came from. I don’t feel complete.’

Krenn appeared to be brewing like a thunder cloud ready to burst, then a smile came across his face. “Sure. Why not? I have some things you can see,” said Krenn standing. “I’ll take it as a last wish.”

Adjacent to some display items was an office cabinet that Krenn took to with a key. After a minute riffling through its contents, he pulled out a plastic bag clip sealed at the top and placed it next to the skull on the table.

Sabienn viewed it and was mesmerised. There were coins and photos and a card that had been signed and touched by his parents. On the top of the packet was a sticker pasted over a label which he could just vaguely see “121” coming through. There was a thrill and a joy pulsing within him. These were touched by people who loved him.

“These things,” said Krenn, opening the wrapping and tipping the items on to the table with all the due care of scraps. “These things belonged to your mother and father.” His enjoyment wasn’t genuine and his expression was more sarcastic than collegial. He appeared to be grinning at him not with him.

The items glowed in the light to Sabienn. There was a photo of a baby. A photo of him and he was sleeping. There was a card with a painting of forest flowers. He picked it up and inside it said “Love, Mum”. He felt a tingling in his fingers and a tornado through his head.

And he was transported.

His eyes were blinking in the bright industrial lighting of what appeared to be a laboratory. It was obvious he was in another one of these visions he couldn’t explain.

An aimless uninterested voice was heard. “What should I put in this card?”

“I dunno. Try “Love, Mum,” said another vague voice.

Sabienn could suddenly see a baby and it was him. He didn’t know why he knew, he just knew. Two operatives in lab coats buttoned tightly round their paunches were placing items into the plastic bag. They spoke with all the enthusiasm and interest of two people painting a long wall.

“What’s 121’s name?”

“Feel.”

“Feel?”

“Check the readout.” One held up a printout to the other. “It’s just a random spit-out. It may as well be “wheel”.”

“Sabienn Feel,” said the name asker, almost forcing it off his tongue like something unsavoury. Taking a camera, he took a photo of the baby. “What a stupid name.”

“Quiet, Push,” said one with caution.

“He’s a stupid kid, stupid name.” Push’s words showed he couldn’t help

himself.

“Not so loud.”

“Well he’ll be earning more than me. Someone’s got to say what everyone’s thinking,” said Push grandly.

“And it may as well be you, Major.” A deep stern voice boomed through the room. The two operatives snapped to attention and quivered in absolute fear. When Sabienn turned, he could hardly believe his eyes.

It was the Grand Inquisitor Profound, Murrlock Hyde. He was much younger and muscular but even in this early age still sporting the powerful bald head. His black cloak draped around him as he stood at the door, possibly there for a time listening to his charges.

“Outside, please. Both of you,” ordered Murrlock.

“No no, please.” Push was now in tears as they both filed out of the room with the GIP in pursuit, closing the door behind them.

In the room on his own, Sabienn looked down on the serenity of himself. He looked so beautiful and calm, swaddled in a cloth. There was printing on the wrap, “Property of Mission Cinnamon”. He’d never heard of this place.

A shot rang out from outside. After a few seconds, the door opened and the GIP returned followed by Push’s colleague operative and a new man, in a lab coat with equal dimensions to his paunch.

Sabienn stood by watching in disbelief as the man, who seconds earlier had just executed a human with his own hands, was now tenderly hovering over his crib with an almost angelic composure and a glowing smile.

The door suddenly burst open and a cloaked figure rushed in. It was the young Krenn, now younger with a handsome crop of black hair.

“Stand easy, Colonel,” said Murrlock, not taking his gaze away from the baby. “Just some staff issues you failed to attend to.”

As Krenn looked around the room, he addressed one of the operatives, “Where’s Major Pushinn?”

Without raising their eyes, the operatives kept on working, as the realization dawned on Krenn of how his Major may have disappeared.

“But the formula strengths? The blood tests? Who has those?” Krenn appeared to be panicking.

“Are you telling me you are not fully on top of your duties, Colonel?” Murrlock’s eyes never left the baby.

“Colonel, we have the Major’s notes here,” said Push’s colleague. “All results, all procedures. We’re all go.”

Murrlock turned to Push’s colleague, “May I?” He was wanting to pick up the baby.

The blood drained from the operative's face. "If," the operative stumbled. "If the Colonel wishes, My Lord." He was balking at the breach in chain of command.

"I'm asking you," said Murrlock, turning to the now jittering operative. "The Colonel doesn't seem to be in command of his brief."

"Please, My Lord," The Colonel moved to assist, removing the child from the crib. In his fumbling, the swaddling fell from the baby's body as he placed the naked boy into the GIP's arms.

"This boy has no nappy," said Murrlock, looking admiringly between the baby's legs.

"We've been taking measurements." The Colonel was sounding more like a salesman offering an impassioned pitch. "This child is sturdy."

"He is sturdy," said Murrlock, still gazing at his privates. "He's a big boy."

"This one is "121". His name is .." The Colonel picked up a clipboard. "Sabienn Feel."

As Sabienn gazed on at the scene he couldn't believe the tenderness in Murrlock Hyde's expression. As he held the baby, he made faces and blew make-believe bubbles with his mouth. After a time, he passed the child back to the Colonel.

"Thank you," said Murrlock. His Colonel stood beside him looking very pleased with his efforts. "I can't begin to tell you," Murrlock spoke smiling to his Colonel. "How much I feel physically sick just to look upon you." The smile left from Murrlock's face along with the spirit sucked from the Colonel's lungs. "Though the children appear to be well," he added.

"I gave you a guarantee and I'm as good as my word, My Lord." The Colonel was doing his best to claw back approval. "They're healthy, of good skin and.." He was cut short in midsentence as the baby in his arms began peeing like a fountain over his uniform, much to the enjoyment of Hyde.

"I like this one," Murrlock laughed.

The Colonel packed the baby back into the crib. As he did so, Sabienn viewed the look of hatred he was projecting into this most innocent of creatures that had the bad accident of humiliating him.

"Attend to this," Krenn barked to one of his functionaries. "Will that be all, My Lord?"

"Reports on my desk as usual, Colonel," said Murrlock, and he moved to walk out.

All this time Sabienn looked on. He had been like the audience of a theatre, watching its actors on stage. Suddenly Murrlock stopped in midstride and turned to look towards where Sabienn's figure stood in the room. He seemed to be

aware of his presence across the vaunting stretch of time and space. It was as if the actor was now breaching the fourth wall to spy out over his audience.

As Sabienn looked towards him, a chill went up his spine as the dark energy of this man's eyes pierced him. "I like this one," Murrlock repeated and gathered his thoughts and left.

With a start Sabienn was back in the present sitting with the now General Krenn. He still had the "Love, Mum" card in his hand. He was still in shock with his encounter and was sweating and breathing uneasily. His watch showed that less than a minute had passed, yet in that space of time the items from the plastic bag in front of him went from priceless treasure to junk. He tossed the card to the table never wanting to pick it up again.

"So are we done here?" General Krenn was his grey present self, but the hatred he projected was the same as it was all those years ago. "Good. Take your stuff and get out. Tomorrow you die."

Sabienn assessed everything he had seen. *Can I use this? It's still a mystery. And what I saw did it actually happen? Or was it some process of my mind?* "Keep it," Sabienn said bluntly to the General. "I won't be dying tomorrow. The Captain said I had friends. Did you know I had friends?"

*Oh no,* Sabienn thought. *That was a massive tactical blunder.* He wished he could pull the words back in that had just left his mouth.

Krenn was stunned by the words and irked by the defiant tone which virtually came from nowhere. "Friends?" Krenn looked like a man who had just had the rug tugged from under him. His face was flush with blood and the gaze became more intense. "What else did the Captain say?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Sabienn undertook some serious backtracking. "I may have got it wrong."

"No no," said the General, suddenly conciliatory. His demeanour seemed to change from dominant to demure in a split second. "Please, we could both use a coffee." Krenn's offer was difficult to turn down. He briefly disappeared to another room and returned with two cups of steaming back liquid and some papers. "Please." He proffered the cup across the table.

"Thank you." Sabienn was just grateful the heat had gone out of the discussion. *Maybe I should ask him if what I saw in this vision was true,* he thought. *And where's Mission Cinnamon?*

After a sip from his cup, Krenn continued his charm offensive. "With this business tomorrow, there's some paperwork. You understand? Nothing major. Am I able to get a signature?"

"Of course." Papers were pushed in front of Sabienn which he duly scrawled on in the spirit of their newfound goodwill. He took some sips of his coffee. The

brand of coffee he couldn't identify as it tasted a little bitter than the ones he was used to.

With his sudden friendliness, Krenn continued, "You have to understand my passion for the black wolf tattoo. I myself have one. Allow me?"

The old General removed his uniform shirt to reveal his old man's chest. Within the grey hairs sprouting on the now flaccid flesh and mole tainted skin, was an ancient tattoo, the black wolf.

"You see the style has changed. The older wolves had more profile." Krenn pointed to the features of his mark. There indeed was a difference Sabienn could see. The wolf was more looking to the side than face on.

"Who gave you yours? Was it Neel?" Krenn continued, moving to a freshly laundered lab coat draped on a hanger on a nearby door. He slipped it on and buttoned it up at the front. "His style is suspect," offered Krenn.

"He said it's the best one he's ever done, sir," said Sabienn brightly.

"Let me see." The General showed genuine interest.

Without a further thought, Sabienn removed his cloak and top to reveal his pride and joy. The black wolf he received that day. His chest was full, his skin had a youthful sheen and he had the more pronounced muscles of a young man. The tattoo stood proud and defiant above his heart. It was the only mark on his body, apart from the ill thought out SEMEN on his arm.

"Impressive," said Krenn. "Your coffee cold?"

"No, it's fine." Taking a long draft of his beverage, Sabienn placed the cup down only to feel his balance spin. He looked up and saw stars before his eyes. "Whoah! I'm not good here." He felt the room spin a little.

"Please. It's stuffy in here. Let's get some air." Krenn helped his charge up and lead him through to a door at the back.

The room was dark as he was led in and he felt the squelch of plastic sheeting on the floor and heard a strange splashing. His legs began to weaken more and were not responding to any message his brain would send. Krenn took hold of him as he leaned more for support. With a sudden push he was launched forward and tipped over into something metal.

The lights came on. As Sabienn blinked to ponder his surrounds, he found himself kneeling in a large metal tray he felt would have been used in a normal sense as a kid's splash pool. Above him were two ropes dangling from the ceiling with wrist restraints attached. Plastic sheeting covered the floor area for as much as he could see. And the noise he heard was coming from a fish tank.

Krenn casually walked to an old metal bucket on a desk and from it picked up a piece of meat which he tossed to the water.

"Eat, my pretties," Krenn called to the fish within. It seethed like a wash pool



with hundreds of awful red-eyed shardee, waiting for a fresher morsel.

Next to the desk was a tray of surgical equipment which included scalpels and items for ripping away skin and various saws and clamps designed to crack through a sternum and pull a rib cage apart.

“Sir,” Sabienn could still think clearly and had an awareness of his surrounds. He just found it difficult to move his limbs which were now a little numb. “What’s going on?”

“Your review,” Krenn was filling in more paperwork.

“But that’s tomorrow,” said Sabienn unsteadily.

“Today is tomorrow somewhere in the world.” He worked his paperwork aloud for his charge to hear. “Review of Sabienn Feel. For the unlawful receipt of the black wolf tattoo, an official mark of the realm. Attendees. General Krenn, present. Captain Randd, absent. Captain Cayninn, absent. Consent for accused to be executed. Oh look,” He held up the paper to show the cadet’s scrawl. “It’s already been signed.”

“I don’t feel well,” Sabienn struggled to keep his thoughts clear.

“Well soso will do that,” Krenn held up a small bottle for his charge’s view.

Sabienn thought, *Soso? My coffee’s been laced.*

“Soso,” said Krenn. “Our friend. From the native tree whose sap is extracted and turned into various preparations. Such as anaesthetics, hallucinogen narcotics, rat poison and suicide pills. I can’t read the label. But I’m sure you’re hoping I picked the right one.”

As he floundered trying to find his legs, Sabienn tried to keep calm. *I have to think. Think fast. What’ve I got here? What can I use? Can the Captain help? He was busy with Wylio. Wylio?*

“Sir, you need to call the Captain,” Sabienn said, speaking as if trying to pass on an urgent message.

“Why would I do that, Feel?” said the General throwing another piece of meat to the tank and watch the feeding frenzy. “By the time your friends hear about this, your heart will be no more. I might even celebrate. Cut you all up. These boys could use a feed.”

“Please, sir.” Sabienn was more insistent. “You need to call the Captain. It’s why I’m here. He sent me. It’s something with Cadet Wyde.”

“Wyde?” There was a sudden pique of interest from the General.

“He said he was unreliable. Wyde said he was unreliable,” said Sabienn.

The General held his gaze then smiled, “Nice try. Peeing little pratt.”

As the General went back to tying on a surgical gown, Sabienn remembered the peeing. It was in his vision. If his peeing on Krenn was true, maybe the other stuff was true too.

“It’s Wyde, sir.” Sabienn was insistent. “Something is wrong. You have to do something. You have to be fully on top of your duties. You have to be in command of your brief.”

The General stopped and stared in disbelief at Sabienn. The words he heard were the words of Murrlock Hyde spoken to him so many years ago in his moment of humiliation. Sabienn saw that it must have unsettled Krenn to hear the thoughts of high command channelled through a lowly snot-rag like Sabienn.

“Sir,” Sabienn implored. “You must contact the Captain. You must do something for Wyde. It’s your duty. To look after the students. Isn’t it?”

After a few seconds thought, the general calmed down and went back to his purpose. Quietly he moved across the room towards Sabienn and grabbed his left wrist. Sabienn was having difficulty struggling but he needed to fight. If his arm was secured in the wrist restraint hanging from the ceiling, it would be game over. There would be no way of escape.

As his body was being pulled up, the cadet realized the old man had an amazing amount of strength. Resistance was proving futile. Just as the clasp was to be tied, he tried his last shot. “Sir, Where’s Mission Cinnamon?”

Sabienn saw the words register on the General’s face. It was a gobsmacked shock. In a split second it seemed that he went from domineering bullying to cowering and surprise. “Who told you this?” said Krenn when he finally found words.

Sabienn just looked back. He felt his best tactic was to stay quiet.

“*Who?*” The General kept an iron grip on his charge’s wrist. The limbs were still numb, but the cadet still stared forward at him blankly. The biggest challenge Sabienn was finding was to stop a massive smirk from spreading across his face. That would be fatal.

After what seemed like ages, the General relinquished his grip and threw his charge back down on to the metal floor of the pool. Krenn ranted around the room.

“*Treachery!*” Krenn was livid. His face was flush with blood and his fists were clenched in rage. He picked up a cup from the table and threw it against a wall and they both watched it smash into a shower of ceramic shards. “*Absolute treachery!*”

The bottle of soso then went hurtling towards the closed door and shattered to the floor.

“*Betray me,*” Krenn directed this towards himself as he picked up his screen to make irate contact with his Captain. “Randd!”

Sabienn had full view of the General’s face as angry as he had ever seen another human. His eyes were wild and his teeth bared. “Randd! Just shut up!

Listen..” By the look of the conversation, the Captain was getting words in edgeways against the force of the General’s scorn. And the look on the General’s face changed once more.

The vitriol of the General’s temper was a mere dam-burst compared to what appeared to be a tidal wave of information coming back at him through the screen and into his ears. His face changed to an expression of hopelessness and despair.

“Yes I understand. I’ll be there presently,” said Krenn, now chastened and meek. The conversation ended and the screen dropped to the floor. The old man sank to his knees and looked at the plastic sheeting on the floor. His head lifted and words left his mouth without thought of who cared to listen. “The Year of Wings.”

Sabienn kept his eye on him. Krenn was a collapsed human struggling to hold on to the desk adjacent.

“Is there something wrong, sir?” Sabienn’s instinct was to be on the General’s side.

The General looked up as if to look right through his charge. “It’s when the Stone Shepherds awaken, Cadet.” He looked down again at the plastic. “It’s the Year of Wings.”

There was a Blue Moon Bible on the top and he grabbed it aimlessly and started flipping through the pages. The cadet could clearly see the page he was viewing.

The Blue Moon Bible had a variety of recipes included to encourage communal eating and social activity. The General was staring at the recipe for a fried rice dish that would serve a village. Krenn was a man who looked completely lost.

After a time, he found his feet and pocketed his bible. He walked to the door, crunching through the broken glass on the plastic covered floor and turned out the light. As the door closed, Sabienn was left in darkness. Feeling was starting to return to his extremities but he lay back in his metal kid’s pool. He looked up at the ceiling in deep thought and listened to the fish thrash in their tank, sensing that they’d missed out.

*What the hell just happened here?*

## 10. It Is Time

Sabienn moved to get out of Krenn's premises as quickly as his limbs would allow. He crawled gingerly across the floor avoiding the savage little shards of broken cup and left the room. The clothes were still where he'd left them in the Museum. All were gathered and he staggered out the door.

There was a bench seat in a bush clearing which allowed him privacy to sit and gather his thoughts and tidy himself up. Slowly he felt more sensate in his body and more strength in his hands and his mind was as sharp as before. *Whatever has just happened has something to do with Wyllo. I still need to see him.* Trekking back to the dorm, he kept his eyes peeled and his senses keen.

As he approached the dorm, there was a gathering of his dorm mates and friends in a huddle around Captain Cayninn. A girl he knew called Sandee saw him in the distance and broke from the group to run toward him.

There were tears in her eyes as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Oh it's terrible," Sandee sobbed. "It's terrible."

"What's wrong?" Sabienn consoled her.

"Wyllo. He's dead. He's killed himself." She sobbed on his shoulder.

"What?" Sabienn was incredulous. *No way. I saw him an hour ago.*

They walked to the group and Cayninn, seeing Sabienn, broke from the ranks to come and hug him. "Sabienn. I'm so sorry. If you need to talk, I'm here." Everyone was looking sadly at him ensconced in the woman's flesh and fragrance but his mind was racing.

"That's not possible. He's not dead. He can't be," said Sabienn.

Cayninn broke free and produced a note. "He left this." It was type-written. *Type-written? You've got to be kidding,* Sabienn thought. *It was always the writing pad.* He remembered their frequent notes like "Can you get me shampoo while you're out?" or "Borrowed your belt. Be back tomorrow." Nothing was typed.

Sabienn viewed the crisp white paper and text within. It was like an alien had written it. Not the Wyllo he knew. He read. "Sabienn. I tried to reach out to you today. Though I don't blame you. Things have been getting too much. I can't go on. I saw your wolf last night. I'm glad for you. I knew I'd never amount to much. I'm dragging down the team. It's best to remove myself. I thought long

and hard down at Grand Defence Beach. I feel like a mould on the wall. One wipe and I'll be gone. And everyone can go on living. Stay safe. Your friend, Wyllo."

Sabienn looked at the words in disbelief. *That's not Wyllo! Firstly, Grand Defence Beach? Come on. With Wyllo it was always The Dee. And secondly I love the way the letter's making out I should assume some sort of guilt. For him topping himself. Faults he may have had, like everyone else, but the Wyllo I knew never shoved blame on anyone.*

Nothing about this letter was adding up. "He didn't write this," Sabienn said, handing the note back.

"I know," Captain Cayninn placed her reassuring hand on his shoulder as if to calm him. "I know how you feel."

Sabienn looked at the crowd feeling sad for him. *I've got to get away. These gawking do-gooders. I'm not standing around giving hugs to people who need a hug. Nothing makes sense here.* He had a sudden need to immerse himself in the sea. And in somehow let nature wash all this weirdness away. Sabienn began to run. He ran in the direction of the beach.

Cayninn cried out, "Stop! Sabienn, come back."

*Come back? Come back to what?* His thoughts tumbled as he ran. *Come back to touchy-feely counselling. Everyone has to hold hands and cry correctly. There must be some paperwork. Insurance for someone important. But I'm not important. Wyllo wasn't important.*

He needed to run. Sabienn ran for a time that seemed like ages. He thought of Wyllo. He thought of the General and Randd and Cayninn. Like they were characters on some stage and he was the only one in the audience.

Finally the sand pushed against his boots as he stood to look out to the sea. He bent over to look at his feet and was surprised at how fit he felt.

It didn't take long to strip down and rush at full tilt to immerse himself within his sea. The waves crashed around him for the second time that day and he stood to push his wet hair back. He looked to the shore with all its drama and dropped himself under the water.

Then it happened again. The voice came. "It is time."

His head lifted from the water. "Who is that?" he cried. He looked around. There was nothing.

"Who are you?" Sabienn's words rang out to no-one. A flock of bats suddenly alighted from the trees near the beach as if the trees ignited and burst into a black flame illuminated by the street lighting.

The words returned. They were calm, matter-of-fact and in no way threatening. "It .. is .. time."

“Time for what?” said Sabienn, searching his surrounds. “Please.”

There were three kids playing on the beach. It was nearly midnight. *If it's those little pricks, why aren't they home?* But they were all too far away for this.

“Why are you doing this?” he pleaded to the unknown voice. Minutes passed and there were no further voices.

Calmly he stood within the waves looking toward the shore. His body had a feeling as if there were eruptions and upheavals occurring beneath his skin and he began to feel very tired.

He ran his hands over his arms and his legs and the wolf on his chest and he felt that he had burnt body fat by doing nothing. And he felt strong. He flexed an impressive bicep in his right arm that he never knew he had and his wrists flexed to the power in his fingers.

*What the hell is happening?* He looked at himself. He was changing. As he stood in the water, a school of inquisitive shardee swam around him nibbling at his flesh. Challenging the scabs of his healing wounds. Rather than fight them, he watched them and let them exfoliate his exposed skin. The sensation tickled him.

They were a curse to the planet but in this moment they had their place in the universe. They were scavengers fulfilling a purpose. He looked on at their small scaled bodies and could see their tiny sacs filled with poison behind their shining red eyes.

With a wave of his hand in the water, he let the fish know he'd had enough. It was time to get out. He found his clothes but was suddenly overcome with a wave of nausea. At a distance from his garments, he fell to his knees and brought up the remnants of his chicken roll and coffee on to the wet sand. *I'm sick. Sick like Wyllo. And so tired. Why?*

Without robing, he gathered his clothes and pushed up into the dunes looking for the cover of beach trees and bushes. There was a warm patch of sand where he lay down. Pulling his clothes over him he made a little cocoon around him and rolled up into a foetal position. Within seconds he was in the midst of a deep sleep.

A dream appeared where he was standing atop the dunes looking out on the ocean and onto a scene of a great drama. There were hundreds of people with extended hands and arms trying to keep their heads above water. They were shouting and screaming and crying for help. And among them was a massive school of shardee attacking and devouring in a churning frenzy. A beach ball with “Obey Me” written on it skittered across the surface caught in a breeze. It was a child's toy of joy playfully dancing on the water with its unfolding carnage.

The dream dissolved into another dream. His sleep was deep and there was dream after dream.

“Get up!” cried a young voice. Sabienn was awoken by a kick to the leg.

Through the cover of his cloak he heard kid’s voices. He peeped out to see the three kids that had been playing on the beach all standing over him.

“What are you doing here, Mister?” said one little juvenile, chewing on his Supreme Order Fruit. Sabienn could see the order and wrapping in the little hand. He must have been eight or nine like his friends.

“Are you a spy?” said another.

“Give us money and we won’t report you, Mister” said the third.

*Little shits*, Sabienn thought. He stood up to his full height clothed in nothing more than his swimming trunks and let his cloak fall to the ground.

With his fingers bared like claws, he bared his teeth and faced his little foes. “RRAARRHH!” he screamed at the kids.

“AAAH!” cried the children looking on in shock at him. *What are these pricks screaming at?* He viewed their response as a bit over the top.

One kid covered her mouth with her hand as she stared in disbelief. “It’s a monster!” She started to run. “Help! It’s a monster!” The other two were looking to something behind Sabienn. When he turned he noticed a growth on his back.

“Ah!” Sabienn started to jump around and brush his body like a man trying to dislodge leeches from his back. The kids watched on at this monster jumping around like a lunatic and followed their companion in hot pursuit.

“Aah!” They cried, “Monster!”

“Ah!” Sabienn flipped around like a burning ember had landed on his back. Try as he might to rid himself of them they appeared to be attached to him. *What’s happening to me?*

Gathering his items, he pushed on back to the beach to see if there were many people around. In the distance he could see a toilet block near the car-park which he knew had a smashed mirror which he could get a better view with.

His cloak went over his back but stood out like he was wearing a backpack underneath. Within the block, he let the cloak fall down as he stood in front of the mirror.

It was the first time he saw them. *Shit! This can’t be happening! I’ve got wings!*

They were his flesh and drew from two wide bases in his back like breasts. There were two trunks protruding from these bases of some springy stiff substance and what appeared to be five extended fingers of the same substance. Filled within these strange appendages was a thick membrane displayed in a manner that made him look like a bat. He then noticed on both sides of his neck

a horizontal gash like two freshly healed cuts.

As Sabienn watched on, his wings looked like they were getting bigger. He also found he could start to move them with his thoughts and some instincts were coming into play. The wings extended upon his wish and similarly folded. He even found he could make them flap.

The image stared back at him and tears rolled down his cheeks as he gripped and bent over the basin in front. His thoughts ripped him apart. *Why me? My life is over.*

He looked at the black wolf on his chest, a high point of social honour, juxtaposed with these hideous wings. *I'm an imposter. I've been found out. I have no right. No right to the mark. No right to anything. The wings found me out. An imposter pure and simple. My life's over.*

Bringing his wings in to a fold behind his back, he pulled on the cloak and looked like a hunchback. *Maybe no-one will notice. They've sent hunchbacks to war.* He stumbled out of the block still carrying his effects and went to the beach grass and looked out to sea.

The street and park lights shone down on him and he covered his eyes with his hands. He began to walk to his thinking place when he saw an Academy van pull into the carpark. In the passenger side he could just make out the head and hairstyle. It was Pattee Standd.

*Oh Pattee*, his heart thumped. *At last, a friend.* If ever he needed a shoulder to cry on it was now. As the vehicle lights went off, Sabienn walked to the passenger side.

"Pattee?" Sabienn called quietly.

"Say, is that you?" Pattee was straining her eyes at him.

"Is that Feel?" A male voice at the wheel could be heard.

*Oh no*, he thought. *Jarrnee. I'm sunk.* His thoughts of receiving comfort were dashed. Jarrnee was the one person who could get the most purchase out of this humiliation.

The driver door opened and slammed and the tall figure with striking white hair came around. "You look like you're in bother, old boy." Shyne Dryde walked over to place a comforting hand on his shoulder. "What's up?"

Sabienn gave a sigh of relief to see he was among friends. "Shyne, Pattee, something .. something's happened to me?"

"Spit it out, old man," said Shyne.

"Come with me." Sabienn led his friends up to his thinking place.

"This better be good," said Shyne with annoyance. Sabienn sensed why his friend was there with Pattee. And it was an arrangement that Pattee wasn't objecting to. Now they were all trudging up a hill.



“Well come on. What’s this all about?” Shyne’s impatience showed as they reached the area. Sabienn laid his items down and let his cloak drop to let them view him just dressed in his trunks.

There was a notable gasp from them. Pattee stared on wide-eyed in the dim light, covering her mouth with her hand.

“What’s this?” Shyne, always the inquisitive one, came over and started to feel his new appendages with his hands. “You’ve got wings, old man.” His friend felt where they attached to the back. “Why’ve you got wings?” Suddenly hearing his friend state the obvious didn’t seem out of context. “And what’s this?” He felt the cuts on the side of his neck. “They’re like gills.”

“I don’t know,” Sabienn replied in despair.

“Say, what are you? Are you ..? I can’t make it out, are you a man .. a bat .. or a fish?” said Shyne.

Pattee joined in with the touching. He felt her fingers running over his new wings but also taking surreptitious detours to his chest and the more marked indentations in his abs. “These aren’t fake, are they?” she said finally.

“So,” Shyne offered a nervous giggle devoid of any humour. “Can you fly?”

“I don’t know.” Sabienn put his hands to his face.

“Well,” Shyne stood back. “Fly. At least try.”

His friends gave him room and he began to flap his wings. There was a torrid of dust movement around his feet but no upward thrust.

“Fly!” shouted Pattee.

But there was no movement. He hadn’t enough lift to counter his own weight. Finally in defeat he sagged like a broken insect on the ground.

“You know I’m going to have to get the Captain,” Shyne said.

“I know.” Sabienn cringed.

“I think you’re gonna wish you could fly,” Shyne said. “Did you hear about Wyde? Killed himself my arse. I saw the suicide note. What a crock.” Shyne shook his head, “Very strange.” It was such a relief to Sabienn to hear someone else voice what was in his mind. “You two stay here,” said Shyne. “I’ll be back.” With that Shyne left to go back to the van.

Pattee and Sabienn sat on the ground looking out to sea. There were storm clouds in the distance, rumbling with rainfall on the water and blue lights below the sea surface flashing and flickering.

“I don’t know what to do,” Sabienn said, once again placing his hands over his eyes. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

Sitting quietly beside him, Pattee let her fingers feel Sabienn’s new appendages again. He was too distraught to care. After a time of gentle probing, she said, “Don’t get me wrong when I say this. But they look good.”

Sabienn raised his head to look at her with a shocked gaze. Her attentive touch returned to his well-formed abs. With a brisk flourish, he pulled his wings away from her. "Do you mind?" He wiped a tear from his face. "Pattee, no. I need a friend. I'm not a circus freak."

At that moment he remembered a feeling when he was at Raajaa Deel's stables in the breeding stalls. There were all these curious onlookers, including himself, looking on at two horses coupling, an act that had gone on for a million years for the horse species, but was still a titillating oddity the humans couldn't take their eyes away from. He was now that oddity.

"What I'm trying to say is," said Pattee, "I've heard of men with wings." Lifting his head, Sabienn's interest was raised as she continued. "I once knew a guy who was a guard. From somewhere up north. What was that place?" She thought to herself. "Begins with 'A'. 'Ambi' something. He said there were winged men here. Before the humans. Before the Turrs."

The words startled Sabienn. "This has happened before?"

"That's all I know. These wings aren't new. They actually look good," Pattee said lying back on her elbows. "That's all I wanted to say." As she spoke she couldn't help but let her fingers do the walking again over his wings. He just resigned to letting her treat him like an object of curiosity.

*There've been winged people before, he thought. That can't be true? How could it happen?"*

In the distance were the lights of two cars. Into the car-park came Shyne's car followed in hot pursuit by an Academy office car. Then what appeared like a mountain expedition came trudging up the path to meet them. Shyne was at the lead, followed by Captain Cayninn and Doctor Leel, carrying a back pack.

Shyne and Pattee stood back and let the Captain and the Doctor view his appendages. Sabienn felt like some curious organism that had just been caught, being jabbed for a response. They took notes and said nothing but gave each other serious glances.

After a time of examination, the Captain turned to his friends. "There's nothing to see here for you. You pair can go." Cayninn was business-like.

"But what's wrong with him?" asked Shyne.

"Nothing," said Cayninn. "Just a viral infection. From mosquitoes. There'll be demerit points if you mention this to anyone. Repeat after me, it's a viral infection."

His friends looked at each other than stated together blankly, "It's a viral infection."

"Thank you," Cayninn pointed to the track. "Go."

There was unease in them but they both left quietly. Once they'd left, the

Captain looked around and waited for the van to leave.

“Prepare please,” Cayninn ordered the Doctor. She unpacked her bag and unrolled from it what seemed like a body bag.

“Kneel,” Cayninn said to Sabienn. She pulled a pistol from her uniform and worked its breach.

*This is how it will end, Sabienn thought. In my thinking place next to my buried biscuit tin. This is where I will die.*

“Anything to say?” She was speaking without emotion as if she was instructed to swat a fly. He had to think fast. It worked once maybe it’ll work again. Without looking at her he said loudly and purposefully towards the ground where he knelt.

“Captain, where is Mission Cinnamon?”

There was silence and no movement behind him.

“What’s Mission Cinnamon?” said a bemused Doctor Leel.

“Shut up!” Cayninn was livid and turned on her. “If you value your career, you’ll forget that.” Cayninn then turned savagely on Sabienn. “Who told you this?” Sabienn kept his silent gaze of the ground. “Who?” Cayninn was forthright and persistent. After an eternity of seconds, Sabienn felt the cold metal muzzle against the back of his head.

“Kill me and you’ll never know,” Sabienn replied.

The gun was lowered and Cayninn retreated to the side where she withdrew her screen for a short anxious and earnest conversation with someone. Try as he could, he couldn’t make out what was said or who was being spoken to.

She concealed her screen and her weapon and had words with the Doctor. As Sabienn stared forward he felt a jab in his arm. His vision became a little starry and he became groggy and compliant. The two females cloaked him and gathered his belongings and helped him to the car.

“Where to, Captain?” The Doctor took the wheel.

“Your lab.”

“My lab?” Doctor Leel offered a strident objection. “Why my lab?”

“You have your orders, Doctor,” Cayninn replied calmly. As Sabienn sat in the rear seat he stared out the window at the confused blur of lights. The car left the carpark and drove in the direction of the Academy.

## 11. He's A Reader

At the Academy, the car was parked and the two women attended to the cadet's appearance before walking him past the unsuspecting passers-by in the corridors. Sabienn's trousers were threaded on and his feet were pushed into his boots. His shirt and tunic were bagged and tossed into a bin as his cloak came back over his shoulders.

"My legs," cried Sabienn quietly. "I.. My legs. I can't walk."

With all the love of two doormen walking a drunk, the two women propped either side of him, ensuring the shaky steps were all going in the direction of the Doctor's lab.

Within the lab, Sabienn was sat down in a chair next to a machine with all sorts of plastic tubes. The Captain locked the door through which they had come and checked that a second door at the opposite end of the room remained locked. She gathered papers from a desk and studied them with intent.

As she was occupied, the Doctor was taking blood pressure readings and a red sample from a vein in his arm.

"What are you doing?" Cayninn's enquiry was not pleasant.

"Taking tests." The Doctor worked with zeal. "This is a moment in science."

"We're not here to improve his health," Cayninn stated plainly.

"I'm sorry." The Doctor hadn't been given an order to stop so she kept on working. "I just didn't get a chance with the other one."

"The other one?" Although still a little groggy, Sabienn was still coherent. "You mean Wyllo?"

"Yes." The Doctor was placing labels on vials of blood. "Cadet Wyde. That's the one."

"Wyllo had wings?" Sabienn was alive now.

"Doctor," Cayninn called with reproach.

"Yes, Mr Feel," The Doctor's enthusiasm was suddenly bursting like an over-gassed wine bottle. "And I don't know if you are aware of this, but right at this moment, right across the planet, about a thousand people so far have grown wings. What I mean is, all men of your age. Why, Mr Feel? Why?"

"Doctor!" Cayninn shut down the commentary. "Come here!" They retreated to a corner of the lab where the Captain gave her Doctor a whispered dressing

down. Sabienn could see all the excitement and colour leave the Doctor's face to leave her gutted like a fish.

There was a knock at the door from which they had entered. Cayninn attended the door and gave a hand signal for the Doctor to follow.

As the Captain disappeared into the next room, Doctor Leel stood looking at the door. She looked at the front door and the back door a few times. Quickly she rushed to the back door and unlocked it and then went to a medicine cabinet where she retrieved a packet of something.

Doctor Leel approached Sabienn and whispered in his ear. "Look, I saw what they did to the other one. It wasn't good." Slyly she placed a box in his right palm. They were suicide pills. "But if you're thinking of .. Would you mind?" She eyed towards the rear door. "It's just .. It's just someone died here months ago. It was a crime scene. I couldn't do work for weeks." Then she became possessed by a conflicting thought. "Just forget that I said that .. Could I have those pills back?" Sabienn had already pocketed them in his cloak and stared back at her blankly. The doctor started to panic and made a move toward the rear door when Cayninn's head appeared from the entrance. "Doctor! We are waiting!"

She followed sheepishly and disappeared after the Captain leaving him alone.

*Wylio had wings too, Sabienn thought. Along with a thousand others. Afflicted with the same curse. Why? I've got to get out of here.* He thought of his fate at the hands of these people whom yesterday were his friends. His fingers touched the box of pills in his pocket. *Just quietly. Just do yourself in. Nobody wants you.* It felt like the best option.

As groggy as he was, he made for the rear door as quickly as his wobbly legs would allow him. He stumbled down the fire stairs and out the exit and stood in the cool air. *Please hold me legs. Please.*

He took a deep breath and viewed his surrounds. The gun range was nearby. If he went there, there were plenty of places to hide with its thick cover of brush and trees in its surrounds; plenty of places to do what he had to do.

Sabienn gathered his cloak around his growths like a hunchback and made his swift unsteady way to the facility. The gun range was a cleared area dimly lit with security lighting. There was a path to the side and a side track where he accessed a little clearing. It was an area he'd like to go to just to get away from everyone. A little oasis of green he'd go to with the necessary intrusion of bullets flying to the side of him.

He took off his cloak and laid it out and placed the box of pills before him. *Here stands the last moments of Sabienn Feel.* The depressive grip of the soso still held on to him making him low and morose. He immersed himself deeply

into the acid bath of his thoughts. *Nothing you ever do is right. You've always been an imposter. A fake. You've grown wings but you can't fly.*

Near his cloak was a large rock that allowed a ledge a metre off the ground where he knelt. He scrambled unsteadily to the ledge and looked out before him. There was a slight breeze around his wings which he felt was a good omen. Extending his appendages, he worked them hard.

"Fly!" he cried out loud.

Jumping out, he toppled to the ground and skinned his knee on the sharp pebbles near his cloak. He rolled over and pulled his hands to his eyes and began to weep. *Why? Why me?*

He crawled around and rolled over on his back, his wings folding in tune with his thoughts. Near the cloak Sabienn noticed a steeler plant, a small carnivorous wild fly-trap going about its business, performing its function. They were native endemic plants popular among people. Wyllo once kept one in their room.

This one had him mesmerised as he stared at it in the dim light of the brush. Its jaws were wide open and a fly stood at its threshold, deciding whether to move in or not. It was a stand-off that lasted seconds but the fly felt the rewards outweighed the caution. It moved in, the trigger was hit and the jaws enveloped it. The final prison was at hand. Its jaws like the wings of death.

*This is nature, he thought, looking on. Nature's perfect. His eyes moved around the unfolding drama of the plant. So whatever it is in the universe. Whatever it is that pushed these molecules together. This is perfection. The force in the world that prevents atoms sliding apart. This force abandoned me. I've been abandoned. Why should you live?*

He reached out and grabbed the plant and ripped it from its life support. Viewing it with envy in his hand, he crushed it. And crushed it again. Tears rolled down his face. *Three deaths. The plant, the fly and me.*

He emptied the box of pills on to the cloak before him. Ten tiny black pills like little footballs that felt hard to the touch but were designed to be bitten easily. A lone bright thought entered his mind of the story that the pills had a lemon flavour. But no-one had been around long enough to critique it if it was enjoyable or not.

Two were picked up and were studied in the palm of his hand. He imagined the rich bauble of soso sap right in the middle like the core of a planet. They sat calmly in his hand looking at him, secure in their know-how of how they intended to rupture his chemistry. The core of each planet held a gravity that drew him in. Enticed him. Challenged him.

*Swallow me, he thought, as if the pills in his hand were talking. I can end all your problems. One pill can show you're a man of efficiency. Two will show you*

*have passion. One swift flip of the hand. To the tongue. Then swallowed. Then let us do the rest.* Sabienn made a sudden move of his hand then stopped. *I was once the most physically perfect specimen in swimming trunks. Now this. Take the pills. End it all.*

He could still hear little Tesser's nursery rhyme chime in his ears. "Twenty-three Whee years, is twenty-four Chee years, is twenty-one Earth years, these are the birth years." *So young and it's all over.* He made another lurch closer to his mouth yet stopped again. The two beads of death looked calm in his hand.

*How can anyone rely on you when you can't rely on your body? You're unreliable. Just like Wyllo said. No longer dependable or bankable. Not able to fit in the team.* The pills rolled around in his palm. Another lurch brought the pills almost to his lips. He could swear he smelt lemon.

He lifted his head and saw the patch of grass in the clearing with so many fond memories. Fond memories of mammaries. It was the patch of grass where he took Pattee Standd. Or where she took him. *Pattee. Wow! That was fantastic. Thirty seconds of huffing and puffing and frantically zipping everything back up again.* It was probably fate that the place he was to end his life was the place he had the best sex of his life.

Sabienn remembered his friend. *She's infuriating and a pain in the neck and self-centred. But, come on. So am I. She's just a lovely girl.* At that moment, a thought like a bright light entered his mind on something Pattee had said. *Pattee. Yes! Pattee .. A .. Begins with A .. A .. Ambi something.*

He sobered up and knelt bolt upright his wings to the ready. The pills dropped from his hand to his cloak and he had the presence of mind to corral the black beads into their box. *Ambi something. A man she dated was a guard at Ambi something. And they knew of men with wings. If there were men with wings, surely there would have been people who got rid of them. Removed them from their back. And if they got rid of them, someone at Ambi something may know how to do it.*

A charge ran through his body. He fisted and palmed and his fingers cracked in their ache to get going. There was no further desire for self-removal. He was too cursed with a rampant curiosity.

*Who would know about Ambi something? Only one person. The person who kept a book on everything and everyone.* Through the trees, Sabienn could vaguely make out the top of the hospital where he hoped Joallee would be off shift soon.

He rushed from the gun range keeping to the shadows. With every step, Sabienn felt a release from the soso preparation that kept him subdued and depressed. He took the back streets and brought up his hood if he came by

anyone familiar.

At the hospital, there was a staff entrance at the rear where people moved in and out, clocking in and clocking off. They carried personal belongings, books and lunch boxes and anything to make their existence easier. He stood and watched the steady stream from across the street in a shadowed doorway, waiting for a familiar figure to appear.

At last, the mousy brown hairstyle became visible in the street lights, with all the familiar mannerisms he knew. She was fiddling in her bag and preening her blue uniform. Then as Sabienn watched on, a hooded figure stepped out of a doorway beside her and grabbed her right arm. She struggled against the intruder and they traded harsh words.

“Hey!” Sabienn leapt from his hiding place and launched himself to cross the road. Cars came back and forward to prevent his immediate crossing. He could only shout at the intruder now dragging Joallee up the street by her arms. “Hey! Let her go!”

He managed to cross the street and Joallee broke free to run to Sabienn. She rushed into his arms and she balked at that moment as she felt the appendages.

“What’s going on?” Joallee said, stepping back. He pulled the cloak down to reveal his wings.

The man who attacked her looked on and the hood fell to show the face of her father, General Krenn. “The Year of Wings,” said Krenn. “When the Stone Shepherds awaken. First Wyde. Now you. Stay away from my daughter.”

“General, where’s Ambi? Ambi something.” Sabienn was insistent.

“What?” Krenn was confused and lost in thought.

“Ambi?” Sabienn pushed hard.

“You mean, Ambia Vee,” said Krenn. “Ambia Vee is off-limits. Stay away from there. My beautiful daughter. You’ve corrupted my daughter.”

“Sabienn,” Joallee cried, pulling him in to her in a desperate plea. “I’m sorry for you. For your wings. But please tell my father I didn’t tell you. About the Mission.”

“About Mission Cinnamon?” Sabienn was bemused. “What is it with this place?” Everyone could sense some street cameras swinging to view them.

“Joallee,” Krenn pleaded. “Why did you tell him?”

“She didn’t, sir.” Sabienn called, coming to his friend’s defence. “You did. When you gave me the card, I saw this vision. I was a baby. A man named Push was killed. I peed on you and you hated me. I had a wrapping. Property of Mission Cinnamon. What does it mean?”

“Oh, my Lord.” Krenn bent over with his head in his hands. He then straightened to his full height and faced a camera looking directly at him from



the hospital wall. "My Lord, he's a reader!" He shouted at the top of his lungs. "He is a reader!"

"What do you mean?" Sabienn was stumbling to keep up. "What's a reader?"

The General rushed to his daughter, now deflated and contrite. "Forgive me, daughter. I did this to you." Tears were now in his eyes. "I did this, I didn't know." He grabbed her in his arms and sharply addressed Sabienn, "Why did you have to grow wings?"

"I don't know," pleaded Sabienn. "You tell me."

The old man was immersed in a private and urgent conversation with his daughter. He pulled a note pad and pen from his pocket and scribbled a note which he passed to her. "Take this to Jarrnee. Please. And know everything I've done, I've done for you and your mother."

"Father, please." She tried to keep the old man still. "Don't go."

"I've told you many things daughter," said Krenn. "I'll never rest peacefully. Until this is done. Go, now."

With that the General began to run up the street. Sabienn held him in his sights at fifty metres when he crossed the road and saw a black car running silent towards them, veer off course and aim directly at the old man. It hit him at full force and he flew into the air off the bonnet and into the gutter. The passenger door opened and a black uniformed person went to the body.

"Father!" Joallee couldn't believe her eyes as she watched on. The pair started running toward where the General lay.

"Hey!" Sabienn held on to his cloak as he sprinted to the black car. Its passenger had reboarded the vehicle and it made a speedy retreat in reverse, backing to a drive then speeding away. Pedestrians walked by as if nothing happened. Cars drove by treating him like a minor traffic obstacle.

They arrived and Joallee rolled the body to check his signs. There was a mark on his neck where it looked like he had been injected with something. The General lay before them dead. The realization hit Joallee and she hugged tightly to Sabienn.

"Joallee." Sabienn had to try and be the voice of reason. "We have to move."

"I can't," Joallee cried. "Daddy. Daddy, wake up." She tended the corpse gently.

"Joallee, please. We can't stay here."

"I can't leave my father."

Sabienn looked down at the body in the gutter. To him Krenn was a tyrant and a butcher but to her, she was still his little girl. Joallee hugged Sabienn again. "He was a man, Say. The sum of his decisions. But he was a good father."

Sabienn pulled a tissue from his cloak to dry her eyes but she resisted. She

pulled out the note, looked at the last words scribbled and pocketed it again. Bending over she kissed her fingers and then brushed his lifeless hair. She then succumbed to allow herself to be led away and they walked toward a nearby park. They found the cover of a hedge row and sat. "I need your help," she said.

"Anything," he replied.

"I need to see Jarnnee," said Joallee. "On my own. But I'll contact you."

"I'll come with you," said Sabienn.

"No," she said. "Just go. And stay safe." She leant over and kissed his cheek. "Thank you." With that she disappeared into the night.

Sabienn sat still with his thoughts. *I've got to move quickly. But where? And no bus, no taxi. Just walking. Wait. Raajaa's stables are an hour away. I know the place. I know his security. I'll get a warm bed of hay until dawn. Raajaa'll understand.*

There was a stormwater easement that ran through the park. He jumped down and sought the shadowed concealment of its concrete walls and made his way toward the sea. He was a fully hooded figure pushing on through small puddles, crunching on small rocks and cardboard cartons.

Even in the drainage system you couldn't get away from the over-arching love of The Great Leader. A poster with his magic profile and piercing eyes was plastered on the concrete wall with the ubiquitous "Obey Me", for no-one's regular view. He stopped briefly to view it and kissed his fingers and touched the moustache. *Even after everything, my trust in you is absolute. Please save me.*

After a half an hour's hike in the drain, he pulled himself out of the concrete walls and made his way to the trees. He kept to a path he'd used on occasions to access his friend's place. In the distance, he could see Raajaa's home. It was very late but the lights were all on and there were people moving around.

He accessed a track with dried mud ruts drilled in by Raajaa's tractor. From there it was an easy walk to the holding stables and a nice and comfortable stall. On a bed of hay he lay, looking at the girders above him. For the first time all day he felt safe enough to stretch out and rest and soon fell into a troubled sleep. He was beset by many dreams and twitched and rolled and jittered to his inner demons going to work in his head.

His last dream was one of incredible happiness. He was with his mother and father on the beach before their bus crash. He was rushing in and out of the water and a man and a woman took it in turns to hold him high above their heads. Everyone was laughing and smiling and beaming with joy.

His eyes opened and he was still beaming with inner light, until he realized he was in a stable, he was in danger and the wings he received the day before had not gone away. Not only had they not gone away, they felt a little stronger

and seemed a little larger than before. *When will I ever wake up?* A crushing and pitiful frown swept across his face like a storm surge moving across a perfect day.

It was light enough to be early morning and someone would be tending the horses soon. *Raajaa will be at the beach. Bringing a pair of chicken rolls and coffee up the path. I just wish everything was normal again.*

At that moment, there was the ring of a metal bucket hitting the concrete floor. Someone was here. He looked up and over the stall walls. As luck would have it, it was his friend, Raajaa Deel.

“Raajaa,” Sabienn called.

Raajaa saw him and by the shock on his face he could tell he was less than impressed. “You’re in deep shit,” Raajaa called. “Now you’re bringing it to us.” He walked to where he lay. The words stunned Sabienn and Raajaa continued. “We had your Captain Randd here last night.” Raajaa moved in and immediately started looking and feeling Sabienn’s wings through his cloak.

“D’ you mind?” Sabienn was feeling a little taken aback by the intrusion.

“I’ve never seen wings,” said Raajaa. Sabienn pulled off his cloak and let his friend have full rein. “This is unbelievable. They’re real. I’ve never seen anything like it. Would you like something to eat?”

“I could eat a horse,” said Sabienn.

“Please don’t say that,” said Raajaa, looking around at the non-human occupants. “Would you settle for bread and coffee?”

“Please.”

Raajaa briefly left and returned presently with a tray boasting two full loaves, two steaming mugs and a block of cheese broken in half. They both wolfed in to the contents of the tray as Sabienn relayed the events of the past evening.

Raajaa listened intently. “You know I’ve met your Captain before,” said Raajaa. “And he’s never liked me and I’ve never liked him. You know, ‘cause he thinks I corrupt you. But last night I saw a totally different man. He’s scared. He’s worried about his wife and kid.”

The news shocked Sabienn. *I’ve brought a stain of shame. It’s now on Ambell and Tesser. Poor Tesser.*

“I got the feeling from him,” continued Raajaa. “That he wants out. Someone’s got him under the pump. He’s in a lot of trouble.”

“Out?”

“Do a runner,” said Raajaa. “With his family. And he needs to see you. Urgently.”

*The Captain needs me, Sabienn thought. He deserves better than this. He’s my mentor, my elder, my friend. And gentle Ambell. Always doting on me. What if*

*she was harmed? And Tesser. If a hair was pushed out of place on her head, I'd kill.*

“How do I get to him?” Sabienn said.

Raajaa stood to his full height and looked around, rubbing his chin in thought. “I’ll clear it with Dad.” he said. “Jump in the back of the truck and pull on the tarp. And strap yourself in.” He winked to his friend. “You’re not the only one with wings.”

## 12. The Supreme Order

The trip to the Captain's place for Sabienn under the tarp was wild and bumpy and challenged the cheese and bread in his stomach to stay put. He could feel the vehicle back in to a property and heard the driver door open and close. Seconds went by and voices were heard.

Then the tarp was flung back and Raajaa whispered close to him. "Hood up. It's time to get out." Alighting from the vehicle, he approached the Captain's quarters and made his way inside as he had done a thousand times before. But this time things were very different.

One thing he noticed in the entrance area, where once there always were three suitcases, now there was only one, the drab one that belonged to the Captain.

The two friends moved to the living area where Randd sat at a table serious and sombre. Without acknowledging his presence, Randd indicated Sabienn to sit. There was a definite feeling of resentment at Sabienn's presence even though he had been summoned. He also noticed Cheerful standing in the kitchen, saddened and head bowed.

"Coffee for three," Randd directed toward his servant. "Then to your quarters."

Within seconds a tray of steaming cups lay before them and the servant was gone. The three sat and Randd sipped his beverage in silence.

"So," Randd said finally. "Show me these wings."

Sabienn stood to comply, removing his cloak and turning for all to view. The Captain offered a brief glance, but he'd seen them before on Wyllo. He turned away in what seemed like disgust.

"Captain," Sabienn said finally. "I didn't want these things."

"Well now we're all stuck with them." The Captain opened a folder in front of him. "Last night, General Krenn was killed. A credible source said he was killed by his son Jarnee."

"What?" Sabienn was shocked. "That's not right, sir. I was there."

Randd proffered a photo forward across the table for his view. It was a shot from a street camera of the dead General lying in the gutter. It may have been taken seconds after he and Joallee had left but nearby him, dressed in the "Place" cloak he always wore, holding a rifle was a picture of Jarnee.

“Let me see that,” said Raajaa, pulling the photo towards him. “This is ridiculous. Look at this photo.”

“You keep your tongue, please,” said Randd.

“No, I know high tech,” protested Raajaa. “This is the worst fake I’ve ever seen. Look at the shade on his face. Then look at the light from the street lights. Then look at the blood on the ground.”

“There was no blood,” said Sabienn.

“The blood’s running up hill,” said Raajaa, pointing to the photo. “It stands out like dog’s balls. This is ridiculous.”

“You need to leave, please,” said the Captain to Raajaa.

But Sabienn chimed in. “Why would he be walking around near a hospital with a rifle? Security would shoot him. He’d have a concealed weapon. This doesn’t make sense, sir. Do you believe this?”

“Yes, I do.” Randd was resolute.

“Then you’re a fool!” cried Raajaa.

“Get out!” The Captain pointed to the door.

“Please,” said Sabienn to both before him. “Let’s calm down.”

They all sat and kept silence. The folder in front of the Captain opened again and he spoke. “There was a robbery from the Krenn Museum of Artifacts early this morning.” He went to the big screen in the room and a recording appeared for them all to view.

It showed Jarnnee, the real Jarnnee, there was no doubt, walking into the hall where Sabienn had stood the previous evening. He was dressed in regular drill without his “Place” cloak and was holding a piece of paper which Sabienn recognized as the one Joallee had received from her father. Jarnnee stood in front of the assassin’s blade, opened the lid of the casing and lifted it from its setting. He grabbed the small native carry bag that was closest, the one with “7” on it, then carelessly tossed the blade in and pulled the cords on the bag tight. With the deed done he was gone in seconds with the items in hand. The screen went blank.

“Did you see that?” said Randd.

They were all still looking at the screen where the images had been. Sabienn looked to Raajaa, who was desperately trying not to laugh. “Tell us when to clap, Captain,” Raajaa said dismissively.

After a moment’s pause, Randd faced Sabienn and continued. “That’s why you have to kill Jarnnee.”

“What?” Sabienn was struggling for words. “Why?”

“For what you’ve just seen. Do you like Jarnnee?” said Randd.

“I hate his guts,” Sabienn replied.

“Then what’s the problem?” Randd’s gaze was intent.

“It’s as good a reason as any,” chimed in Raajaa, heavily laced with sarcasm.

“You can’t kill him for taking something that’s his father’s,” said Sabienn. “From a place they both have access.” Sabienn couldn’t believe he was arguing on behalf of Jarnnee, a man he disliked intensely.

The Captain kept his gaze. “With that blade he will assassinate The Great Leader,” said Randd.

Sabienn and Raajaa were stunned. Raajaa was the first to react. “OK. Where’s the secret camera? This is one of those prank shows, isn’t it? We’re all being set up and some guy is about to jump out now and say it’s a joke.”

“This is no show. This is real.” Randd was definite.

“This doesn’t make sense,” said Sabienn.

“Well let me make it easier for you.” The Captain slid across the table something that sent a shiver down Sabienn’s spine. It was an overturned piece of paper but he knew from the style of paper exactly what it was. The same paper that covered his sweets as a kid. Even without reading it, he knew he had just received his first Supreme Order.

He turned it over and he regarded the words as if they glowed before him, touched by a deity. It read.

“I, The Great Leader, Orr Benn Kee, issue a Supreme Order to,” In the space was “Sabienn Feel” handwritten by a pen touched by the hand of the great one. There was further handwritten text, “To hunt down and kill Jarnnee Krenn, who has revealed his clear intent to assassinate a member of the Committee. The last known sighting of Jarnnee Krenn was outside Mission Ginger. You are to take no weapon and use your discretion in this killing. Leave all possessions behind. What you walk around in now is all you own. You are to leave immediately upon reading this Order. This is decreed.”

Sabienn’s heart was still in his mouth. *Assassinate a member of the committee? They all say that. But everyone knows. It’s always the big man. The Great Leader would never care about his own death.* The cadet stared at the bold signature and struggled to take in all that he read.

“You have just received a Supreme Order,” said the Captain. “Do you understand it?”

Once again Sabienn understood why this question was asked. As the Captain was the one issuing the Supreme Order, there was much at stake for him that it be carried out. There must be no misunderstanding on behalf of the recipient as to the nature of their mission, and he must offer as much assistance as he can to allow the recipient to succeed. After all, it was Sabienn’s future, but it was also the future of Captain Randd, and therefore by association his wife Ambell and

little Tesser.

“I understand,” said Sabienn, and upon the Captain’s urging, he took the piece of paper and placed it into his mouth. It was the most important meal of his short life. “May I ask if there is any further evidence?”

A dossier was opened on the table on front of the Captain and further documents were offered, that looked like they had been patched together with bad copying.

There was a supposed membership form to the Chard Liberation Army or CLA, a paramilitary group up in the northern province devoted to sabotage and becoming a separate state, with an old photo that looked like it had been taken from a primary school line-up. There were more terribly doctored group photos with his head badly inserted mingling with people supposedly about to commit evil. There were reports from teachers of moments where he momentarily shirked his devotion to The Great Leader in class choosing not to salute and mumbling, “I will kill him one day.”

Looking at the clearly concocted documents, Sabienn was struggling. The Jarnee that he knew did not have a political bone in his body and as far as devotion to The Great Leader went, being the General’s son he overacted his love. He’d seen him in class weeping when the salute was made. *This is all false. Yet he still must die. Because I have a Supreme Order. And never, never question The Great Leader.*

“Are you telling us,” said Raajaa finally,” that the most heavily guarded man on the planet, under the constant eye of the Ten-69, who are the most deadly human shield in the country, is scared of a kid with a bad haircut and a toothpick?”

“Raajaa, stop,” said Sabienn. His friend was moving into that territory of questioning a Supreme Order which was similar to treason.

“You keep your tongue, sir,” said the Captain.

Raajaa then mimicked someone holding a knife threatening an assault. “Wait! See my assassin’s blade? See the width of my toothpick? Are you scared yet?”

“Sir.” Randd was ready to explode.

“Am I the only one here who is awake? This is ridiculous,” cried Raajaa.

“I think you need to go now, sir,” said Randd to Sabienn’s friend. “Thank you for bringing him here. But now you must leave. I need to speak to Sabienn. Alone.”

Raajaa sat quietly for a few seconds then stood to leave. Sabienn stood and met his friend near the exit.

“Sorry if I said too much,” said Raajaa. “Whatever happens, you’re still my friend. Look me up if you’re in trouble.”



“Thank you.” Sabienn hugged his friend briefly then Raajaa left. He watched him go and thought he was going to need all the help he could get.

Back in the living room, the Captain motioned to his charge to repair to the courtyard. “Please.”

The documents and photos were left in the living room and the Captain carried their cups outside. They took the same seats as they had the previous day. The morning sun in contrast to the mood of their meeting was sunny and welcoming. “I’m sorry for what’s happened,” said Randd. “And I’m sorry for how I acted. I don’t like that man.”

“He’s my friend,” said Sabienn.

“I know,” said Randd, more subdued. They sat for a time drinking their beverages. Sabienn saw the steam arising from his cup and wished he could just vaporize and disappear with it. “You’ve become the unknown,” said the Captain. “No-one wants to be with the unknown. No-one knows how they act, or react. Everyone walks around on egg shells. No-one wants to offend them, no-one wants to be offended by them. You no longer fit in. You’re unknown.”

“That’s how I feel.” Sabienn bowed his head.

“I hope I’ve always been there for you. I’ve always tried to be there. I want to tell you something. But you must never tell anyone.” The Captain looked around to see there was no intrusion. “I’m in trouble. I can’t say too much,” continued Randd “But there are people out to get me. Powerful people. But I also have people on my side. I still have the love of The Great Leader. Whatever happens, trust The Great Leader, Say. This Order I’ve passed to you. It shows he trusts me. But I can’t take any more.” He leaned forward to confide in his charge. “Please, not a word. I’m getting out.”

“Out? You can’t leave me,” said Sabienn.

“I’ve made arrangements. Ambell and Tesser are on their way to Fort Heel.”

*Fort Heel?* Memories flooded back for Sabienn of happier days. It was a broken down fort on the far northern coast destroyed during the Curl War. Near the campsites, there was a busted brick turret housing a cannon that used to point to sea. *What a great time. With the Randds last year. Tesser, Ambell and me. Playing a game of shooting airships,* he thought wistfully.

“I am to leave now,” continued Randd. “I needed to give you the Order. And when you’ve done your job, come meet us there. We have a boat to take us to Cajj Cajj. And from there we’ll find our way to Deerland. Ambell has family there. Sounds good?”

“Yes. I’ll come. I’d love to.” Sabienn felt a shiver of excitement. “You’re my family.”

“Good,” said Randd. “Look, I know there’s so much here that’s strange.” He

indicated the pile of papers and photos on the inner table. “And you may not like Jarnnee, but killing him? You think it’s too much. But always trust your orders. And the Supreme Order shows they trust you.”

“I understand.” Sabienn was fully on-board.

Placing his hand on Sabienn’s shoulder, Randd spoke like a friend, “And I don’t need to tell you, failure attaches itself. To you. To all of us. Especially to Tesser. Imagine her at Blue Moon University in Deerland? She’ll be an outcast. You don’t want that?”

“Never in a million years,” said Sabienn, placing his hand on Randd’s arm. “You know I love Tesser. She’s my kid sister. I’d die for her.”

“Just stay safe,” said Randd. “Complete your mission and meet us at Fort Heel. Got it? Let’s go.” The Captain handed Sabienn a folded document of weather-proof paper. “Take this. It’s my old army map. All your roads lead to Mission Ginger. And then to Fort Heel.” With the map, he placed a hundred kee in assorted notes into his hand.

The cash was secured and Sabienn opened the map briefly. He pointed to Mission Ginger and then Fort Heel. Then above Fort Heel, an expanse of sea with Cajj Cajj off the map. *Easy*, Sabienn thought.

The pair made their way through the living area and at that moment Cheerful appeared from the kitchen. He held a small cardboard box of biscuits. “Sir, if I may,” Cheerful said. “A box of biscuits for Mr Feel. Should he have to travel far?”

“Oh.” The Captain’s annoyance at the intrusion was softened by the practicality of the gesture. “Of course. Thank you. Now leave us,” said Randd. The biscuits were stowed into Sabienn’s cloak with his map and the servant left as swiftly as he arrived.

The Captain grabbed his cloak and bag near the door and they both stopped on the front step. A flock of ghost finch spiralled and lifted into the peach and blue sky of the new day.

“Good luck.” The Captain shook the cadet’s hand briskly unaware that they had been watched since they left the front door. At that moment, two male figures appeared dressed head to toe in black, their facial features concealed by full masks. They crept from the cover of a nearby tree.

“Captain Randd?” One intruder spoke directly to Randd as a challenge. The Captain dropped his bag to face the man.

Each of the two assailants held a knife. In the speed of things, Sabienn noticed the tips of the blades. They were something black that he wasn’t familiar with. The speaking intruder lunged at Randd with his knife but the Captain, who was still muscular and skilled, blocked the thrust and pushed the assailant back.

The second assailant ran straight toward Sabienn. The knife was thrust toward him and Sabienn had all eyes on the blade. *I've trained this a hundred times.* All that training went out the window. The shock of the attack left him scrambling to think.

He eventually found himself on the outside of the attacking arm and rammed an elbow into the assailant's face. It stunned the black masked man enough to allow Sabienn to knock the weapon from his grip.

Then a gun shot was fired.

Briefly Sabienn looked toward the other pair fighting. Somehow the Captain found his hands on a pistol from his cloak and fired a shot into his assailant. Sabienn could still see the look of absolute shock in the eyes of the masked man who'd been shot.

In the interruption, Sabienn rammed another elbow into the neck of his attacker and swivelled to place a choke-hold on him. The same that he had delivered to Jarnnee the day before. He was now behind him hanging on for dear life squeezing the life out of his attacker. *One, two, three, four.* He counted way past eight.

"Sabienn," called Randd. But the cadet was still committed to his hold. All life was squeezed from the assailant and he went limp in his grip. "That's enough," said Randd finally. "He's dead." Now coming to his senses, Sabienn fell back from the figure so full of life before now. He had just killed him. "Come on. Let's go." Randd beckoned his charge to come away now.

*I've just killed my first man,* Sabienn thought without triumph. He leant forward and removed the mask from him. He'd never seen this guy before in his life. The attacker was his age and build but now he was dead. Sabienn took one last look at the man's face and shivered with the come-down of the adrenalin.

"Let's go. It's all over here," said Randd. Randd gathered himself and pulled Sabienn to his feet. They stood at the gate post and saw some curious on-lookers who soon went back to their business. With that, Randd was now running up the street, turned a block and was gone, leaving Sabienn standing there watching him go.

Sabienn was now on his own. Everything he stood in was all he had. Cloak, watch, pants, trunks, boots and socks. No shirt. Everything in his pockets was all he owned. Map, biscuits and a week's amount of cash in a wallet. No weapon, no compass and no communication. *But I have a Supreme Order,* he thought, looking at the street. *I have a mission and the trust of The Great Leader. He'll give me my future. With my new family, the Randds. Everything depends on me.*

With a brief glance at his watch, he was surprised at the time. All buses leading to Foundation City from where he could get connections to the north-

west would be leaving soon. With new found energy and purpose, he ran in the direction of the bus depot.

## 13. Grey Cape

As the bus's big battery came to speed and pulled silently out of Foundation City, Sabienn sat next to a man covered in sores. And the owner was making no effort to cover them.

"Do you mind?" Sabienn said, when he had the man's attention. "I don't want to touch you."

"It's about as contagious as your hunchback, brother," said the man. "I have an hour's trip to the Ruins. Please don't talk to me."

He then slumped back in his seat sliding away from Sabienn. *At least he's given me distance*, Sabienn thought looking at the confronting existence of his fellow traveller. *And he respects silence. He's just like me. Nothing worse than the social pitter-patter of loose gums trying to be good-natured.*

From his window seat he viewed the poorer part of town move by him. There were people sitting on the street with hats in front of them as people passed. There were fruit sellers selling oranges from a truck. There was a mother helping her baby boy pull his pants down and have pee on a street tree. There were strange men handing out flyers and pointing up alley ways. And there were women walking up and down casually leaning into car windows.

He lifted his head over the seat in front and viewed the whole reason he was there. The reassuring countenance of The Great Leader stared at them from the portrait at the front of the bus. Sinking back into his seat, he thought, *I won't let you down. I won't let anyone down.*

It was late morning now and with all the excitement and adrenalin of the past hours, he felt tired. With one last look at Foundation City passing by the bus outside, he closed his eyes.

Soon he was lost to his dreams. Visions cascaded upon visions. After a time he settled into a dream with a view of a nightclub. There were rows and rows of seats and he watched a lady on stage removing her clothes. He looked around and he was alone. The woman had his back to him.

"Enjoying yourself?" A voice suddenly came from beside him in his vision.

Sabienn turned and went stiff with shock. Sitting beside him was the man he had killed this morning. "Who are you?" Sabienn was ready to leave.

"Sit down," said the assailant with annoyance. "I'm a messenger of the

planet.”

“The planet’s trying to talk to me?” Sabienn said in disbelief.

“That’s right,” said the assailant. “Don’t look so alarmed. You did say you didn’t fear dead people. Nothing I hate more than a liar.”

“I’m sorry I killed you,” said Sabienn.

“I don’t care either way,” said the assailant dismissively, looking at his watch. “I’m only here to say one word. I’m not here to judge. Though I have to say, watching your teacher take her clothes off, that’s really sick.”

They both looked up to the stage as the woman turned around to reveal it was Captain Cayninn. She was now down to her panties and her big veiny boobs were bursting to come free from their bra. She was now reaching around to unclasp and unleash the Cayninn cannons.

“I have one word,” said the assailant. “Eat.”

“Eat?”

“That’s it.” The assailant stood to leave. “Just “Eat”. Get some food. Goodbye.” Then he was gone and Sabienn turned in time to see Cayninn remove her bra and fling it at him hitting him in the face, as she jiggled what she had in all its mature glory.

He then awoke. “Huh! Oh no!” he cried, looking between his legs. There was a mess in his crotch and still a manly spent bulge in his pants. *Holy shit! What the hell is happening? I haven’t done that since I was a teenager.*

Luckily the seat next to him had been vacated. They must have passed the Ruins. He’d been asleep all that time. There was still a wet patch on the seat where the man of sores sat.

He pulled his cloak in closer. *What am I going to do? I need to clean myself.* He viewed the wet patch coming through his pants and looked around that no-one was laughing or had noticed.

As he placed his hands on his cloak, he did notice the box of biscuits given to him by Cheerful. He pulled it from his pocket and looked at it. *I’m not hungry. But the dead man said “Eat”.*

Sabienn reached in and grabbed a biscuit but also felt a flat piece of paper hugging the inner side of the box. Both were retrieved and he bit into the treat. A biscuit of oats, apple and cinnamon, one of his favourites baked fresh. The paper held words for him. It was a copy of the note General Krenn wrote and handed to Joallee, with her own scribble at the top.

*Of course, thought Sabienn. Cheerful and Joallee know each other through the hospital stalls. That’s why it’s here.*

It read, “Sabienn, please take this note to Grey Cape at Ambia Vee,” map co-ordinates followed which must have been directions to this elusive place. “And

please stay safe. Joallee.”

What followed were the original words of the General, “Note to Jarrnee from Boxx Krenn.” *Still formal to the end*, thought Sabienn. “Go to the Museum. Pick up the assassin’s blade and place it into the bag immediately adjacent. Of all the numbered bags, it is the one that is “7”. Go to Port Tyla near Fort Heel. Seek the fisherman Jossack. Await my further instructions. If anything should happen, you are the man of the house. You have a good heart. Always, Your Father.”

Sabienn was stunned at the note. It showed a softer side to Krenn’s soul. It was well documented that Krenn put hundreds of prisoners to the sword by his own hand during the Bol War. He was a brutal tyrant but he took his role as father seriously.

And, whether she intended it or not, Joallee offered further directions to the location of Jarrnee, whom he was now sworn to kill by Supreme Order. *Look, and here’s this Ambia Vee again. The place with winged men. I need to know more.*

With the coordinates in mind, he retrieved the map from his pocket. Indeed, the numbers pointed to a place inconspicuously marked “A.V.” As luck would have it, it was within the wider area of his travel.

Within about two hours he would be arriving at a cross-road township called Walk-Don’t-Run. From this place, there was a road north-east to Mission Ginger and there was a road north-west to “A.V.”.

The countryside rolling by the window of the bus was flat tree-land and he viewed the folk going about their business. There were people sitting around a burning log drinking beverages, mothers hanging sheets on lines and kids running through the trees chasing each other. It was beautiful country.

*Who the hell’s Grey Cape? And who’d give you a name like that? It doesn’t say much for you if all you’re known for is a colour and article of clothing. Still. It could’ve been, “Take this note to white lab-coat” or “Take this note to pink ear-muffs”. Grey Cape’s as good as any.*

There was still time before they reached Walk-Don’t-Run, so Sabienn helped himself to more biscuits. *Mmm. Oats. Apple. Cinnamon. Cinnamon. Cinnamon. Grey Cape. Cinnamon. Who’s Grey Cape? What’s Mission Cinnamon? What’s Ambia Vee? My most important priority is the Supreme Order. But what have I got? Jarrnee’s last sighting was outside Mission Ginger. That’s a big place.*

Sabienn knew it well as he had visited there once on camp. Nestled on a cleared plain in the tree-lands, Mission Ginger was essentially a camp or a holding facility for people. It boasted well-equipped huts, ablution blocks, laundry areas and a fully fitted canteen and mess hall. He remembered the triple bunks in the dorms and he always had the top where he could touch the ceiling.

It had its own gun range but its biggest attraction was its wilderness. Cadets were sent off with a compass and a map to defeat a concealed enemy. He suffered a hundred deaths but he sure learnt a lot.

*But why's Jarrnee there? If he's been instructed to go to Port Tyla, this's way out of the way. Nothing's adding up.*

He looked again at the map, at the road to A.V. and the road to Mission Ginger, and he wished he could have had a coin to flip. *I have my Order. That's paramount. But I have an obligation to a friend.*

The bus stop to Walk-Don't-Run loomed and he was still weighing his options. Whether to leave the bus and take the hike up the road to Ambia Vee or stay on through to the town of Chees, set up near the Mission.

The door opened at the stop and he bundled his deformed body out the door. He watched the bus take off and leave him. *This is a bad move. But there's so much I need to know. And poor Joallee. Just to see her face when her father died,* he thought, wiping his eyes. *I just can't let on that I have to kill her brother.*

The ground was intermittently surfaced with a slate material which would be treacherous to travel on if it was wet. He kept careful concentration on his boots as he walked ensuring he didn't land up on his back.

He dropped into a local store and with his limited cash bought water and small ration packs. The shop specialised in outfitting people for camping and they had tents, rifles and sleeping bags for sale. He purchased a cheap but reliable compass to work with and a good knife, as the surrounding forests would have native stoneberries that he'd need to crack. All he had he packed into his clothes. It was through good fortune he had his fatigue pants with the multiple pockets.

It was late afternoon now and the heat had gone from the sun. He pulled his cloak around him tighter as the breeze had a chill. His map showed him the way and he put one foot in front of the other and commenced his trek.

Trucks with logs rolled back from the direction he was heading. They ran silent on their batteries, so he had to keep his wits about him. A turn in the road revealed an unlucky wild pig that must have been cleaned up by one of the trucks. It lay on the side where it was dragged to and was now stinking and being eaten by meat-eating greenfire ants. *Keep your wits about you or that'll be you. Only you won't get dragged to the side of the road. You'll get dragged in further and left there.*

A number of utilities passed by him, going in his direction, laden in the back with sacks of vegetables. One passed with sacks of carrots and another with potatoes. As he watched a utility sounded a horn and pulled over to the verge ahead of him, the rear of the vehicle heavily weighed down with watermelons.



“Where’re you off to?” The smiling driver looked almost exactly like the old man he abused on the street the other day, with white hair, a beard but no moustache. *Be kinder to this guy, he thought. Keep your fists in your pocket.*

“I’m going here.” The map was held before the driver and Sabienn pointed to A.V.

“You’re going to the prison?” said the old man.

“No, here.” Sabienn pointed again.

“Yeah. The prison. You know any songs?”

What?”

“You can jump in the back,” said the old man. “You just need to sing to my melons. What songs you know?”

“How about “Onward To Victory”?” said Sabienn.

“No. Anything up-tempo?”

“Black Wolf Shuffle?”

“You’re kidding, right?” the old man laughed. “Thought you hunchbacks could belt out a tune.”

“How about “Heart In The Country”?” said Sabienn.

“Perfect,” said the old man. “Melons love Alessis Seel.”

“But aren’t they..” Sabienn leant in closer as if to collude. “Aren’t they dead?”

“Give them a good song, melons get bigger. And sweeter. I don’t make the rules. Drop you off at the crossroads before the prison.”

*Prison?* Sabienn piled in the back contemplating a prison with high walls and towers. *I’ve walked these woods. Never heard of a prison.* The vehicle pulled out and continued on to shouts from the cabin within, “Sing, boy. Sing.”

He sat up on a throne of melons and hung on for dear life as the truck swerved and turned. Singing at the top of his lungs, he upheld his side of the bargain. “There’s a heart, there’s a heart in the country. Beats like a drum to the slaves on the sea. Chained to her hull, hands to the tree. There’s a heart, there’s a heart in the country.”

For the first time that day, he was enjoying himself. He always liked singing even though people told him he couldn’t hold a tune to save him. Over and over again he sang the only part he could remember, much to the stunned gaze of onlookers from the other cars. *This feels good. This feels really good.*

Gazing ahead, he was expecting to see high walls in the distance with razor wire or gun towers poking above the trees. But all he could view before him was an uninterrupted green stretch of woodlands. The sun was starting to dip below the horizon as the crossroads loomed and they moved to the verge.

“Good fishing,” said the old man.

*Fishing? Of course,* Sabienn thought. *Why else would I be here?* “What fish do you get here?” he asked.

“Only one fish,” said the old man. “Paint fish. Only thing they come here for. You look a little light on gear?”

“No,” Sabienn tapped an empty pocket. “The old hand line’s here. I like to walk light.”

From a console the man pulled out something that hadn’t been broken out of its hard plastic packaging. It was a kid’s hand line kit. “Tourist left this. Nasty sod. Wouldn’t sing. Take it. It’s yours.” The old man handed the gear across. “Stay clear of the prison. Guard shot a man in the foot. He’s OK. Just stopped his dancing career. Use muscle worms. They tell me its best.”

“Much obliged,” said Sabienn, pocketing the item. “Where you headed?”

“Turmeric markets. Go there if you can,” said the old man.

“I will.” Sabienn patted the package in his pocket and watched the melons he’d been entertaining for the past half hour recede into the distance. *Those melons do look bigger and happier. Must be something to it.*

Looking around him, he took stock of his position. *If I’m going to go wandering off that way, someone’s going to take pot shots at me. Think.* The light was getting dim and the dusk mosquitoes were becoming fierce. His neck was red with constant slapping so there was water nearby.

The map showed a watercourse and a lake nearby and he pushed through the woodlands to seek it out. He came across a very welcome bankside set-down, hidden in the reeds for privacy, with a rock to sit and take his boots off. He was naked now and washed the muck out of his trunks and pants. All his belongings were layed out on his cloak or hanging to dry in the trees, so he waded out into the cool clear water to get clean.

As he immersed himself into the deeper lake, he was overcome with an absolute feeling of peace. *This. This is great. This is where I belong. I’ve come home.* He felt excited and exhilarated.

He pushed deeper to the bottom and floated happily among the water grass. Then it came as a shock. *I’m breathing!* His gills were now alive and working and keeping him sustained in his aquatic playground. Looking around he saw fish, turtles, lobsters and eels of all shapes and sizes and rather than feeling that he was apart from them, for the first time he felt he was one of them.

His wings now took on the nature they were created for. With the buoyancy the water offered, they were no longer encumbered by the need to lift dead body weight. When they flicked and pushed back, he was propelled like a bullet. The shock of his new found freedom was totally unexpected.

“Whoahh!” He dipped and soared and spun and spiralled in an ecstatic

underwater ballet of joy. In his travel, he came up against a school of paint fish. They could turn on a pin-point moving in one way and then in an instant take a right angle. His size kept him clumsy to their acrobatics, but he had an instinct as to where they were at all times.

Sabienn knew the paint fish well. It was a native fish so named as it was largely white but looked like it had been splashed with black paint along the right side of its head. They were a prize catch as their flesh was smoky sweet and full of nutrition but they were cunning and some were legends in different lakes. People would talk fondly of Old Yellow and Old Beak and how they almost caught them.

Swiftly he drew alongside them now. He could sense that they weren't trying to get rid of him. They were playing with him. They were soaring in one direction. *These fish have a trick up their sleeve. If they had a sleeve.*

In a nanosecond they made a split right angle turn and Sabienn's head ran at full tilt into the back of an object and skittered past and hurled himself up onto a mud bank.

There was commotion on the bank with several people. A man in a grey cape standing on the land held a rifle pointing toward the intruder.

"Stand clear, so I can get a shot." The man in the cape shouted to an old naked man in the water. Sabienn had hit the man's left buttock at speed but luckily deflected away. He had his back to him as he checked for damage which quite by fortune was minimal. As he glanced he could see the old man had extensive wounds on his back. Deep welts as if he'd been whipped when he was younger.

"Stand down," said the man in the water. "Look at his wings. He's human."

"Well, I'll be," said the man on the shore, lowering his rifle.

Sabienn suddenly realized he was naked and there were women on the shore. He struggled to get back to the water to cover his privates and maintain a little modesty. The old man in the water on the other hand had no such inhibitions and stood for all to see. It was then Sabienn recognized his face.

"Oh my goodness," said Sabienn. "I know you. You're The Grand Inquisitor Profound. I'm so sorry."

Indeed the naked man before him was a dead ringer for the second most powerful man in the realm. But he had long hair and his beard reached down to his chest. "Stand down, boy," said the man.

"Who are you?" said the man on the shore in the grey cape. "Why are you here?"

"If you're Grey Cape, I think I'm looking for you," said Sabienn to the man on the shore. "My name is Sabienn Feel. I'm from Academy Salt. My principal

General Krenn is dead. His daughter Joallee is my friend and asked me to take a message to you.”

“So, Krenn is dead. The rumours are true,” said the man in the water to the other. “He was a cruel man.”

Sabienn kept talking to the man on shore. “The note’s with my clothes. Are you Grey Cape?”

“Grey Cape?” said the man in the water. “The man you seek has no cape. Get this man a robe,” said the man wading his way out of the water. An attendant rushed to Sabienn’s aid, offering him a brown robe. The old man himself donned a brown robe.

“The man you seek is me,” he said, reaching for some fruit offered to him on a plate. “And I’m not my brother.”

## 14. The Stone Shepherd

“How old are you, boy?” Grey Cape said, offering a plate of fruit to Sabienn.

“Twenty-three, sir.” He took an apple and bit hard.

“Who would have thought,” said the man with the rifle to Grey Cape. “This would be the Year of Wings.”

“I keep hearing this,” said Sabienn. “What does it mean?”

“When did you get wings, boy?” said Grey Cape.

“This morning. Sir, who are you?” said Sabienn.

“How very rude of me.” Grey Cape offered his hand in greeting. “My name is Rutherlenn Hyde. But you may call me Grey Cape. This is my colleague, Argent.” He indicated the man in the grey cape. “So you have a Supreme Order?”

Sabienn balked at the question.

“I thought so,” said Grey Cape. “Have you come to kill me?”

“No!” said Sabienn. “If I’d come to kill you, you’d ..”

“Yes, yes, I’d be dead already,” said Grey Cape, finishing his sentence dismissively. “I’m shaking in my boots. Please.” Grey Cape indicated a path. “Shall we retrieve your note?”

Grey Cape, Argent, Sabienn and two native females following like acolytes walked a path to the road. Sabienn looked bemused to the man calling himself, Grey Cape. *Rutherlenn Hyde*, he thought. *That text book. The one to be burnt. Heavily blocked out. Just with the initial “R”, and “brother of” and “Eight Governing Masters”.* What’s going on?

The girls took it in turn to timidly come up and touch his wings through his robe. They giggled with each other for some unknown reason. Sabienn felt uncomfortable with the intrusion of the young ladies. *Native girls. And they’re not servants. I hope I don’t catch anything.* “I was looking for a prison,” he finally said after a moment’s silence.

“This is a prison,” said Grey Cape. “Welcome to Ambia Vee. Which in the native tongue is .. Can you help me here?” He turned to his colleague.

“Depends on the dialect,” said Argent.” Could be “death”. Could be “exile”. Could be “prison”. It’s an exclusion.” Argent appeared to be a much older man than Grey Cape. If he made a guess of Grey Cape being in his sixties, Argent

would be up there in his eighties. He did however, for his age, seem quite energetic and spritely.

"This is indeed a prison," continued Grey Cape. "I am free to come and go as I please. I can travel freely abroad. I can speak to whomever I want, as long as it is on matters of religion and science. And my image or words are never to be published. So, who have you come to kill?"

"I have a Supreme Order, sir. I can't say," said Sabienn.

"Well you're green, boy, when it comes to orders," said Grey Cape. "Can you tell me where you were going?"

"Wait a minute!" Sabienn dug his heels in and stopped. Bats left the sanctuary of their trees in the day's twilight at his voice. "You're not the only one with questions. *I've got questions too.*"

The two elder men stopped to look at each other.

"Of course," said Grey Cape. "Please."

"Why do I have wings?" said Sabienn.

Argent offered a response as if it would explain everything. "You're a Stone Shepherd."

"I'm a what?"

"A Stone Shepherd," said Grey Cape. "We can't really tell you much more."

"Well how do I get rid of them?" said Sabienn.

"Rid of them?" Grey Cape was stunned.

"Yes! I want my life back. I want to be *normal* again," implored Sabienn

The old man sidled up to the boy and whispered in his ear so as no-one else could hear. "You do understand, that there are two women behind you, who would gladly go down on the ground now, at the drop of a hat, on their backs, and have sex with you. *Because* you have wings. How I envy you. How one man's imperfection is wasted on the ignorant."

"I'm not comfortable with natives. I don't want to be nasty about this," said Sabienn. "I don't usually.. I don't *want* to hang around natives."

As the words left his mouth, he knew what was coming. *Oh boy, wait for it. The indignant spray of elders. The usual lecture of the high-minded. Enforcing the way they see the world on everyone. Well if I'm uncomfortable, it's best to say I'm uncomfortable.*

The two old gentlemen looked at each other and then looked back at him stunned. The look they gave him wasn't indignant. They were smirking like people sharing a private joke. Grey Cape put his hand on the cadet's shoulder. "Sir, if you live long enough, you're in for a big shock."

Ahead of them on the road was a small hut used as a sentry house with its light on. There was an old man in uniform sitting at the front with his rifle

resting against the wall. He was watching the five people walking towards him but didn't flinch a muscle in response.

As they neared, it was Grey Cape who broke the silence.

"Mr Same, look lively. There are people watching everywhere."

Mr Same roused himself from his rest and stood to preen his uniform down. From the inside of the hut rushed another soldier hurriedly buttoning up a tunic. He had shoes on different feet.

"Sir," he announced. "Lovely evening for a stroll."

"Mr Cave," said Grey Cape. "This gentleman has found his way into the enclosure. He's very welcome. Do we sign him in?"

Cave looked Sabienn up and down. "You'll vouch for him, sir?"

"I think we will," said the old man.

"If you say he's OK, that's OK by me," said Cave. "There's been no showing of the man you were looking for, sir. You were saying there was a man with a green notebook?"

"That will be all, Mr Cave," said the old man, in an apparent move to shut him down.

"If it's a notebook you want, sir, I can get you one." Cave kept turning up to impress the man. He pulled a green pocket notebook from his tunic. "They're standard army issue."

"Mr Cave, I said that's enough!" Grey Cape was definite.

"Sorry, sir."

"Now we are going to take a walk to retrieve this man's clothes," continued Grey Cape. "We should be no more than an hour."

"Of course, sir. Enjoy your evening." Cave went back into his hut, to the sound of two shoes removed hitting the floor.

They walked the road till he found a familiar area where he accessed the forest to the lake. His gear was laying there undisturbed just where he left it.

As he pulled on his pants and boots, Sabienn opened up again, "So you're saying I can't get rid of these wings?"

"You mentioned a note," said Grey Cape.

Joallee's note was passed to Grey Cape who strained to read it in the dimming light. After he read it he passed it to his colleague, who held it to his face to comprehend its contents. Sabienn looked intently on the older men's faces. *I still need to find Jarrnee. Watch their faces for any signs.*

"What does it mean?" said Sabienn.

"Thank you, sir," said Grey Cape, indicating the path they had come. "You may go now."

"But I still have questions!" The boy stood his ground, stamping his foot

petulantly.

“The only question I have is why’ve you lived this long?” said Grey Cape. “If my sources are right, all winged people are being rounded up and taken to Mission Ginger. Is that where you were going?” The cadet stayed quiet. “And judging by the way you passed the note,” continued Grey Cape. “And the look in your eye at my response. I’m sensing this gentleman. This Jarrnee. This is the man you have an Order on.” Once again Sabienn kept his silence and looked to the ground. “So,” continued Grey Cape. “Sir, I thank you. But we have no further business.” Once again he pointed the way.

The cadet looked around despondently. None of his questions could be answered and he was being shown the road. Then Sabienn’s eyes went to Argent and he noticed a very simple single metal ring on one of his fingers with a design like twisted wire.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Sabienn. “May I hold that?”

“No!” Grey Cape’s response was emphatic but the older man with the ring sensed something in Sabienn. He handed the ring across as requested much to the protesting of the man in the brown robe. Grey Cape was less than pleased. “That ring is over ten thousand years old. Do anything stupid and you pay.”

As the ring hit Sabienn’s palm, he felt the tingling feeling and he was once again consumed by what was like a tornado entering through the top of his skull to fill his body. And he was gone into another vision.

Sabienn suddenly found himself once again as an observer on a large stage in the middle of an elaborate and joyous ceremony. There was a festive gathering of men and women before the stage. There were sellers of fruit and sweet meats and children waving coloured streamers and flowers, climbing trees to get a better look at proceedings.

On stage, there were musicians blowing unusual flutes and beating strange drums of animal skin. He stood next to a man with an instrument drawing a bow across two strings, wearing the ring that was now in his hand. To Sabienn’s surprise, there were winged men flying above them. *Flying!* Their wings were much larger and more complex and muscular than his.

In front of him, the stage was occupied by three people.

Standing centre stage was a man in a white robe with a metal head-piece to indicate he was a ruler. He stood with his hands on his hips in an act of dominance. His face was covered by an ornate red mask of a material so thin it appeared to be like paint on his skin.

To the rear of the stage was a man seated upon a throne of white cushions festooned with yellow and white flowers. He also wore a white robe and his face was decorated with a similar mask to the first man but yellow in colour. There



was also a cord of white and yellow intertwined strands drawn and tied around his head. The man sat with a ramrod posture looking forward with a look of depth and calmness but also a sense of gravity for the occasion.

The third man took Sabienn by surprise. He seemed like an identical twin to the man on the cushions, sitting on a simple wooden chair by his brother. One look at the man's face and the way he moved his head gave Sabienn the impression he was a man incapable of complicated thought.

He too was dressed similar to his brother, with a white robe, yellow mask and white and yellow cord around his head.

At that moment there were raised voices and commotion from the crowd. They parted to allow a man to be brought through the middle and taken to the stage. People hurled abuse and pebbles at the man with his hands bound and head downturned.

He was taken up the stairs by two burly guards and was tossed head first before the ruler.

As if on a pinpoint, the mood of the crowd changed to quiet awe as another man in a white robe walked through the crowd on the cleared path made by the guards. He held a cushion and as he mounted the stairs, Sabienn had to peer hard at what rested upon it. There appeared to be three objects, each no greater in size than a tooth but the reverence that they were held in by the people held Sabienn in amazement.

When the white robed man reached the stage, he gave the cushion to the ruler who lifted it above his head in front of his people. There was wild applause from all before him and a fanfare from the musicians. After the excitement, the cushion with its objects were returned to its original carrier who backed away reverently and took a place at the right of the stage.

Four winged men who had been flying overhead landed to the far left of the stage and immediately went to their knee in deference to the ruler.

The man in the head-piece spoke in a tongue that Sabienn couldn't understand. But by the way he held his hand out to the winged men, it was to invite the audience to acknowledge them. The crowd cheered approval and the men stood to face them and bowed.

The ruler now turned to the two men at the rear of the stage and went to his knees and prostrated himself before them before standing again.

He then drew a dagger from his belt and walked to the prisoner. The captured man's head was wrenched back as the ruler grabbed a handful of the man's hair.

Then the dominant figure at the back shouted what Sabienn believed to be a "No!"

The ruler stopped and spoke in a respectful manner towards him and,

although Sabienn couldn't understand what was said, by his mannerisms it appeared to be something like "We've discussed this before. Please see reason."

Again came a strident response of disapproval. "No!"

The dominant figure with the yellow mask then drew back the left sleeve of his simple brother to reveal that his hand had been cut off to the lower forearm.

Again. "No!"

Weighing up what was said, the ruler still insisted on placing the dagger's blade against the neck of the prisoner. His intent was clear.

Again from the figure at the rear. "No!"

Suddenly there was a stunned disbelief from all before him as the dominant yellow-masked figure pulled a dagger from the folds of his robe and held it to the neck of his brother. The submissive brother didn't move a muscle but looked ahead calmly.

Again. "No!"

By the limp grasp of the weapon and the look in the dominant figure's eye, Sabienn could see there was no intent to do any real harm. *What's going on? He doesn't want to hurt his brother, thought Sabienn. He wants to humiliate himself. In front of a man obviously sworn to protect him. From harm and humiliation. Why's he doing that?* "No!" the dominant figure cried again.

Sabienn watched on as the ruler's dominant demeanour and authority crumbled and fell before everyone's eyes. He let go of the prisoner and then went to his knees before the man about to kill his brother. The head-piece was removed and placed before him and he ripped the red mask from his face. From his robes he retrieved a yellow mask and clumsily put on as quickly as he could and proceeded to lay prostrate before the brothers.

The dominant brother placed his weapon back within his robes and indicated to the guards to bring the prisoner to a chair nearby him. All the prisoner's entrapment was then removed.

It was then indicated to the man with the cushion to come forward. The cushion was placed in the lap of the simple brother and the three small stones held within started to pulse with a blue glow.

Sabienn could sense the wind pick up and blow the streamers in the children's hands. There was a warmth to the breeze and even as a distant observer Sabienn was overwhelmed with what the audience was feeling. It was a feeling of being complete. A feeling of extreme well-being.

Almost as if with a glorious tapering of a dream, he awoke from his vision feeling peaceful and refreshed. He placed the ring back in Argent's hand and sat down on a rock breathing peacefully.

"Well," said Argent finally. "What did you see?"

“Not so fast,” said Grey Cape.

“Please.” Argent silenced his friend and stood before Sabienn intently.

Coming to his senses, Sabienn recounted what he saw. His vision was so vivid that he stood and walked around to indicate with his hands what he’d seen. As if to say, “This was over here.” and “That was over there.”

He laid bare all the details. The ring on the musician’s finger, the ruler, the brothers, the prisoner, the winged men, the cushion with the stones, the cut-off forearm, the action with the dagger, the humiliation, the blue glow and the feeling of peace.

The old men stood before him gobsmacked.

“Tell me,” said Argent, almost fearing the response. “Were they wearing masks?”

“Yes,” said Sabienn.

“Could you see what colour they were?” Argent seemed very tense.

“The two brothers,” said Sabienn, “had yellow. The ruler had red. After the incident, the ruler ripped his mask off and placed a yellow on. Does that mean anything?”

Tears welled in the man’s eyes before him and he went to hide his face against a nearby tree.

“Are you absolutely sure?” Grey Cape said.

“Yellow,” said Sabienn. “They both had cords of white and yellow, twisted like this” He moved his hands. “Wrapped around their ..” Before he could finish, everyone turned to Argent who was beating his palms against the tree in front of him. His cheeks were moist now as the tears rolled freely in his animated joy.

“This could be a trick,” said Grey Cape.

“No!” Argent turned and pointed to his friend. “No! Over fifty years I’ve studied this. The gathering of the stones. Every book, every person, every place I’ve seen. Fifty years. And I learn more in the last minute than in all that time. There’s no way. No way he could know.”

Argent was now in Sabienn’s face grabbing his ears and kissing his left cheek. “Thank you.” He then dropped to his knees and took the hands where the ring was held and kissed them gratefully. “Thank you.”

As he came to his feet, he pointed to Sabienn and announced for all to hear, “This man is a reader.”

“What’s that mean?” said Sabienn. “You’re not the first to say this.”

“Not the first?” said Grey Cape.

“Krenn said it. Shouted it in front of the hospital. Then he died.”

“Then that’s why he’s alive,” said Argent to his friend. “He’s still of use to them.”

*Still of use? OK, thought Sabienn. Maybe this gift will offer me a little currency to negotiate.* “I still have questions,” he said.

“Please, sir.” Grey Cape, his demeanour changed, came forward to rest a hand on his shoulder. “I’ve been less than a good host to you. It will be dark soon. Come back to our camp. Take some food and shelter. Before first light, we will take you to Mission Ginger.”

The thought of being ejected into the night to fend for himself had weighed on Sabienn’s mind. *Spend the night here. Take food, drink and shelter. And find out more about myself. Then tomorrow fulfil the Supreme Order. Works for me.* “In my vision, there were winged men. With larger wings than mine. They could fly.”

“They were the Stone Shepherds. Thousands were given wings. Four answered the call,” said Argent.

“I don’t understand,” said Sabienn.

“You have a Supreme Order from The Great Leader,” continued Argent. “But the planet has given you an order. It is trying to heal itself and has given you a calling. You too, Mr Feel. Just like the men on that stage.”

Argent came forward and again grabbed his ears.

“You are a Stone Shepherd.” He patted his cheek and walked away.

## 15. The Seven Women

The trudge back to the camp seemed a lot more enjoyable. It seemed that all eyes were on Argent who was ahead of them speaking excitedly with the girls. It was almost as if sixty years had been wiped off his odometer. There was a skip in his step and a ready boyish giggle to every unfunny comment.

Sabienn watched on and spoke with Grey Cape ambling alongside. “I don’t understand.”

“Yes,” said Grey Cape. “Join the club.”

They walked in silence another minute before the old man opened up. “I feel I owe you an explanation. But I do so at my own personal risk. Do you understand?” Sabienn turned and saw the sincerity in the old man’s gaze and nodded. “The vision that you saw,” Grey Cape continued, “is a corner-stone mystery of native culture. It is known as “the gathering of the stones”. There have been so many myths, so many legends, and so much rubbish, written about what you saw clearly. Of what happened ten thousand years ago.”

“How can you trust me?” said Sabienn. “I mean, if it’s true.”

“I can’t,” said Grey Cape. “Only everything makes sense. For these people.” He indicated those ahead. “Myths are powerful. A myth is the campfire that the population is drawn to, to come in and warm their hands. But myths can be controlled. Control a myth and you get obedience. You control the people.”

Grey Cape took a breath before continuing. “There were three people on the stage. The ruler was Emperor Ryo, a fair leader with a high opinion of himself. He made love to two hundred women who went on to give him offspring. And all two hundred of his boys and girls grew to lead his army. He valued loyalty and family gave him that. The main brother was known only as The Holy One. His mother had been set aside by mystics who followed the stars. Hers was to be a special birth. And she delivered twins. The other brother was known as The Forlorn. He was simple and offered silent witness. Part of his arm became gangrenous when he was a child and was cut off. From his dead limb, physicians found three stones. The stones you saw on the cushion.”

Grey Cape paused for breath. “Now this is where you must never breathe a word. The stones are small. There are two identical and one larger, but essentially they’re no larger than a tooth. They’re known as the “six”, “two” and

“two” stones. By their proportion in size.”

“An army that holds the stones has an advantage. This has been proven by probability. Over their ten thousand years of existence, an army with the stones is favoured for success. Both in attack and defence. They have more confidence. They have more fight. They have more will to win.”

“So where are the stones now?” said Sabienn.

“I can’t say,” said the old man. They walked further in silence for a few more minutes. They both looked on at Argent with a dance in his toes like a school boy.

“Why did the masks mean so much to him?” said Sabienn.

“Masks are important to these people,” said Grey Cape. “The red mask that the Emperor wore means anger, aggression, to show no quarter. But the yellow mask that you saw is special. It’s actually called the lemon mask and to these people it is the most powerful. To show the lemon mask means “enough is enough”, no more bloodshed, show restraint. And the two brothers not only wore the mask. They tied it on with rope. As if to say, “This is our position. This is what we wear and shall never be removed.” Very interesting.”

Grey Cape spoke in excited bursts as if he had discovered something precious to him. “As I was saying, there’s so much rubbish on this. There are powerful people convinced every person on the stage had red masks. That The Holy One was a man of anger, showing a dagger as a call to fight.”

“OK,” Sabienn was finding the stories hard to follow. “This is all very fascinating. But when are you going to tell me what the hell it has to do with me?”

The old man looked to the younger and placed a reassuring arm on his shoulder.

“I just have!” Grey Cape said. “I’m so sorry, Mr Feel. I can’t say any more.”

On the outskirts of the camp they could see the smoke rising and the smells of cooked meat as dinner was prepared. Children ran to greet the party in ragged but clean clothes. They passed a group of mothers pulling their kids from a bath. They wrapped their young ones in towels and rubbed their faces clean. Women with babies sat suckling their young on their breast and talked over the day’s events.

Three dogs came up to greet them and started to sniff Sabienn’s crotch. He wasn’t sure if it was the remnants of the accident he had on the bus they were detecting but they weren’t letting him go further until they had satisfied their curiosity over the new smells entering the camp.

“Boys, get out of there.” The old man gave them a gentle kick to move them along from the younger man’s privates. “Samuel, Giles, Eddals. Move!” The

dogs relented and moved to sniff three dirty and ragged men on the side of the road already incoherent with rice wine bottles in their hand.

Sabienn looked on at the scene because it fitted every story he had heard of these people. *Natives and alcohol. They were such a natural fit. Why don't they take a good hard look at themselves, get off their backside and do something with their lives?* One of them seeing Grey Cape, stood up and came over to offer his bottle to Sabienn. His hand rubbed against Sabienn's arm and he felt that he needed to wipe himself with a clean rag.

"Thank you, Sage," said Grey Cape to the intruder with the bottle. "We're fine."

Sabienn looked on. There was no attempt to admonish the drunk. *What else can the old man do? Just let him amble off aimlessly like a sunset. Into the rest of his life.*

They reached a row of huts with metal roofs and panels of timber and blankets draped together slap-dash to keep the wind out. They abutted against a large area where a camp fire had been the night before. As they walked in, children were gathering timber and branches from the forest for tonight's blaze.

Grey Cape directed Sabienn inside one of the huts. "Please, this is where you'll sleep tonight," he said.

Sabienn looked around. *Acceptable cleanliness. But I bet my skin will be crawling with something in the morning.* There was a mattress, clean sheets, a bowl of water to wash his face and a solitary apple by the bedside. "Thank you," he said. "Just like home."

"That's very diplomatic," said Grey Cape. "If you have time, I'd like to speak with you."

They moved to a hut which was simply furnished but had books to the ceiling in shelving on one wall. There was a bed and desk and a bucket to pee in that hadn't been cleared for a few days, giving the room that stench that said "old man's quarters".

Grey Cape saw Sabienn inspecting his bucket. "Please, excuse me." Grey Cape tipped the bucket out the window narrowly missing some girls passing by. "I wasn't expecting guests."

The old man pulled out a drawer from his desk revealing a number of items wrapped in plastic. "Look, I'll just come out with it," he said. "You have a gift and I want to use you. If that makes you feel like a performing seal in the circus, I'm sorry."

"OK. Throw me a fish." Sabienn was beginning to like the old man.

Grey Cape held before him a pair of ankle manacles which he retrieved from a plastic wrapping. They were aged and rusted and even before touching them,

Sabienn could sense a sadness around the piece.

“One thing worries me,” Sabienn said. “Something like this would have been worn by many. How do I know you’ll get the story you want?”

“I’ve only known about five good readers in my life,” said the old man. “But there are thousands who say they are. Some are vague, some see in black and white and some are just fakes. But you, you’re good. You have a purpose, lad. Far beyond your Supreme Order. The purpose will choose it for you.” He held the object up to him. “And it’s wanting to give you that story.”

The younger man took the manacles in hand and felt the tingling and swirling through him. The first thing that hit him was an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness and fear.

He was transported to a room of high white walls and small floor space. There were small windows guarded by bars to prevent leaving. Seven women sat on a simple wooden bench within, shivering and huddled together. The manacles in his hand were being worn by the second last person on his end and she had her face in her hands weeping silently.

“Well they can bring seven chickens into a yard. The chickens can see the blood on the ground and the chopping block. They must know they’re about to die. But do they care? Some things just have to die.” The words came from a strangely calm woman on the end of the bench. Another thing Sabienn found unusual was that she was a native woman but she spoke in a tongue and accent from Deerland which he could recognize.

“But I didn’t do anything,” said the distraught woman with Sabienn’s manacles.

“Of course you did,” said the first. “You were born native. Should’ve chosen your parents better.”

A glance around the room showed a bucket used as a shared toilet stuck in the corner. On the bucket, Sabienn could just make out “Property of Mission Cinnamon”. *Once again, this place.*

A closer perusal of the walls saw scratch marks. It was hard to make out what was there but there were words. Lots of the word “Love”. Something indistinct “Loves” something indistinct.

Sabienn noticed the woman at the opposite end of the bench to the woman who spoke last. By her posture she had the sense of command. “Please, we’re women of the plain. Stay firm,” she said. Sabienn moved to her and squatted close to watch her.

“But they’ll cut our ears off,” said the woman beside her, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“They won’t cut our ears off,” replied the leader.



“Yes, they will,” the weeping woman said. “They also promised we’d all be well. Now they’re killing us. Everyone. Their promises mean nothing.”

The woman third along nodded with the second and added, “The Colonel threatened my husband. Before he was pushed out on to the road. He said he’d cut our ears.”

“You *cannot* trust him,” said the second.

“They won’t cut our ears,” said the leader. “I’ve never said this to anyone, but I am the daughter of Jeel, right hand man to Jarrnee, chief of the Tee Lee. I want you to listen to me.” Sabienn was amazed at the mention of the name “Jarrnee”. The woman in charge continued, “I made it clear to Colonel Krenn. The Tee Lee were not the Turr. You can’t cut our ears for a trophy. The Tee Lee must be complete in body or we can’t enter heaven. If we have no left ear, we can’t sit at the right hand of the maker. I said this to him. He understood. And what’s more. I said, fail this and beware of The Year of Wings. Your family would be cursed. This was said and he understood.”

The second woman added, “I still have doubts, Joallee.”

Once again, Sabienn was stunned. *First “Jarrnee”, now “Joallee”. Is this a coincidence? Krenn loathed the natives. Everyone that knew him knew that. Why would he name his only children after them?*

Joallee continued with her friends, “Please, I can’t offer any words of comfort. But all I ask is that you listen to me and follow me.”

All seven women sat quietly on their bench their heads bowed as if resigned to their fate. Sabienn looked on at the profile of Joallee, as proud and resolute a person as he’d ever seen. *She’s almost human*, he thought. *Dare I say it, she’s beautiful.*

As Sabienn stared at her, she turned to look at him, as if to look down the camera Sabienn was viewing her with. And stepping across the vaunting breach of space and time, she spoke gently in almost a whisper. “Your mother would be proud.”

The shock of the words pulled him out of his vision. “Uhh!” Sabienn cried as if waking from a nightmare.

“What’s wrong?” said Grey Cape.

“I .. There was .. A woman spoke to me.” He had the shallow breath of a man who’d been scared out of his wits. “She just looked at me and spoke to me.”

“Please, tell me what you saw,” Grey Cape was enthralled.

Sabienn recounted the complete vision, with descriptions of the cell, the bucket with “Property of Mission Cinnamon”, the seven women, the names he heard of the Tee Lee, Joallee, Jarrnee and Jeel, the threat to cut their ears and not getting into heaven and the curse of The Year of Wings.

Grey Cape had sat at his desk and took notes feverishly.

“This place,” said Sabienn. “This Mission Cinnamon. When I was with Krenn, I saw another vision of it. And your brother was there. I was a baby and he was holding me.”

“Can you tell me more about this?” Grey Cape had ripped over another page and his hand was flying again as Sabienn recounted as much as he could of what he had seen while sitting in Krenn’s Museum.

“So where is this Mission Cinnamon?” Sabienn said finally, watching the other put his pen down.

The old man looked long and hard at him and stood to walk the room. “You’ve given me so much information. And I can’t say much.” He walked around as if there was a heavy burden on his shoulder. Sabienn looked to him sympathetically. *This guy’s hurting.*

Grey Cape scratched his beard and pulled his brown robe in around him. “Once again my life is in your hands. If I say too much.” The old man walked to a map on the wall of the room that covered the three-quarters of habitable surface of the planet, three-quarters of which was ocean. Sabienn saw the usual countries he had been familiar with all his life. There was Hayddland dominating the lower right of the map, Turrland taking up the top right corner. Deerland to the west sprawling through the central portion of the map and the outer territories and protectorates running down the left side. Of course, further on from the edges of each side was the quarter marked as The Desert, with its angry volcanic activity. It held no use for anyone except scattered tribes.

Grey Cape pointed to the map. “Here,” the finger rested on an area at the top of Deerland. “This is the province of Klear, which you may be familiar with.”

Indeed Sabienn was aware of Klear. It was a place that held the largest population of Turrs outside Turrland. As if to confirm his thoughts, Grey Cape added, “There’s many Turrs there now. With all the troubles brewing. The Turrs are once again under threat. They feel sanctuary in the geographic arms and warm asylum of the northern reach of Deerland. To its west is the forest and plains of the Tee Lee.” He pointed to a territory known as The Raft marked green adjacent to Klear and then moved his finger towards the southern border. “Mission Cinnamon was here.”

“Was?” said Sabienn.

“It no longer operates.” The old man looked sadly at the portion of the map he had just identified. Sabienn could see the old man’s face and memories like a dark cloud pass over. They seemed to overwhelm him and send him to silence. Sabienn wondered. *Why is an area thousands of miles away, in another country and another hemisphere, of any interest to anyone?*

After some pause, Grey Cape spoke. "But you must understand," he said, his eyes teary now. "I couldn't do anything." He walked to the younger man and opened his arms. He hugged Sabienn, putting his arms around as far as the wings would allow. "There was nothing I could do."

It was a moment of raw emotion and Sabienn was taken aback but as he had no engagement in what he was talking about or what had happened, he still felt detached. That and the fact that the old man's brown robe had opened slightly and his naked genitals were pressed against his pants. It was an unusual situation for him. It was comical, it was tender and it was poignant. But this was a human being in genuine pain.

"It's OK." Sabienn hugged the old man tenderly patting his back. "You're a good man."

They eventually broke hold and the elder went back to his desk. For the next hour, he asked Sabienn to hold another three objects but each of them came up a blank. If the objects had a story for him or wanted to use him as a vehicle to convey what had happened to them, they didn't want to share it.

The old man took notes as usual then took the objects and placed them back in their plastic wrapping. He wrote labels which he stuck to each. "No Further Use".

"I'm sorry," said Sabienn.

"Why?" Grey Cape placed them away in his desk. "If there's nothing in them, there's nothing in them. Are you hungry?"

From the doorway, they viewed the gathering area. In the courtyard, a generously fed pig was turning on its spit, crackling and exuding the most heavenly of smells to the young man. Root vegetables, potatoes and black onions were being exposed steaming hot, laid out in their metal serving containers after being carefully pulled from the hot charcoal.

As the village gathered, Sabienn watched on. People came from far and wide with plates of fruit and breads. There were berries and apples and nuts of all types. They placed their contributions in a circle for distribution by self-appointed caterers; old women slapping the wrists of curious hands trying to break the queue.

Even the non-contributors came in with their bottles in hand and sat on the outer rim of proceedings. As food was passed out, people took generous plate-loads to them too. *It's as if the non-contributors contribute too*, thought Sabienn. *Just by existing and respecting the laws of the camp. Curious. It's like a fabric. Everyone's intertwined. Intermeshed. There's no free-loaders. Everyone's family. I wish I had family.*

Musicians gathered, shook hands and conferred as they tuned up. Men and

women with hand drums, fiddles and bamboo flutes drew out exquisite harmonies that got the people's toes tapping.

And there were dogs, dogs and more dogs. Dogs licking, dogs finding empty plates and dogs fighting over bones and squabbling for the last morsel of meat.

As a guest, he was led to and took pride of place sitting on a blanket on the ground next to the man who made this prison possible. Grey Cape, the prisoner, was in fine spirits. Argent took up the place on Sabienn's other side. And there was no shortage of lovely girls coming forward with platters to lay before him. He seemed to feel their curious fingers touching his wings as they left. *I must be some good luck charm. I'd protest but it feels so good.*

The feast was incredible. It was juicy and succulent with all the aromas of the soil and heaven. They ate with their fingers and licked their skin before dipping into wash bowls for a semblance of civility.

And to Sabienn the company was agreeable. They embraced him like family. A cup of wine was passed to him and didn't go empty the whole night. A female hand would always seem to appear with a pitcher over his shoulder and the cup would be full again. It happened so many times as to be a blur.

The wine had the effect of loosening the tongues and throughout the course of the meal, Sabienn turned to his host. "So," Sabienn slurred. "Mission Cinnamon. What is it?"

Politely Grey Cape's forefinger would come up at each probe as if to say enough is enough. There was definite pain in his expression. The wine of course worked both ways and all caution seemed to lift from Sabienn's tongue with every draft he drank.

"How.." Sabienn staggered with his tongue. "Well you .. How'd you know I had to kill Jarrnee?"

"I didn't," said Grey Cape. "You just told me now."

"I don't want to kill him," said Sabienn. "I hate his guts. But .. But if you killed everyone whose guts you hated, no-one'd be alive."

"I think you're walking to your death," said Grey Cape. "Such a waste of a gift."

"No-one'd love me here if it wasn't for my gift," said Sabienn.

"Truth hits hard, son. We're all in it for ourselves," Grey Cape took his cup and struck Sabienn's in collegial toast before draining its contents.

"Well what's in it for you?" Sabienn's question was jocular enough.

Argent sat listening also affected by wine and there didn't seem to be any tethers on his tongue as he off-loaded. "We are the last resistance, boy. The planet is to be plunged into darkness. An unspeakable darkness. And for what? For the follies of man. When out there." He started waving his hand north

somewhere. “Out there somewhere. There’s a healing. A healing wind will blow. If only it had a chance.”

He suddenly went silent and the three went quiet. After a time, Sabienn started to giggle and looking around to find his response inappropriate. Grey Cape looked stonily at Argent who sat sullen and head-bowed.

Sabienn felt the need to break the deadlock. “Well,” he said. “Your secret’s safe. I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about.” He turned to Grey Cape. “Sir, did you know Krenn?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve met him?” said Sabienn.

“Yes,” said Grey Cape. “He was here last year. With his daughter.”

“With Joallee? Why?” said Sabienn. Again the silence. Sabienn could sense this party was coming off its keel.

“Tomorrow will be a long day,” said Grey Cape finally. “It may well be your last. If we are to wake you at four, we should all retire. Mr Same and Argent will take you to Mission Ginger. You should be there at first light.” Someone had half-filled his cup as he spoke and he raised it to his guest. “Good luck. May your death be swift.” With this proclamation, the contents were drained down his throat.

“Thanks, I .. I think.” Sabienn followed suit.

Grey Cape walked with him to the young man’s quarters and helped himself to a leak in Sabienn’s bucket. “Would you like to know why I’m in prison?” It seemed to be a candid sharing. “Here,” he said, reaching for a Blue Moon Bible on a shelf nearby. The book was ancient, it seemed like a hundred years old. Sabienn held it tenderly, its covers worn, its pages yellow and dog-eared. “Enjoy. See you in the morning.”

With that, Grey Cape left. As his head swam with wine, Sabienn looked at the old book in his hands. *What the hell is this? Is he trying to tell me something?* He studied the book’s cover, front and back. *Am I supposed to find solace within its pages or something?*

With the bible in hand, he pulled down his pants and sat on the bucket to relieve his bowels. *I do my best shitting when I’m thinking.* His thoughts were as loose as the effluent coming out. *A high-minded book. But life, philosophy and shit. All things must pass.* He opened the ancient relic.

Like the book he received from Raajaa at the beach, the dog ears lead the way. The first dog ear led to a story familiar with him of the old woman and the ten beans to teach people the virtue of being frugal but always be willing to share. He opened at the second dog ear and it was the same menu for fried rice Krenn turned to when he was trying to kill him in his museum. He remembered

one time using it to make a communal dish for his colleagues at a camp long ago.

The light in his room was harsh but the detail of the print was perfectly fit for reading. The pages were vivid and alive in his eyes and he was surprised at how remarkably lucid he then became in his thoughts after so much drinking.

The third dog ear took him by surprise. It was a page he had never seen before and he had studied this book from front cover to back in order to get credits for his black wolf. It was quite simple in its delivery and everything was on one page.

“The Seven Powers

And above all else, in all endeavours, remember there are Seven Powers.

The Power of Courtesy

The Power of Serving

The Power of Self-discipline

The Power of Gratitude

The Power of Forgiveness

The Power of Restraint, and above all else,

The Power of Love

Some may not always adhere to these, and I include myself in this, but always strive to keep them before your thoughts.”

*Who put this in?* The stuff on the page exploded in his mind like a rock hitting a bee-hive. He lifted the book up and down and turned it over to see if it was the same book he was familiar with. Yes it was.

The next page had the more familiar story of the man, the wind and the snow, teaching the virtue of the austere lifestyle. He knew that page like the back of his hand. *Where the hell did that page come from? Maybe it's a freak edition. A mistake in printing kept to fetch a high price one day.*

Sabienn slammed his book shut and reached for a roll of paper thankfully laid nearby. He washed himself in a bowl of water by the bedside and, although the stench from his bucket was appalling, the day's events seemed to catch up with his body. He was so exhausted he stripped down to his trunks, turned off the light, crawled to his bed, folded his wings and went quickly to sleep.

## 16. The West-East Corridors

That night Sabienn had so many dreams. A face kept appearing before him saying “Your mother would be proud.” *How would a native woman know my mother? Would she know about the bus crash?*

A dream appeared where he was a fireman. He stood beside a truck that smelt like oranges as people were pulling out a hose from the vehicle. They kept pulling and pulling and unravelling it further but the water wasn’t coming out.

His eyes awoke with a start as he felt something touching his leg. As his bed lamp went on, he was staring at two naked young women asleep in his bed and his trunks were missing. They were the two same women that followed him to gather his things at the water’s edge.

He looked around the room and it had been tidied and all his clothes lay neatly on a chair. His bowl of water had a neat new towel by its side. And there was no stench. His bucket had been removed and emptied and its aroma had been replaced with a fresh citrus smell. *Poor girl who had to do that.*

And now they were naked in his bed and he had no pants. *Wow! Talk about going from high intellectual reading last night to the pleasant feeling of women in the morning. It’s like I went to bed in one church and woke up in another. That was some wine.*

Sabienn saw the book he had been reading the night before and turned its page to the third dog ear. What he read last night was still there. It least that wasn’t a dream. His watch showed he still had half an hour before his call so he switched off his lamp and lay calmly with his room service, enjoying the sweet smell of their skin.

There was a knock at the door. It was four o’clock. Without a word the women roused and robed themselves and left him alone.

He washed and made use of a disposable razor left by his room service and rubbed his teeth liberally with some baking soda. Sabienn stared at the image in his mirror of a man with wings and a Supreme Order on his shoulders. *If I’m to die today, I need to look good.* He threw some more water on his face. *I’m awake, I’m thinking clearly and I’m scared.* The black wolf tattoo stood out on his chest. *I am the incomplete warrior. I studied for you but I wrote a stupid cheat note. I’m temporary. I’m a fake. And I don’t know what to do.* Joallee’s

*right. I'm just a pleaser.* His hands gripped the bedside table tightly. *There's only one person. Tesser. Little Tesser. She's the only person I'm doing this for.*

He shook his head and rallied his energy to the day's task. The clothes came on quickly and he checked all pockets and buttoned everything secure.

In the room was a small portrait of The Great Leader on the wall for which he kissed his fingers and went to touch. *Please help him get through this day.*

At the doorway, he was hit by a brisk breeze and he gathered his cloak in around his shoulders. As if reading his mind, one of the young women came forward with an army-issue green T-shirt and held it up to him. It had a large portion of its back removed and the hole reinforced with stitching. In a quick dress, he threaded his wings through and felt its thin chest plate of cotton resist the chill. It offered suitable comfort with the cloak on his back.

The utility was already in the yard with cabin lights on and people working around. The back of the utility was stacked high with watermelons and a tarp was being drawn over the top. Grey Cape was there helping some women tie down the back.

Seeing Sabienn, Grey Cape came forward and hugged him generously. "Life has taught me never to get close to people. I wish I could have told you more. You're special to me. Good luck." With that he broke free and walked away without a backward glance.

Mr Same took the wheel and Argent and Sabienn piled in, giving the young man the window. The batteries brought the vehicle to movement and they were off.

His fellow car occupants were notably quiet. He felt that Argent next to him may have still been thinking of the outburst he made the night before. In the spirit of goodwill, Sabienn opened up the conversation with the elderly gentleman who sat next to him. "You know, I used to camp these woods," said Sabienn cheerfully. "Not round here. But up around Mission Ginger."

Taking the light comment on board, Argent looked back quietly then placed his eyes ahead. The dirt road they were travelling was illuminated by the vehicle's headlights and the two moons above. The country was densely populated with trees.

Sabienn ventured forth with more information. "We used to have campfires at night. The older boys would take pretty girls to their tents. Me and another guy crept up on one tent and tried to listen for sex. You know, thinking they were writhing around entangled and groaning inside. But nothing. Not a sound. Only crickets. I think the crickets were getting more sex. We were so pathetic then." He looked to his companions for a reaction. Mr Same sat stony-faced pointing the car at the road. But a smile went across Argent's face.



“You still are,” said Argent. “These trees are full of ghosts. Just don’t join their ranks, sir.” He turned to Sabienn. “I like you.” After a pause, Argent spoke again. “These trees have memories. I fought with Grey Cape in the Bol War. I fought with his brother and The Great Leader.

Wow! Sabienn was stunned. *I’m sitting next to a revolutionary.* Much to Sabienn’s pleasure, Argent continued without further prompting. “I was at Mission Ginger for a time. Here for the Teel Break-out. It was tough. We were here with the Deer. The Deer showed their mettle. They were as useless as tits on a bull. Very casual in their fighting. But they got the better huts. The hotter food. They were pampered like princes. But for us? It was a slog. You ever hear of the West-East Corridors?”

“Of course,” replied Sabienn listening intently. “We learnt it at Academy. Look here.” Sabienn pulled back his sleeve to reveal his cheat mark SEMEN on his arm. “It’s to remind me. The war criminals. Seem, Ell, Mee, Erp and Note. They walked through these woods. I’ve got shivers up my spine.”

“And the Teel Break-out? You’ve heard of that?” said Argent.

Sabienn let the dam burst on his knowledge of this place. He really wanted to impress the old man. He waved to the west in the direction they had come. “On the western side of the mountains, in the provinces of Teel, Nawt and Reins, four million people were slaughtered by the Turrs. The filthy Turrs always believed that land was theirs. Just because they occupied it. Having it for a thousand years before the humans doesn’t make it yours, right?”

“Go on.”

“Well towards the end, the Turrs grip was weakened. Their supply lines dried up due to the Deerland Blockade. The Deer airships, they just stood off the coast and starved the armies, shooting down supply ships out of the skies. They just hammered them. I saw a picture of one curling in a whirlpool.”

“This boy’s good,” said Argent to an unresponsive Mr Same.

Sabienn was on fire. “So to save themselves, the Turrs formulated the Teel Break-out. An operation which looked like an all-out offensive over the mountain into the province of Sett. Where we are now. It was in fact a front for a mass evacuation of soldiers, marching single file from Teel in the west coast, through Sett under the cover of the thick forests, right through to the woodlands of Chard on the east coast. One of the most notable pick up points was actually Fort Heel where their airships would make quick retrievals. Huh! I’m quoting from the text book. I memorised it so well.”

“I couldn’t tell,” said Argent blankly.

“These single file routes were the West-East Corridors. They numbered three in total. Two had been discovered and one had never been found. This was as

much as they could get from captured Turrs before they were executed. They set up secret supply depots along the way which offered shelter from the elements. They were guarded by camouflaged shade cloths and were stocked with rations and water filter kits. And still today, somewhere out there in Sett and Chard, there are secret supply dumps waiting to be stumbled upon.”

“Thanks for the lecture,” said Mr Same blankly, breaking his silence but keeping his eyes on the road.

Undeterred by the response, Sabienn continued to cap off his story, “Their invasion plans were ordinary but their evacuation was a logistical success. They saved thousands of their own measly little necks in the manoeuvre. The Turrs were always at their best when they were running away.”

“Don’t speak ill of your opponent,” said Argent. “They have their reasons for fighting.”

The comment put Sabienn on the back foot. “I didn’t mean any offence. I just hate the Turrs. When I complete my Order and The Great Leader brings me back in the fold, maybe I’ll kill some too.”

Argent shook his head and looked forward. “I almost had the third West-East Corridor. A Turr was about to tell me over coffee. But an order came. He was taken out and shot.”

The three of them kept silence and watched the road ahead after the comment. As the sun was about to clip the horizon, the skies in the east before them were peach and crimson. The vehicle turned off the main road to a side track where it was then parked on a verge and had all lights killed.

From the glove box, Argent retrieved a pair of binoculars. Mr Same pulled on a back pack which he picked up from the rear of the vehicle. Everyone worked in silence and with Argent in the lead, the three men made their way through undergrowth moving up the higher ground. Every now and then, everyone would stop and listen.

“Hear that?” whispered Argent. There was someone talking in the distance. “Guards could be working the perimeter.” He touched his lips for silence and they continued their cautious walk.

At the top of the small ridge, they broke through foliage and stared out over the expanse of the facility being bathed in the morning light. Mission Ginger was already alive and moving with people. There were breakfast smells wafting from the exhaust flues of the camp kitchen and mess hall which made the young man water at the mouth. There was a detail of servicemen being drilled in calisthenics, currently going through the motions of star-jumps. And others in STL uniforms, the men and women of the Secret Police, were walking and rushing around.

The facility was located within a tall barbed wire fence and outside this was a road and a clearing before the dense woodland. Within the perimeter of the fence there were two guards dawdling along inspecting any breaks in the wire, holding their rifles like carry sticks rather than a weapon of quick response. By their body language, it appeared they were totally bored going through the motions of their duties stuck out in the middle of nowhere.

Within the enclosure were several buses. Troop transport vehicles in army green. The drivers were at a makeshift table playing cards. "If the drivers are up this early, there's to be some transport movement soon," whispered Sabienn.

The three men sat in silence within the protection of the foliage watching the proceedings before them. Mr Same unpacked his bag and passed a wrapped item to Sabienn with a bottle of water. He welcomed the cheese, tomato and meat sandwich within the wrapping, savouring the pork which was left over from last night and bit into it ravenously.

Argent quietly offered the binoculars to Sabienn after his own careful scrutiny of the facility. Through them he could make out no more than he knew already. He was already aware of the buildings, the walkways, the halls and dorms. Handing them back to Argent, he concentrated on his sandwich.

"So what are we looking for?" whispered Argent.

"I haven't got a clue?" Sabienn responded.

"That makes three of us," said Mr Same. By the tone of his voice he was nervous and uneasy.

At that moment there was movement occurring within the camp. There were guards rushing out to the outer edges of the parade ground, taking up position for an arrival of something.

From the edges of the dorm huts coming into view were a sad and sorry sight of bedraggled young men. They had wings like Sabienn and he could tell from their physique that they were all his age. Each had a hessian bag on his head so their movements were uncertain and disoriented. They had their cloaks removed and were bare-chested and their wrists appeared to be bound by zip-ties held submissively before their army issue pants.

Looking on, Sabienn was struck by the different kinds of wings on the men. It was the first time he'd seen a collective of winged people and there was no set size or shape.

"Why are there no women?" said Sabienn.

"What?" Argent was deeply engrossed in the view within his binoculars.

"With wings? There are no women with wings?" said Sabienn.

"Wings only appear in men," Argent replied, as if it were common knowledge to anyone who mattered. "It's a men thing."

“Why?”

“Concentrate on what’s in front,” whispered Argent losing patience.

There appeared to be about twenty winged men in this awful procession. There was total hopelessness in their demeanour. *They’re to be taken to their death and they know it.*

They were lined up in single file in the parade ground and there was something written on their upper arms. Retrieving the binoculars from the old man, Sabienn looked at what was written on the arms. There were numbers displayed in black marker pen. He looked down the line and saw the numbers. One had “89”, another “22”, another “156” and so on and so on. Towards the end there were men who only had “X” on their arms.

Even looking on them from a distance, there was a distinct difference in the way they were treated. One man with an “X” looked like he had said something and a guard came up behind him and hit him solidly in the head with the butt of his rifle. One of the numbered ones, number “156” appeared to say something in retaliation and the same guard steamed up on him but offered a stern but whispered admonishment.

*Numbers*, thought Sabienn. *Someone once called me “121”. Maybe there’s a link.* “What’s with the numbers?” he said.

There was no reply from the old man who appeared to be affected by what he was seeing. Sabienn could see the man’s eyes moisten as he gazed on quietly.

“That’ll be your fate, boy,” Argent said finally. He turned to the younger man. “Come back with us. Back to Ambia Vee. There’s nothing here for you.”

Sabienn sat there in serious consideration. *There’s no dishonour in retreating to fight another day. Everything here seems to be a lost cause. I have no idea what I’m doing and if I present myself now, I’ll just be throwing my life away.* “OK. Let’s go back,” he said.

The light came on in Argent’s face as if he had become a boy again. It was the response he had been waiting all morning for.

“Wait!” Sabienn lifted his binoculars to the camp. Two figures appeared adjacent to one of the buses. They both wore cloaks with hoods up to conceal their identities. One cloak was black and not army issue. The other also wasn’t army issue and was extremely recognizable. It was a purple and white cloak from the fashion house “Place”. He read the brand “Place” down the sleeve and along the back. The white hood was pulled in tightly to cover the wearer’s identity but Sabienn knew it was Jarrnee Krenn. He could even see his own blood marking the white patch on its left shoulder which he’d left there when they fought. The two men appeared to speak earnestly with each other and kept their gaze towards the side of the bus, which Jarrnee was pushing against. The

man in black handed Jarrnee a leather satchel with a strap which he placed on his shoulder.

“That’s him,” said Sabienn.

“That’s who?” Argent felt deflated as the rug shifted from under his plans.

“Jarrnee Krenn. The man I must kill.” Sabienn gazed through the binoculars at his prey.

The old man took the binoculars and looked on at the two figures by the bus. “Why?” cried Argent in despair.

Sabienn weighed up the question. “That man stole an assassin’s blade. He is going to assassinate The Great Leader. I have an Order to kill him.”

Argent was letting everything that just hit his ears sink in. “That man will kill The Great Leader? That man walking freely in the secure military compound? Will kill the most heavily guarded man on the planet with .. a toothpick?”

“Why does everyone keep calling it a toothpick?” said Sabienn.

“This is ridiculous.” The old man was trying not to get too animated for fear of their discovery. “This is beyond ridiculous. Come back, boy. Come back to Ambia Vee.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?” Argent implored.

“I just can’t.”

“Please, boy,” Argent pleaded. The old man’s joy, which arrived just seconds ago, sank like a stone.

“I’m sorry,” said Sabienn, his mind made up. He took the binoculars again to view the people in the compound. *Nothing here’s adding up. But I’ve got a Supreme Order. Whatever it is I’ve got to do, I need to work fast. Think.*

Sabienn looked on at the parade ground before him and gambled. *There’s only one bus needed to carry the prisoners. No more men are coming from the dorms. Jarrnee would have to be on that bus. Otherwise why would he be here?*

From his pocket he retrieved his compass and map and laid it out for all three to see. Mr Same scoffed privately at the document before him in wide scale and pulled from his pocket another map of closer and more detailed view. He laid it out and there was the camp and all feeding roads. There were streams and outer roads, bridges and more camp grounds.

“There are four access roads,” said Sabienn.

Mr Same was like a man who just came alive and had fallen into his element. “The bus will take this access,” he said pointing to the map. “They’d be going to the shooting pits.” Once again his finger pointed. It was an area north-west of them marked “Prohibited Access”.

The journey by road traversed a circuitous route to access a bridge further to

the east. Sabienn knew an area of rapids in the creek with worn rocky outcrops that he had crossed once before quite near to where they sat. On the map there were several hairpin turns the bus would need to negotiate and he chose one with proximity and forest cover.

“Here,” he said, pointing to the area he had chosen. “I can be there within twenty minutes. Can I take this?” He held the map.

“Of course,” said Argent. “But this is folly, boy. Come back with us, please.”

“Thank you,” said Sabienn. “Thanks for everything.” He gave Argent a brief man-hug and shook the hand of Mr Same. With that he was off.

## 17. The Ambush

At speed, Sabienn was back down the way they had just come. He was jumping rocks and fallen branches and pushing his way through the undergrowth. Stopping briefly, he took bearings and decided to head direct north. *Avoid the vehicle. There may be eyes on it.*

Mounting on to a rock in his haste, he paused just in time not to step on a black snake in his path. He jumped over as it slithered away. There were lilac and red wildflowers to the side of him and stoneberry bushes by the dozen which he would normally stop and break fruit with his knife. He pulled a few from the branches while he was in flight and pocketed them for later.

Up ahead he could hear the sound of rushing water timelessly breaking over the rocks and stones of the stream. As he broke through the clearing he came upon the stepping stones he was aware of when he was there before. The only thing that wasn't there before was a huge native red ribbed black snake sunning herself on a flat rock in his path. It saw the human intruder and immediately reared up into defence mode. Sabienn stood nervously.

Near his boots he spotted a nest of speckled eggs which he understood implicitly as something he needed to move away from. "I'm cool, Mama," he said, open palms to the cranky reptile. "I'm cool." He edged his way around the rock under her constant and stern glare. One strike from those fangs on display would finish his mission now.

The snake lunged slightly at him causing him to react and let his feet go into the water. Luckily they were caught by a shallow rock but now he had wet boots. He took one last look at the now mollified reptile moving back to her nest and was on his way jumping the other rocks like a mountain goat.

Pushing through the undergrowth of the other side, he passed more wildflowers and stoneberries which he pocketed. The trees held vines and parasitic ferns which made the canopy more dense and green. To his right he passed the distinct five-pointed star white flower of the hope tree. The natives regarded these plants as sacred and to touch a hope tree was to bring good luck. It was a small diversion from his route but he went to it and placed his hand on it. *I need all the luck I can get.*

His blood was pumping but he felt fit and still with breath. The growth was

thick around him now and he'd lost track of the sun's location. To save getting lost and going in circles, he stopped to view his map.

At his feet there was a single file stream of meat-eating greenfire ants moving toward their nest. He looked at where they were going and saw a small nest covered in the characteristic red secretions of their bodies. Like all the nests it was built on the north-south meridian which was reassuring. He didn't need to pull out his compass. Little ants tested Sabienn by crawling on to his boots and he quickly bent down to slap them hard.

With his bearings settled, he pushed on and finally broke through the foliage and spilled on to the dirt road. There was another brief pause to check his map and he was off at full tilt sprinting. Another five minutes and he should be at the intended ambush point. He had no idea of the movements of the bus running silent on its battery. *That bus will be around the corner any minute. Then what do I do?*

At a turn in the road he stopped again and looked at the map. This was the place. And close by he heard the very distinct squeak of a worn brake pad. Something was coming.

On the side of the road was a fallen branch which he pulled with all his might on to the road. It was thick enough in girth to worry a large vehicle's suspension so it was going to have some reaction.

At that moment, a utility came around the bend. The driver was an old man with a black and grey beard and through the windscreen, Sabienn could see the sheer terror in his eyes. The cadet came to the driver's window to a man almost wetting his pants. "Please. Please, don't hurt me. I have a family."

In the back was a dead pig cleanly killed by a rifle lying alongside. Sabienn picked up the weapon and held it. It was a cheap and nasty jak jak rifle, one of the worst weapons on the planet. It had a consistency of jamming every fifty shots. "Take it. There's no bullets in it, I swear."

Then shock hit Sabienn. The bus rounded the corner. He looked up at the driver of the bus and once again viewed absolute panic in someone's eyes. Rather than slowing down, the driver decided to floor his accelerator and veer around the obstruction taking his vehicle far over on to the other side of the road. *That ground's dropping. He's not going to make it.* It inclined sharply from the road and its motion forced it to lean and topple on to its side. Its momentum pushed it into a clump of trees and it came to rest in a cloud of dust and shards of freshly stripped timber.

From within the vehicle there were the squeals and screams of people crying out in shock and pain. With his empty rifle in hand he went to the front of the vehicle. Through the shattered windscreen he could see the driver's cabin had



been crumpled and the man behind the wheel was making movements like a pinned bug working his way out of entrapment.

With the rifle slung on his shoulder, Sabienn took grip and foot holds on the headlights, wipers and anywhere he could get purchase to pull himself on top of the disabled vehicle. As he walked along the top to an open window in the middle, he'd noticed that the emergency exit back window panel had been pushed out and encumbered prisoners, still with their hands bound and sacks on their head were staggering out and away from the bus. *Holy shit!*

People were running everywhere away from the scene, the driver of the utility included. *Where's the purple and white cloak? Have I got the right bus?* Two guards appeared from the back, one with a rifle, and ran to the higher ground near the road.

"Halt! Or I'll fire!" shouted the one with the weapon. At that instant he saw Sabienn on top of the bus and swung his weapon around to put him in his sights. *I'm gone*, thought Sabienn.

With his legs shaking, Sabienn instinctively raised his empty rifle up and put the guard in his sights. *I've got no chance. But he doesn't know that.* There was a stand-off of a few seconds. Then from the deepest depths of his guts, Sabienn let out a roar, "Rrraaahh!"

The unarmed guard tapped his partner with the rifle on the shoulder and the weapon was thrown on to the road. Sabienn watched them empty their pockets of wallets, documents and keys on to the roadside and run into the dense foliage on the other side.

Through the opened window at his feet, he dropped into the mayhem inside the bus. His feet landed on a prisoner with an "X" on his arm still bound and head covered moving in desperate egress to the back. Sabienn toppled off him into the ceiling hand rails hitting hard on his shoulder and spilling his rifle from his hands. He looked towards the back and there crouching at the rear still holding on to his satchel was Jarnee. His hood was still covering his face and he couldn't make out his features but he knew that was him.

Standing beside him was one of the prisoners, the one with "156" on his arm, but his hands were out of their zip-ties and the sack was off his head. He was standing at the rear guiding the other bound and blind occupants out the exit. The man was thin and muscular and his head had a manicured crop of springy curly brown hair.

"Get out! This way," the curly-haired "156" shouted pulling the prisoners to freedom. He turned to Jarnee crouched nearby him. "Stop looking at me and save yourself!"

From the new floor of the bus wall, a body of a guard that was lying their

came alive and grabbed the leg of “156”. With his other hand he was working free a knife from his belt.

Sabienn’s focus came back to his target still crouching. He moved to the back and Jarnee dropped the satchel and struggled to the emergency exit. With his body half way out to freedom, Sabienn made a diving lunge for him and took hold of his left ankle. His blood was pumping. His quarry was caught. With his other hand he was trying to retrieve his own knife which was sheathed in his pants.

“Help me!” A voice came from beside him. It was “156” on his back struggling with the more powerful guard. The guard had his knife poised pointing towards the chest, turned sideways to slot between the ribs. His strength was overcoming the curly headed man and edged it closer and closer to his death. “Help me, please!”

At that moment, Jarnee took advantage of the break in attention to give a firm right foot kick to Sabienn’s head. It was followed by a stab to the holding wrist with a pen he got his hands on. The grip broke free and he was out the exit and away. Sabienn watched him go and then turned to “156” and then back to Jarnee.

“Help me!” cried “156”. In the next second he would be dead.

From close quarters Sabienn came in with a controlled and heavy elbow strike which split the guard’s nose into a bloody pulp. With the stunned head gripped by the back of the hair, he then rammed the attacker’s face into a chair armrest and pushed it in for good measure with some well-aimed palm strikes. The guard’s unconscious body slipped away down to the ground and Sabienn picked up the knife from his hands and followed in hot pursuit of the man in the purple and white cloak.

Racing up the embankment to the roadside, he looked around. There was no one in sight. Even the driver of the utility had come back and driven his pig away. There was lots of rustling noises of bound beings clumping around in the undergrowth but for the man he was seeking he had just disappeared. Sabienn took a hunch that he may have gone back up the road and he sprinted for all his life. But after two minutes swift travel he gave up. It was the wrong option.

Giving up, he jogged back to the bus to find the curly-headed winged man still there helping the driver out the back exit and setting him down to rest in a safe place.

“What’re you doing here?” Sabienn called. “This place’ll be crawling with STL soon.”

“I’ve got nowhere to go,” said “156”, laying the driver down into recovery position. “I know you. You’re Feel. Sabienn Feel. You’re at Salt.”

“Who are you?” Sabienn said, deeply suspicious of anyone he didn’t know calling him by name.

“My name’s Braylenn Skenn. Friend’s call me Bray. I’m from Coriander.”

“So how do you know me, Braylenn Skenn?” Sabienn was still testing his memory banks to where he knew this guy.

“I did primary school at Salt,” said Bray. “I remember you. Wow, you were a real prick.”

OK, thought Sabienn looking at Bray. A *“Thanks for saving my life” would’ve been nice.* “Thank you.” He left the observation unchallenged. He went back to the bus and retrieved the satchel that Jarrnee had left and placed it on his shoulder.

“Who was that? In purple and white?” said Bray.

“Jarrnee Krenn,” said Sabienn.

“General Krenn’s boy? That’s the first time I saw him,” said Bray. “He did primary at Cumin, didn’t he?”

“I haven’t got a clue,” said Sabienn. “Why was he on the bus?”

“I had a sack on my head. I didn’t know who was on the bus. I only got free because I got out of the ties.” Bray presented two fists side by side. “It’s all in the way you show your hands. Plus I’m a little double-jointed. Just one of my many talents.”

*Why did I have to save this guy?* Sabienn was trying to get some distance from the guy. *He can sure blow his own trumpet.* “Well I’m off,” said Sabienn. “Good luck.”

“Wait, wait. Where ‘re you going?” Bray moved to get in front of him. “You saved my life. I owe you.”

“That’s OK,” offered Sabienn.

“No no, I owe you.”

It was at that moment, the sound of screaming came from the foliage on the other side of the road. There were multiple voices crying in what sounded like excruciating agony. Running to the high ground of the roadway, Sabienn picked up the rifle tossed aside by the guard and with Bray in tow ran into the forest to see where the screams were coming from.

Within a minute they came upon a terrible scene. The two guards who had fled the scene were kneeling before a greenfire ant’s nest and had gouged into its red exterior with their hands. Thousands of disturbed ants were covering the men like a green blanket biting and stinging them. But instead of making tracks and trying to get away they just knelt there. They grabbed handfuls of the ants and poured them over the top of their heads like they were bathing in some deadly particulate green water.

“What’re you doing?” Bray shouted towards the men. This act of suicide affected him. “Move! Move! Save yourselves!”

There was movement in the undergrowth to the side of them and Sabienn swung his weapon around fearing it to be the arrival of STL. But he saw the concerned heads of Argent and Mr Same, bobbing around among the bushes seeking out the same noises they had heard.

“Over here!” Sabienn shouted. They broke through the undergrowth to join them.

“This is a terrible thing,” said Argent. “You have to kill them.”

“What?” said Sabienn.

“I’ve seen this before,” cried Argent in despair. “They’ve had orders and failed a mission. They’ve probably ditched their wallets and ID somewhere easy to be found. They have wives and children held hostage at Mission Mint until they succeed. And only their deaths will release them. For goodness sake, put them out of their misery.” Argent was averting his eyes now as flesh was being torn from the living men.

“Me?” Everyone was looking toward Sabienn holding the rifle.

“Please,” said Argent. “You must.”

He checked the weapon for ammunition and moved around the rear of the screaming men. In quick succession he despatched two bullets, one each into the rear of their heads which killed the bloody row. Instead of feeling like the dispenser of mercy, he felt sick in his guts. All were looking on staying quiet, letting the ants eat silently.

He worked the breach of his rifle. *That’s three men I’ve killed. How am I feeling now?* His thoughts left him less than fulfilled.

“Come on,” said Argent. “We’re up this way.”

They made their way silently through the forest to the utility and all four jammed in together on the front seat. Sabienn kept the passenger window as his stomach was churning.

“So did you get your man,” said Argent finally after they had got under way.

“I got his satchel,” said Sabienn. He reached in to the unclasped satchel in his lap and pulled out the sum total of its contents, two business cards.

One of the cards was for a general store called The Battleground Trek Shack which he was familiar with as a place he once visited in Chard. It offered guided walking and bus tours as this area had a rich history of battlefields during the Curl War. He held the card up for Argent who just sniffed at it.

“Nothing to do with me, boy. It’s your life,” said Argent. “Only the manager is a man named Crayne. I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could pick him up.”

The next card was for a family portrait shop called We Are All Family near

Mission Turmeric on the east coast. It specialised in photography and paintings specifically of family gatherings featuring a portrait of The Great Leader. Sabienn knew of a similar store in Salt and its services had been booked out for months. It was seen as a tangible way to show your allegiance to the big man.

He held the card up to Argent whose eyes rolled. "That's no good to you. They have a back room which makes fake passports and documents. You'd be dead before you get there. My goodness, business cards. Conveniently left for you in a satchel. Can't you see you're being played?" Bray was just sitting there looking at the old man who then offered an invitation for the new man to join in. "What do you think, boy? Our friend here has a Supreme Order. To kill a man who will kill The Great Leader. With an assassin's blade. Ridiculous, don't you agree?"

"Are we talking about Jarnnee Krenn?" said Bray. "Well it's unusual."

"Exactly." Argent felt exonerated achieving another ally. Sabienn was just sitting there looking out the window, feeling sick like he wanted to lose his breakfast. *Oh boy. Here comes the "toothpick" reference. Now from Mister Honesty.*

"No," said Bray. "If I were The Great Leader, I'd get his sister to kill him. That way I'd get her to show her love for The Great Leader was greater than her love for family. That would be poetic. And The Great Leader is a poet." The answer stunned Sabienn. It was an interesting perspective. "And we should speak of introductions," continued Bray. "I ceased to be called 'boy' ever since I received the Gold Lion for patriotic painting. You may not know this but it was my painting that went on the screen at the Salt rally. My interpretation. My art. My 'The Great Leader Gazes Upon Prism Gorge.' That was my work. The contribution from the whole of Coriander was mine."

"You young jumped-up buffoon. They tried to kill you." Mr Same was worked up into a lather over the new arrival's attitude.

"This man saved me," said Bray nodding towards the man on the window. Sabienn wasn't overenthusiastic. *Leave me out of it*, thought Sabienn. *My sandwich is desperately trying to part ways with me.* "And I do take note on your tone of a Supreme Order," continued Bray. "No-one understands the mystery of a Supreme Order. We can't possibly ponder the mind behind them. If he has a Supreme Order then he has to fulfil it. And as he has saved me, as I owe him, if a Supreme Order is his quest, then it is now *my* quest too."

*Oh shit*, thought Sabienn. *Mister Honesty has just welded himself on to me.* "Bray, you owe me dick," said Sabienn. "Let's just call us even."

"Nobody wants you, you buffoon," said Mr Same.

"Please sir," said Bray. "Don't take this as an insult but advice. Your breath

*stinks*. You should look after what's in your mouth. It'll save your teeth."

"And you should shut yours," Mr Same was now brandishing a clenched fist as he drove. "It'll save *your* teeth. Do you want to get out and walk or what?"

"And save us from your driving?" countered Bray.

"Hey hey, I hate to break the romantic mood," Sabienn climbed in to the conversation. "But I'm just about to hurl." He held his mouth to whatever it was that was going to have an unstoppable exit.

The vehicle quickly veered to the verge and then he spilled out from the door and took up position on all fours on the grass. Waves of his breakfast came up and splashed before him in a few timely convulsions. The others stood around in a polite stand-off waiting for him to finish his business.

Sabienn finally sat on his haunches and saw stars before his eyes and he felt weak and dizzy. His head swirled as he stood up and he staggered and sank back to his knees. He fell face first to the ground and passed out. Swirling images filled his unconscious mind.

He was transported to another one of his visions.

There was a campfire before him at night time and something large was turning on a spit. Two men had their backs to him sitting on a log. They turned to look at him and Sabienn was looking into the faces of the two guards he had just put out of their misery dying on the ant's nest.

"We've been expecting you," said one of the guards and turned back to warm his hands on the flame and chomp down on a large drumstick in his hands.

"Take a seat, please," said the other guard. "Now you've cleared your stomach, you can dine with us." He took a seat with them, each with a drumstick in their hands.

Over the fire turning on a spit, crackling and sizzling away, was a huge greenfire ant, big as a pig, missing some legs.

The first guard spoke again. "The beauty of eating this thing," he bit generously into the meat, "is that you have eight drumsticks."

"Eight?" said Sabienn. "But an ant has six legs."

The two guards were about to bite deeply again when both of their drumsticks disappeared from their hands.

"Well thanks a lot," said the second, becoming irritated. "You're like your friend. You always have to be right."

"First you kill us," said the first. "Then you take away our food."

"I didn't kill you," said Sabienn, protesting his innocence.

"We were just happily following orders and you rolled the bus," said the second.

"But I didn't put you on the ants. Why didn't you run to the stream to save

yourself?”

“But we’re in drought. The stream’s dried up,” said the second.

“No it wasn’t,” said Sabienn.

“No, it was in flood and we’d be swept away,” said the first.

“No it wasn’t,” Sabienn said again, becoming annoyed. “I walked across the stream myself.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself,” continued the first. “We’re just playing with your mind. And there’s not much to play with.”

Both guards giggled at the comment.

“I didn’t mean to kill you. I’m sorry,” said Sabienn.

“We don’t care either way,” said the first. “The planet is trying to talk to you. It chose us.”

“We have one sole reason for being here,” said the second. “To give you a message.”

They then sat silent. The silence lasted for seconds.

“Which is?” said Sabienn.

“Not just yet,” said the first. “Something’s about to happen. It’ll give a big theatrical effect. We don’t want to spoil it.”

“I hate theatre,” said Sabienn.

“Oh, you’ll like this,” said the first.

As if taking a cue from the side, the second said, “OK, the message we must give you is this. You must go to the monument for the Battle of Second Best Hill. Your instincts will guide you further.” He then sat silent.

“That’s it,” said Sabienn.

“That’s the message,” said the first.

At that moment there was a muffled stomping in the distance. There was a large shape moving towards them like a big black monster. As it got closer he could see that that it was a gigantic fly making its way toward them, its multiple eyes shining in the campfire light.

Before it was a tall pole that it ploughed right into and suddenly the massive plains around them swung up like the wings of a butterfly. The walls came up and up and Sabienn looked up to see the teeth of a canopy coming together to prevent the fly’s escape.

They were all encaptured within the incredible cathedral-like cavern of a steeler plant tripped by the pole the fly walked into. Everyone looked up at the closing ceiling above them as the teeth began to enmesh.

“Goodbye,” said the first and second guard in unison.

The walls suddenly whooshed in at speed crushing everything in its path. It was at the point where Sabienn and his two campfire companions were about to

be mashed by the incoming walls that his vision went dark.

His eyes opened.

"You OK?" Bray was standing over him after laying his body out in a recovery position.

Seeing Bray attend to him unnerved Sabienn. "Your breath's not much better," Sabienn said.

"You passed out. D'you do this often?" Bray had suddenly turned nurse.

"I had another vision." Sabienn was rubbing his eyes.

"A vision, boy?" Argent moved in closer. "What was it?"

"I must go to the monument for the Battle of Second Best Hill," said Sabienn. "My instincts will guide me further."

"What does this mean?" said Argent.

Still feeling woozy, Sabienn was now being interrogated. "I'm not making this stuff up. I haven't a clue."

"Of course, boy," Argent rubbed his chin.

"Wait a minute," said Bray. "You can see visions?"

"You young fool," said Argent. "This man's worth a hundred of you, you painter. This man's a reader."

"You mean like in the legends." Bray was impressed. "I remember talk of that. How?"

"You mean, how does a gift like that be wasted on a jerk?" Sabienn was matter-of-fact and blank in response.

"Exactly," Bray continued. "No offence."

From his pocket, Sabienn pulled out Mr Same's map and displayed it before them. "Where the hell are we?" Due to his gastric concerns Sabienn hadn't been paying attention to direction.

"We're here?" said Mr Same, pointing to his map at a place far north on a few dirt tracks removed from the rolled bus. "Evasive moves, boy. That road would be crawling with Secret Police." He indicated where they had just come from.

The monument for the Battle of Second Best Hill was indicated by a blood red dot next to the clearly marked old fort on Second Best Hill. It was located just west of the bus roll. Everyone looked at each other.

"I have no intentions of going back," Mr Same made it clear to everyone. "Too risky. And I have no intentions of taking this young twit any further." He nodded towards Bray. "He's all yours, boy."

Sabienn looked to Bray. *I've just inherited a bad puppy.*

Bray who was unusually upbeat. "Suits me," he said to Sabienn. "When do we start?"



Argent appeared more conciliatory. "Tomorrow, this time, we will be in the tourist car-park at Second Best Hill. Only approach us if you need us."

"If you are still alive," said Mr Same. The two elder men piled back into the vehicle.

"Good luck," Argent offered a sombre farewell to Sabienn as he passed the guard's rifle to him. "Surprise us and come to your senses."

The two young men watched the rear of the vehicle diminish into the distance. Sabienn noticed the driver's side rear light had been broken. *Hope he steers clear of traffic police.* He then took stock of what he had. *I have two business cards. Supposedly left by accident. To point me in the direction of people I shouldn't trust. Then I've got a vision to go to Second Best Hill. One thing's for sure, I won't be asking this guy for an opinion.*

"If you were the Secret Police, what would you do?" said Bray.

Intrigued by the question, Sabienn replied, "I'd send in the cleaners." *Efficient beggars, STL, he thought. They'd send they're cleaners. To restore the scene to normal. They'd sweep it clean, pick up ID and documents and human remains. About twenty people will descend on the forest to straighten out every creased blade of grass there.*

"Then there's us," said Bray. "Prisoners trudging round the bush with sacks on their head. There's an order for execution which hasn't been done. Would you set up road blocks?"

"Yes I would." Sabienn responded to logic.

"With how many people?"

"The usual," said Sabienn. "Two for a checkpoint."

"Where would you put them?" Bray looked down at the map.

Looking down at the map, Sabienn had a memory of his camping days here when a robbery had taken place. He saw places where he had known checkpoints to be located at the time. Checkpoints always seemed to be located next to substantial ditches and thriving greenfire ant nests so people could disappear without trace. One was on the dirt track heading from where they were back to the connection roads to Ambia Vee.

As if sensing what Sabienn was looking at, Bray added, "As much as I think your friends' breaths stink, they might be driving into danger."

Sabienn thought, *Why didn't I pick that up?* "Why didn't you say this before?"

"You didn't ask," said Bray.

Sabienn offered a glance to him as if to say "I hate it when you're right". Bray's reply glance was as if to say "You're going to hate me a lot".

"We need to move," said Sabienn, packing and stowing everything for a

streamlined transit.

## 18. Second Best Hill

Sabienn took off at pace through the forest with Bray in hot pursuit, keeping quick time and staying agile on the precarious footing of felled logs and shrubs. To his credit, his companion wasn't asking for any let up or favours. Sabienn looked to him. *He's fit, I'll give him that.*

Trying to find the sun through the trees, Sabienn took a stop at a large tree trunk. "I need to see the map."

"Go," said Bray. "The map's in my head. The ant's nest is pointing north. Your course is good. Go." They both went off again at speed through the thick green growth for at least another ten minutes.

Then Sabienn heard voices ahead. It was the raised sound of barking orders. As they spilled through some tree branches, he saw a utility stopped at a check point. He was viewing the action from the rear of the vehicle. Guards were standing over the passenger and driver side shouting at the occupants to get out.

Sabienn's blood rushed to his head. He saw the utility, the stacked water melons draped in their tarp and the broken back light. *Bastards!* He gripped his rifle to bring it to use.

"That's a relief," said Bray. Sabienn turned on him with a hostile gaze. "It's not them," Bray continued. "Number plates. This is CH074757. Chard registration. Theirs is Sett. SE057047. And look at the stickers." On the right hand side of the back tray door was the very small but distinctive sticker of the Chard Grey Shirts. It looked as if someone had tried to tear it off but most of it still remained. It still contained the black "C" with lightning bolt strike through the middle. And on the left hand side was another small sticker for the Chard Fleece. It was the distinctive white lamb caricature staring back at him.

"Refresh my memory," said Bray in a whisper. "The Chard Grey Shirts?"

"A committed paramilitary movement," said Sabienn, watching the vehicle. "They see government as corrupt and only there to intimidate the small man. They're descendants of fathers disgraced in the Bol War. Massive chip on the shoulder. Loathe the Secret Police but love The Great Leader. See him as a friend and war hero. Tolerated because they're good informants."

"And the Chard Fleece?" asked Bray.

"Short for Freedom, Love and Peace," offered Sabienn. "Non-violent and

theatrical. Chain themselves to towers and unfurl banners. But still have the support of The Great Leader.”

“So we have two men in a vehicle,” said Bray. “One sticker says, “I support black”, the other says “I support white”. Just who are these people?”

The occupants alighted from the vehicle obviously scared and fearful of what was to happen with their hands high in the air. They were dressed in the brown robes of monks of some order of the Blue Moon but it appeared that nothing they were saying was washing well with the guards. They were ordered to come around to the roadside and kneel down facing the ditch before them. The guards moved around to take up position behind them.

“I have to do something,” said Sabienn.

“Why? It’s not our fight,” Bray was reaching out to hold his friend back.

“It is now.” Sabienn moved in closer and from the cover of a tree he raised his rifle and took aim at the contents of the rear of the vehicle. One shot was fired and a watermelon exploded from the back of the truck sending the green and red juicy shards splattering everywhere. Some fragments hit the guards and the monks.

The guards were taken aback at the distraction. The monks were momentarily shocked.

It was at that moment that the monks, taking advantage of the situation, each grabbed a guard a piece and wrestled them in to an arm hold. Each retrieved a knife from their robes and slit the throat of their allotted guard. As the blood gushed from the neck arteries, the guards were each quickly pushed down the incline into an ant heap. The monks then retreated to behind the vehicle.

“Who’s there?” one shouted. Sabienn and Bray hit the dirt and didn’t flinch a muscle.

One of the men braved the situation and quickly ran in front of the vehicle and tossed the guards’ rifles into the rear. He then dashed to the passenger door and got in. “Thank you,” he shouted.

The vehicle sped off leaving Sabienn and Bray looking through the trees gobsmacked. With little relish, Sabienn looked at the rifle in his hands and examined his actions. *What the hell happened here?*

Bray patted him in a detached and reassuring gesture on the shoulder. “Let’s go.” Quickly they backtracked their way through the forest. They came to the spot of Sabienn’s initial pause and sat by a log looking at the ants on the north-south axis. The maps came out and Sabienn cracked some of his stoneberries with a knife. He shared with his friend the fruit flesh with its protein and moisture.

“We’re here,” Sabienn pointed to where they were, “and we need to get

here.” They saw the red spot. “We’ll follow the stream from here to here.”

“If I were a prisoner, I’d be going to the stream,” said Bray matter-of-factly.

“Yeah. Good call,” said Sabienn. “If I were stumbling through the forest with a sack on my head and heard water I’d probably aim for it too.”

“And where the prisoners go, the guards’ll follow,” said Bray.

“Then let’s go south,” said Sabienn. There was unison in their movement as they stowed maps and any scraps that may indicate their presence.

They pushed south into the forest. Sabienn jumped from rock to felled tree trunk. *Why am I so fit? I should be puffing.* Bray kept pace and they moved quietly in rhythm. They made fifteen minutes of forward movement before Sabienn stopped. In the distance he heard the sounds of branches cracking in several areas.

“Searchers,” said Sabienn. “I didn’t expect them this far north.”

“What now?” said Bray.

“Sit tight.” Sabienn took up position at the base of large tree. Bray followed suit at a tree nearby. As he kept his eye on Bray, Sabienn suddenly became wrong footed and his foot went astray.

Snap! A branch at his feet broke with the loudest noise he had ever heard a piece of wood make. *Shit,* thought Sabienn. *Call yourself a black wolf? You’ve let the side down.*

He knew that the sound registered with the people in the surrounds as everything went silent. After a few seconds, the noise resumed with more intent in their steps. There was also noise coming from either side of them.

Sabienn stole a look at Bray. Bray’s hands were displayed in a manner that suggested “What do we do?” The hand signal he gave back was “Just sit tight”. He gripped his rifle in readiness. Sabienn was now laying low on the ground on his belly when he looked across at his friend. He was making wild pointing gesticulations to something at Sabienn’s rear.

A bird suddenly took flight from the branches and undergrowth about two metres away to the side of Sabienn. *Why’d that go? Why now?* It gave the searchers further indication of their presence and whereabouts.

He then felt the slither across the back of his cloak guiding its way through the gap it made between his wings. The head came alongside Sabienn and its tongue darted in and out probing the air for chemicals. It was one of the largest red ribbed black snakes he had ever seen and it was now looking at him. In its mouth, it was packing enough poison to kill every person within a square kilometre.

Sabienn looked on the snake and it just seemed curious, as if surprised that these strange creatures with wings had come into its realm. As Sabienn’s

experience with the female snake on the rock by the stream would attest, they could get cranky. So he was trying to keep it calm.

He had a brief glance at Bray who was making slitting moves across his throat as if to say “Kill the thing”. *Like that’s going to happen*, Sabienn thought. *I’d be dead before I get my hand to my pants.*

In the near distance, the noises of people coming through the forest were clearer and more definite showing they were nearly on top of them.

Sabienn held gaze with the snake. He was a very big boy. There was an intelligence in the snake’s eyes that Sabienn was trying to connect with. *I’m your friend*, he pushed his thoughts on to the snake. *I don’t stand on eggs. Not me. You can sun on the rocks. I walk around them.* Sabienn tried to get the snake to look at the oncoming searchers. *Can you go and annoy them? Those people over there.* The snake just stared at him with small dark eyes, pushing its tongue in and out. It was calm and interested.

There was a crack of a twig nearby. The snake kept looking into Sabienn’s eyes. *Big Boy*, Sabienn was still forcing his thoughts hard. *Can you please go and annoy those people? Any time soon.”*

A sudden female voice rang out. “Over here!”

“Shut up!” came a male reply practically on top of Sabienn who was still laying on the ground with his rifle in hand.

“No,” the female voice came again. “I’ve got something. Over here.”

Big Boy took one last look at Sabienn and moved off slowly and gracefully into the undergrowth at his side. Sabienn caught Bray’s eye and there was a brief sigh of relief from both men hiding but they still held their silence.

The searchers had gathered around where the female had called out less than twenty metres away. They whispered among themselves and the sound of photographs being taken was heard.

“Will we bag it?” said one.

“Bag what?” said another. “Let’s get out of here.”

“But the noise. You heard it too? And the bird.” said another.

“Over this way,” said the first voice. Steps moved closer to the hiding men through the undergrowth. Sabienn looked to Bray to sit tight. The footsteps got closer. They were less than five metres away. Sabienn gripped his rifle and his heart was pounding. There was a rush of blood in his ears and his senses were alive.

“Whoah! Snake, snake!” came a voice. “Let’s get out of here.”

The steps moved away quickly and the searchers retreated swiftly from the scene, talking relaxed and animated among themselves. Sabienn put his face to his rifle still gripped for dear life in his hands and let out the biggest whoosh of

breath long and hard from his lungs. *Thank you, Big Boy.*

When the situation appeared stable, the pair stood up and silently walked through the undergrowth to where the searchers were gathered and taking photos. They came across a sad and gruesome sight of a winged man with a sack on his head resting on top of a greenfire ants nest slowly being dissolved by the insects. Standing in silence, they knew it would be impossible to identify him.

"I knew this guy. I helped him from the bus," said Bray, affected by the sight. "The bag on his head had that slight tear." He pointed to the imperfection in the material.

"It was a mighty effort to get this far," said Sabienn, feeling obliged to say something uplifting.

"He had an 'X'," said Bray.

"What's that mean?" Sabienn was now turning away from the nest. He'd seen enough.

"Don't know," Bray kept his eyes on the nest. "It seemed like everyone at the Academies had numbers and your average man pulled off the street had 'X's'. But they were all our age, Say. They were all our age."

Sabienn noted that he had just been called by his shortened familiar "Say" which only his closest friends used. "Sorry about the noise," said Sabienn.

"That's OK," said Bray. "We're both dead anyway. It's just a matter of time. Shall we go?"

They continued on their way south pushing through the forest at pace. At a clearing surrounded by trees entwined in their hope trees they stopped to gather their bearings. The canopy of flowers like white stars looked down on them like some joyous sky-burst.

"Can we have a minute?" Bray was looking up at the canopy of white flowers.

Looking at Bray, Sabienn could see his friend was still affected by the events of the past hour. "Sure." They both sat to view the beautiful flowers above them.

"Did you know the hope tree is actually a vine? A parasitic one at that," said Bray wistfully. "It has a relationship with its host. Only the host gets the benefits. There are stories of trees that are practically dead take a vine and come back to life again. Have you ever touched a hope tree for good luck?"

"No," said Sabienn. "I'm not up for native superstition." After consulting his compass, Sabienn pointed forth into the green growth, "South-west?"

"South-west it is," said Bray. As he got to his feet, Bray passed by the hope tree and placed his hand on it, offering a muttered whisper. After Bray had moved through, Sabienn followed and placed his own hand on the same spot as he had done earlier that day at the other hope tree. *Native nonsense. If it works,*

*I'll take it.*

Moving off, Sabienn took extra care to keep his noise down. He kept his eyes and his ears open and made sure to take small breaks to stop and listen for movement in the trees.

Ahead he could hear noise of people but it was noise of a different kind. Excited laughter of children, car boots slamming and generally pleasant chatter. Sabienn and Bray stood within the cover of the trees looking out over the car-park of Second Best Hill.

From the seclusion the trees offered, they watched a black car slowly drive through the car-park. "Secret Police," whispered Sabienn. The occupants of the vehicle had binoculars and were keeping an eye on anything and anyone who moved in the area. Their intent and purpose were in direct contrast to the light and happy mood of the tourists.

"Wait here," said Sabienn, as the vehicle passed he pulled his cloak around him and put his hood over his head. He walked out of the vegetation and walked the easy access to the gift shop next to the bus park. Inside he viewed the numerous souvenirs and cards with photos of commemoration of various battles here. The compulsory photo of The Great Leader surveyed everyone within the store. He walked to the counter at the store and approached a lady with large spectacles.

"Excuse me," he said pleasantly. "Last week I was here with my family and we lost a cloak. Do you have a "lost and found" please?" A box appeared on the desk from where she stored it below and she rummaged through the items within.

"Beautiful day for a visit," Sabienn said feigning interest.

"Oh the weather's been glorious." Her fingers found a female cloak which was white with lilac wild flowers.

"Oh that's the one," said Sabienn. "Expecting many people today?"

"We're at peak," she replied. "Come back again now." With the cloak in hand he made his way back to his friend in the trees without being seen.

"I'm not wearing that," said Bray.

"Fine," said Sabienn handing him the rifle. "Just hold them off when they come through the bush."

With that, Sabienn turned and started walking briskly away. Steps caught up with him of a figure in a stylish white and floral cloak with hood in place. Sabienn and Bray looked like a married hunchback couple walking together up to the monument. And they had no rifle now.

Before them was a wide cleared area on a steady incline up to the unassuming presence of the old fort. The building had had its stone roof



removed which let the winds scour the rock walls within. Sabienn had heard once that this allowed the dead spirits transit.

At the moment, it was now lunch time and families were laying out picnic blankets next to the now grassed over trenches. There was fierce fighting within these ditches during both wars that affected these areas, the Curl and the Bol Wars.

They walked up the track to the side of the hill towards the monument which comprised of a massive stone piece placed in the ground with inscriptions on a plaque added. The stone piece used to form part of the roof structure of the fort but after the Bol War was placed here as a memorial.

Sabienn had visited here previously years ago but never felt the need to actually walk up to and read what was written on the monument.

The rock was bathed in bright sunlight and the letters on the plaque which he began to read were easily discernable.

“On this ground in the year 4924 during the height of the Curl War, this fort was held siege by the Turrland invaders. But for the bravery of the men and women who occupied this fort, holding defence for the Motherland, this ground would have been lost to the Turr.

Twenty-one Blue Stars were won for conspicuous gallantry in this now sacred land for us.

Let their heroism shine as a guiding beacon for us in our daily lives and may we live our life by their example.”

There was no mention of the actions that took place here during the Bol War. It seemed like an area of history that just didn’t seem interesting enough.

Sabienn looked upon the stone. *My vision said my instincts would guide me. But I’m getting nothing. A complete blank.*

At his feet and in the manicured surrounds, he started looking for bullet casings or hand-grenade pins or something he could hold. But everything lethal from the past had been swept away.

Bray could sense what his friend was doing. “Why don’t you touch the stone itself? It’s been here for a hundred years.”

Heeding the advice, Sabienn walked to the stone and looked it over long and hard. He then placed his hands on the side of the stone.

He felt the familiar tingling like a tornado through the top of his head. All went black. Then in an instant, he was transported to his vision.

## 19. The Sergeant

Sabienn found himself on top of the roof of the fort. The stone that he was touching was formed back into the impenetrable lid on the historic site.

From his vantage he could see everything and the sight that greeted him was one of absolute horror. *Oh no. This can't be.* It was late afternoon and the sun was descending but supplied enough light to witness the futile mess of this battleground.

There must have been two to three hundred dead and dying soldiers all wearing the uniform of Deerland regulars. *This is the Bol War. No doubt.*

In the field there were obstacles and barbed wire contoured around the hill. Most of the dead lay on the lower side of the wire. Movement had been gained through some breaches but not much further.

Some of the bodies still moved. He was watching a soldier who seemed to be dragging himself slowly backward. A succession of bullets fired from a secure gun housing underneath the stone he was laying on brought the body to stillness.

As he had done in his previous visions, he could move like a ghost-like apparition. He moved out from the top to hover in front of the slits in the walls of the fort to see who was firing. As he moved in closer he could see the pointed ears of the Turr within. There were two machine gun crews set up with a wide angle of view of the gruesome field in front of them.

He could hear their voices communicating with one another and with his basic understanding of Turr he could hear, "What are they doing now? Why are they doing this?"

Moving through the wall he came across the scene inside the fort. The number of Turr regulars holding the ground was quite small. He counted about ten. They were gun crews and others scattered at parts around the embattlements.

In the centre courtyard, there were seven Deerland soldiers shot dead in front of a makeshift shrine. *Poor souls, thought Sabienn. Caught unawares while at worship. Hope their Red Sun Prophet received them well.* Sabienn moved upward to overlook the scene and gain perspective. *Seven defenders. Ten attackers. This fort has no strategic value.* He viewed the surrounding countryside. *This is an observation point. High ground, sparsely defended. Low importance so given to the Deer.*

Sabienn moved like a ghost to view the Turr behind their machine guns. *OK. I get it. This attack is a distraction. The real action is out there. In the forest.* He viewed the ocean of trees. *The troops slinking back to the safety of the east coast along the West-East Corridors. This move is tactically sound. But wrong target. The fort is sacred ground.*

Sabienn moved outside the walls and saw the movement and heard the sounds of preparation in the trenches down the hill. Over the fields of dead and dying and over the barriers of barbed wire, he moved down towards the line of men fixing bayonets on to their rifles. *That barbed wire's not the Turr's. That barbed wire's been put there by the Haydds. It's built for stopping. Surely these soldiers aren't going to charge?*

Within the trench the atmosphere was tense. Sabienn saw people sharpening blades crying for their mothers. There was a man checking his pockets for photos praying to the Blue Moon Prophet audibly saying "If you can just get me through this, I'll be a better man." There was a dead woman shot with deadly accuracy between the eyes.

From his vantage above the trench he looked around. A Turr sniper had set himself up in a suicidal nest in a tree to the side. With pinpoint precision he was picking off anyone in the trench raising their head long enough to be hit.

Sabienn hovered low within the trench as a Sergeant scurried up the dug-out area keeping his head down. There must have been a hundred men following behind him. They were moving towards a Captain with his pistol drawn and a whistle in hand.

"You're late, Sergeant," said the Captain.

"Sorry, sir," the Sergeant crouched down and kept his head low.

"Where's your Captain?"

"Dead, sir," said the Sergeant.

"Captain Gradd," said the Captain by way of introduction.

"Oololo, sir. Sergeant Oololo. Reporting for duty." Sabienn looked on at the man and knew his name well. The man was vilified and immortalised in yellow print on the mess hall Honour Board as one of "The Unreliable". But this Oololo was muscular but not overly solid and had a considered and worried look on his face.

"Well send your men along," said Captain Gradd, indicating the ominous depth and length of their trench.

"My soldiers need to rest, sir. We've been double time from the crossroads," said Oololo.

"Know your place please, Sergeant. Our orders are to attack at 1600," said Captain Gradd.

“But,” said Oololo, in protest, “that’s now, sir.”

“Send them along.”

Sabienn watched as Oololo issued orders for his charges to comply with the command. The Sergeant shared glances with the people he had been keeping pace with as they passed him. In his face could be seen that he didn’t like this situation any more than they did.

The Sergeant took note of the gun placements within the fort fully loaded and prepared for what was coming. “Do we have artillery, sir?”

“We’ve had artillery. They’ve been softened,” was Captain Gradd’s response, more intent with the time piece on his wrist.

A glance over the edge at the fort showed the Sergeant that they didn’t look softened. “We could just starve them, sir. Cut off supply.”

“No.” The response was definite.

At this point their conversation was intruded by a native ammunitions bearer, feeling very concerned enough to raise his voice. “Pardon, sir. May I suggest?”

“We don’t take instructions from natives,” said Captain Gradd, dismissing him blankly. “Send bullets up the line please. Do your job.”

Oololo watched the downcast figure slink off down the line with his box of supplies. “Do we have mortar cover?” he said.

“No.”

“Can they send in an airship?” said Oololo.

“No.”

“But..” There was no further conversation. Captain Gradd was dead. Sabienn and Oololo watched as a bullet entered the Captain’s neck and he slumped to the ground. In the stunned silence that followed, Oololo was just looking at the man he was taking orders from.

“What do we do now, Sergeant?” said a voice.

As he looked up and down the line, Sabienn could see that Oololo found that he was now the ranking soldier. He was now in charge of about two hundred Haydd regulars. Some of them Sabienn noticed as they were placing bullets into their rifles only had a vague idea of which end the bullet came out.

“It’s your fault we’re here,” said the same voice.

“You shut y’ face, soldier,” said Oololo. He obviously wasn’t a light touch. “We had orders to go to the cross-roads to unpack boxes from trucks. That’s why no-one was guarding. We lost some of our men too. We had an order. Just like the order I’ll give you. You can be the first to go over. Put an “X” there.” He touched his forehead. “That’s where the bullet’ll go.”

The complaining soldier sank back down, gripped his rifle and started to weep. “We’re all dead anyway.”

“Who’re these crispies?” said Oololo, referring to the dead soldiers out in the fields ahead of them.

“Some companies of the Deerland Knives. They had orders to take the hill this morning,” said the soldier. Both men surveyed the field with care. He continued, “Not so sharp now.”

A communications officer came up the trench and found the Sergeant. “Sergeant, I have the Colonel,” he said. A screen came alive with the familiar face of the younger Colonel Krenn. Although no-one could see him, Sabienn was still startled to see his face and know how he ended up ungraciously in a street gutter near a hospital.

“Sergeant, you’re in charge?” said Krenn.

“Yes, sir,” snapped Oololo.

“Why haven’t you made your charge?” said Krenn.

“We need artillery, sir.”

“You’ve had artillery,” said Krenn with annoyance. “Every advantage you’ve been given is waning with every minute you waste.”

“Yes, sir,” said Oololo.

“Start the charge now.” Krenn was most definite. “This is a Supreme Order.”

“A what?” Oololo looked visibly shocked at what he just heard.

“You heard,” said Krenn.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good man.” The screen went dead but the Sergeant kept looking at it, as if it was going to come alive again with good news. But it stayed dead like their chances.

At his feet he picked up the whistle that had been dropped by the dead Captain. Sabienn watched him feel it in his fingers and let the sick little thing rest in his palm. From this tiny object would come the signal for all these soldiers to storm over the top and watch all hell break loose. The Sergeant would then come and join them.

“Sir,” said a voice. Oololo turned to be faced by the native so summarily dismissed by the Captain. He had pointedly come to implore with whoever was in charge again. “May I suggest?” he continued.

“Please,” said Oololo. *Intriguing, thought Sabienn. If you are starved of options, you should be prepared to listen to anyone. Even a native. This Oololo is doing what I’d do.*

“Behind the fort, the wall is this.” The native did an up to down knife-like move with his hand. Sabienn knew what he was referring to. There was an area at the rear that had a sheer drop right down to the rocks adjacent to the creek and was generally regarded as impenetrable and rarely guarded. “My brother and I,”

he continued. "We know this cliff. We climb this cliff many time. I climb this cliff for you. I throw you a rope. I tie to a tree. You climb up. Back door is there."

Sabienn watched Oololo digest what he was hearing. *If it was me, thought Sabienn. I'd say it's a trap.* Then a sniper's bullet narrowly scraped by Oololo and hit the sand bags in the trench. *Poor Oololo, thought Sabienn. His name's writ large in yellow. It would have been merciful if it would have hit him.*

As the bullet hit the bag Oololo pushed his back against the wall and his breathing was quick and shallow. Sabienn even noticed that he had soiled himself, a completely normal combat reaction. As he watched him, Sabienn put himself in Oololo's shoes. *I have to think for two hundred regulars. I feel scared, I feel inadequate and I feel alone.*

"What do we do Sergeant?" said the complainer. "Are we going over?"

The Sergeant turned to the native, "What's your name?"

"People call me Shop," came the reply. The communications officer came up the line again. You could see in Oololo's sunken face what was coming. The screen came alive with a ranting Krenn. "What's going on Sergeant? You have orders. Why haven't you fulfilled them?"

"We just arrived, sir. We're getting ready," said Oololo.

"A Haydd is born ready, man," countered Krenn. "If you can't fight, we'll get someone who can."

"No, sir. I have my orders." Oololo felt the whistle in his hand.

"You have a Supreme Order, man." Krenn wasn't backing down.

"I have a Supreme Order," said Oololo. The screen went dead and he lifted the whistle to his lips.

"Are we going over, Sergeant?" came the complainer again. "Are we going to die?"

Sabienn watched Oololo's lungs fill with air to send breath through the instrument. His seconds of indecision were over. He flung the whistle to the ground and got a grip around his weapon.

"You!" He pointed to the complainer. "What's your name?"

"Batt," came the reply.

Oololo started laying down the law with definite hand gestures. "Batt, Stradd, Harpp, Beel, Trott and Stayinn. Get behind me. Corporal Norr!" A female corporal came up the line to take her instruction.

"Send down the line," called Oololo. "Five minutes. Everyone. Fire at the base of the fort. The base of the wall. Hit me and you're dead meat. Understood?"

"Understood." She trotted off down the line with a spring in her step. The

allotted group packed for the mission, securing weaponry, ammunition and thirty metres of rope.

“Get behind me,” said Oololo and went off down the trench away from the fort towards the creek.

As they moved along, Sabienn kept pace with them moving in his apparition state. He saw Oololo look up and catch the noise from a nearby tree of a rifle crack. In the trees, there was a lone figure silhouetted against the darkening sky. Its concentration was on what was in the sights of the rifle in its hands. Oololo raised his weapon and took careful aim. Crack! In the tree, the head jolted upwards and slumped lifeless within its nest. The group came up from its crouch and kept moving forward.

The creek afforded them good foliage cover and they moved swiftly to the objective of the sheer west face of the fort. *Unbreachable*, thought Sabienn viewing the vertical cliff. *Impossible*. As they took cover in the bush near its base, the rope was handed to Shop who went forward without any hesitation or any care for any eyes looking down from above.

To watch his progress was remarkable. He seemed to gain purchase in the slightest of cracks and crevices and pulled himself upwards like an insect on the wall. It was as if the plane had been turned from the vertical to horizontal, and he looked like a cat making steady and quick progress towards the fort.

At the top he disappeared briefly. Sabienn watched Oololo and tried to read his mind. *Is Shop with the enemy? Is he securing the rope? Or are they all climbing to their death?* The answer came as the rope was flung from the top followed by a dextrous Shop shimmying down the cliff face, bouncing his bare feet off the wall.

Oololo met him at the base and the rope was handed to the Sergeant. “Sir,” said Shop politely. After the handover, Shop was off into the scrub. He wasn’t hanging around to be identified. The seven men and women were of peak physical prowess and made short work of the climb to the top. Sabienn kept with them for every move they made. They found the access door without too much trouble.

“How many?” whispered Batt. “What’ve we got?”

“No idea,” replied Oololo.

Batt, to his credit, pushed open the door and slammed himself to the side wall inside. He offered cover for his group’s entrance but there was no resistance. As they entered further, Sabienn could see their surprised looks at how quickly they could access and how sparse their defending opponent was.

The gunfire had already commenced from the trenches as ordered by Oololo. It gave an impression of cover fire for a full front-on onslaught. All the

defenders were on the upper levels of the fort's parapets in readiness.

Upon entrance into the courtyard, Sabienn saw again the gruesome sight of the Deerland occupants who had been slaughtered where they knelt. He viewed the reaction of horror in the faces of Oololo's troops. Oololo pulled his group in and split them. "You three, those stairs. You guys, get behind me." The groups accessed the stairs on either side of the compound and made their way upwards to the parapets.

Each group upon reaching the top saw their enemy at their positions on the parapet. They held back in the shadows picking out their targets and under the cacophony of the gunfire from below, they shot and killed six men where they stood. Sabienn watched one body fall down with a thud to the courtyard below. The troops then moved quickly to the secure house where the Turr gunners were unleashing their lethal spray. The access door was tried and appeared bolted shut.

With dexterity, Oololo climbed to the top of the fort and sat on the thick stone roof; the exact spot Sabienn entered this vision on. He took rope from his belt and secured it to a vent pipe that he tested would take his weight. Satisfied with the rope's integrity, Oololo lowered himself over the edge and swung close to the slits where the gun crews were located. He quickly lobbed two smoke grenades within and saw the acrid grey smoke fill the rooms before pulling himself back up.

His soldiers waited outside listening to the gagging and coughing within. Oololo dropped down to be among his charges as the scraping noises of the door being unbolted was heard. "All of you. Get behind me. Wait till they all come out," ordered Oololo.

The door swung open and the Turr soldiers from within sought what they thought was the safety of breathable air. Four men staggered out gagging and holding their throats. A captain moved towards Oololo only realizing his presence at the last minute. Sabienn witnessed the shocked and wide-eyed look as he faced the Sergeant.

"Now!" Oololo's command sent a hail of well-directed bullets into the men. The choking, the gagging and the coughing ceased. The captain himself took a bullet from the Sergeant point blank into his heart.

Batt stormed through into the gun house and shouted, "Clear!" The mission was over.

After a brief sigh of relief, the six companions now worked their way through the fort while Oololo unbuttoned the pockets of his dead enemy. From his vantage point behind the Sergeant, Sabienn watched as he withdrew from the dead captain's pockets various documents. There were orders written in Turr that



he could vaguely understand. There were the personal items; chewing gum, a breath freshener and a tiny plastic figurine of a cat.

From his pants pockets there were documents that looked like maps bagged in a protective plastic wrapping. *Now we're talking*, thought Sabienn. *Show us some maps*. When the first map was unfolded and opened to its full expanse, Sabienn could not believe his eyes as he gazed on it over the Sergeant's shoulder. *You've got to be kidding me!* He viewed the confused look on Oololo's face. *This guy has no idea what he has in his hands*. There was a map of the total top end of Hayddland and within were the markings of all three West-East Corridors. That is the known two and the elusive third. *This map's worth its weight in gold. Holy shit. Where's Bray? I can't remember any of this*.

Struggling hard to book things in his brain, Sabienn viewed it intently. The two known corridors he was familiar with. The third was surprisingly more north and there were markings of supply depots deep in the Chard forest that were probably still not tampered to this very day. There were compass markings and supply details scrawled nearby. And just as he was trying hard to digest its contents, it folded back up again in the Sergeant's hands and was placed back in its wrapping. *I desperately want this map*.

The second document was also a map. It was a complete map of Cajj Cajj which had seen massive battles and loss of life from both sides of the Bol War. The contents showed depots sequestered within the forests once again possibly untouched to this very day. *If my future lies in getting to Cajj Cajj, I need this one too*. Sabienn quickly tried to memorize coordinates clearly marked on the map, but once again as soon as he looked on, the map folded back up again and was replaced within its safe plastic.

The third item he retrieved from the wrapping was the photo of a little girl and a hand written note within its own separate plastic wrapping such was its value. It didn't take much of an expert in Turr linguistics to realize that these were the sweet nothings of a loving daughter. They were decorated with wild flowers lovingly scrawled at the end. And Sabienn did understand the Turr word for "love" and it was writ widely and wildly with her name, which he couldn't make out.

Sabienn watched the face of the Sergeant as he looked on at the letter and the photo. *She is a pretty girl*, thought Sabienn. *For a Turr*. With the photo in his hand, Oololo silently bent forward and shivered and wept quietly. *This Oololo, writ large in yellow, he's a sensitive soul*.

All the items including the two maps, the personal letter and the photo were carefully placed back in their protective plastic and stowed securely within Oololo's back pocket. Sabienn watched as they were carefully buttoned. *All*

*documents go to Intelligence now for analysis. But hang on. The third corridor? It's here but hasn't been found. That doesn't make sense.*

"Clear!" came the call from the courtyard. It was well and truly over. They could all relax.

At the base of a flag pole, the top of which could be seen above the parapet, Batt found the discarded flag of Hayddland. He took it upon himself to attach the cloth and hoist the colours for the world to see.

The gunfire in the trenches ceased and Sabienn heard cheers from people spared an untimely end. The seven people gathered in the courtyard and patted each other on the back.

"You'll get a Blue Star," said Batt hugging Oololo with delight. "I'll see to it. You saved two hundred people. You saved me."

"You'll get one too," said Oololo, gripping Batt like a brother.

Sabienn looked on and wondered. *Why am I watching this? What's the purpose of this vision? Is it the maps?* The vision faded but instead of returning to the present another vision opened up.

Sabienn was now far away in a field rimmed with trees. It was nearly dark now but he did recognize this place as he had been there once before. There were a group of soldiers that Oololo fought with holding lanterns and standing distraught and saddened at the edge of proceedings.

In front of him was a firing squad detail standing at the ready. To Sabienn's surprise, the young Colonel Boxx Krenn was there alongside them seeing that they were properly provided for. *What the hell's going on?*

There was a freshly dug pit waiting for someone to be thrown into. It was adjacent to a very distinctive tree that looked like a white "Y". Sabienn paid particular note of these things having failed to memorize the maps he had seen.

A person was now led out with hands bound behind and a sack on the head. *A Turr informer? Why would they get a ritual death?* The person turned to have words with one of the people leading them out and it would appear at a request the sack was taken off the head. It was Oololo.

He was hurriedly put up against a tree and faced the detail about to end his life. Krenn came forward and spoke for all to hear. "Sergeant Briskk Oololo, as of actions undertaken by you three hours ago, you are charged with the failure to undertake a Supreme Order. The penalty of which is death. Do you have anything to say in your defence?"

"I didn't do anything wrong," implored the Sergeant. "I did what I believed was right."

From the side Sabienn watched as Corporal Norr who had tears clearly rolling down her face start a slow clap with her hands. It was picked up by others

there who were moved to show their support. Krenn shut them down. “Corporal, you were about this far off,” Krenn indicated a pinch with his fingers, “receiving execution yourself. One more clap and you’ll be shot too.”

“No no, stop!” Oololo begged his friends. “Please, I take full responsibility. But what I did, I did because I believed it was right.”

*But the maps?* Sabienn took a candid and detached view of Oololo. And Sabienn hated himself to seem mercenary in his observations but he assumed that in the rush to be judge, jury and execution squad on this man, they neglected to check his pockets. By the look of Oololo’s bulging back pocket, it looked like all the maps and documents were going to be tossed into the grave with him.

“Let this be a warning to everyone. You’re not here to do what is right. A Supreme Order is to be followed because it is a Supreme Order. By order of Leader Ween.” Krenn then turned specifically to Oololo’s troops and continued. “The companies that failed today are to be dismissed without pension. You are to be sent back to Chard with your tails between your legs. You do so in the knowledge that you failed to perform.”

Krenn then turned to Oololo, “And Sergeant you will not be afforded the courtesy of seeing your death. You will be blindfolded to assert the character you are.” The Colonel retrieved a blindfold from his pocket and tied it around the Sergeant’s eyes. There was a word emblazoned in white print across the front that would have been impossible for the Sergeant to read. But in the dim light his friends and Sabienn could read the word.

Sabienn could see the rage in his friend’s faces in response to this indignity. It was an extremely unfair commentary.

The execution was emotionless and swift. Krenn moved to the side and barked in quick time. “Firing squad detail. Ready.. Aim.. Fire.” Crack! The man’s body slumped to the ground. A detail then tossed the corpse into the freshly dug grave and made short work of covering the body with soil.

“One final matter,” Krenn continued. “Corporal Norr, by order of Leader Ween, you are to be given a Supreme Order. Remove the roof of the fort where these acts have taken place. Let the wind scour out the shame of our soldiers. Fail to obey this at your peril. Is this Order understood?”

“Yes sir,” replied Norr.

*It’s all about shame,* thought Sabienn. *The roof wasn’t removed to allow the dead spirits movement. It was to scour out shame.*

At this point, Sabienn’s vision went dark and he returned to the present and the watchful eye of Bray. With the vision still clear in his mind, Sabienn relayed the details to his companion.

After digesting what he had just heard, Bray nodded sagely. “I’ve heard of

this,” Bray said. “One of my teachers spoke of it. Off the record, of course. He called it bagging. Is this of interest?”

“Please,” Sabienn’s ears were pricked and eager to hear more.

“It happens when two allied countries work together apparently,” said Bray. “Bagging in its literal sense was to take a brick wall with all its rough edges and crevices. You throw mortar on it and push it around to smooth over the surface. You then render it flat.” He pointed to the placid scene of picnickers before them which held the battle. “Those poor Deerland Knives lying on the battlefield were the brick wall. Oololo’s troops in their trenches were there to smooth them over.”

“I still don’t get it,” said Sabienn listening intently.

“Shall I be blunt?” said Bray. “It’s how the leader of one country shows they’re so concerned about the alliance that they’re willing to slaughter enough of their own men. To show they’re sharing in the heavy lifting. It’s all keeping up appearances. Two hundred Knives lined up and slaughtered themselves. Then two hundred Haydds lined up and failed to do the same.

So Deerland can say to Leader Ween, “We slaughtered our men for you. What have you done for us?” Oololo would have been better off just jumping out of his trench and letting all those bullets rip through him. Then his carcass could be tossed in a war cemetery and they’d sing songs about him for a hundred years. Is this stuff boring you?”

“No. It’s not,” said Sabienn, following every word. “You don’t find it interesting?”

Bray sniffed, “It’s all politics. I’m above all that. I’m an artist.”

Sabienn was still blinking his eyes. The sunlight was still bright and he exhaled heavily. “How long was I out?”

“About two seconds,” said Bray.

*Two seconds*, thought Sabienn. *The whole victory and disgrace of Oololo was compressed into two seconds.* He rubbed his eyes. “I need to find those maps.”

“D’you know where they are?” said Bray.

“I sure do.” Sabienn pulled out his map and pointed. “I recognized the trees.”

Bray looked to where the finger pointed. “Shit! The shooting pits?”

“We need our rifle,” said Sabienn.

“Forget the rifle,” said Bray. He pointed to the black car now parked at the gift shop. “What do we do?” They retreated to the cover of surrounding foliage and Sabienn retrieved his map to plan the next move.

“We go west. Cross the creek here. Fill up our water,” said Sabienn. “Are you up?”

“Oh, I’m up,” said Bray, spying through the foliage at the black uniforms walking up on to the field. “I’ve never been upper. Let’s move.”

## 20. The Outcasts Assemble

Sabienn and Bray pushed through the foliage once more towards their intended target. The ground moved downwards to the creek that ran by the fort which they were moving away from.

In their steady pace making their way through the thick undergrowth, Sabienn grabbed some stoneberries in his transit. He took some time to crack a few on a ground stone with his knife and shared them with his friend. The sun was now into afternoon and he envisaged an hour's travel at their present slog.

Through the cover of the branches, the creek could be heard tripping and gurgling over the stones as it had done for thousands of years. Before breaking through to view the water, Sabienn stopped and listened. *No traipsing heavy-footed. All life-forms find the water. Keep your eyes peeled.* Quietly he and his friend walked to the clearing and bent down to fill bottles with the freezing cold fluid, keeping eyes on the surround.

Less than two metres away he saw another red-ribbed black snake, just coiled up in the stones looking at him and jabbing his tongue out for the winged man's smell. *We must be a big hit with the snakes, thought Sabienn. Winged men. Threat level, still assessing.*

With their fluids filled and stowed, the pair danced across some stones in the shallow portion, to reach the other side. Once sequestered within the foliage of the western bank, Sabienn allowed himself some time to gather his bearings before heading off again. It was a sunny day but the brisk chill of the forest gave him goose-bumps. He viewed Bray and they were both fit and breathing well.

The ground towards where they were going was moving up and up. *That would have to be for the water table. What a terrible place.* They pushed upwards, helping each other over the felled logs and large stones, keeping their silence to hear their surrounds. Up ahead they could see a fence running through the forest consisting of three strands of barbed wire. It was a laughable barrier but in a way was there to signify that the area being breached here was prohibited.

Sabienn slid easily beneath the lower strand which Bray helped to raise, making allowances for the dimensions of the wings. It was late afternoon and the shadows of the trees cast longer as the forest thinned out.

“You’ve been here before?” enquired Bray nervously.

“Once,” replied Sabienn. “When I was camping. On a dare. Worst night of my life. Spooks the shit out of me, this place.” He stopped. “Wait,” whispered Sabienn. Ahead he heard people and movement.

“I hear it too,” said Bray. They broke through from the dense trunks and had a view of the clearing, still keeping the shadow of the foliage surrounding the shooting pits.

Sabienn and Bray stood before a gruesome scene. There before them about fifty metres away were three winged men still with their sacks on their head and their hands bound by ties in front of them. The captives knelt before a freshly dug pit.

There was a guard behind them and Sabienn instantly recognized him as the man he’d given the elbow strike to which laid him unconscious. It was the man who almost pushed the knife into Bray. The guard was walking along behind the three ramming the butt of his rifle into the backs of their heads.

Sabienn scanned the field around and no-one else was here. There was a larger more portly winged man kneeling on the end. This man seemed to take umbrage at the treatment and turned around lifting his arms as if to attack. Bang! The sound of the gunshot echoed in the field. As the poor paunched man’s body was moving forward, the guard gave it a heave along with his boot to let it drop into the pit before him.

“We have to do something,” said Bray. He was deeply affected by what he saw. “If I run at them, I can stop him.”

“It’s fifty metres. He’d see you and pick you off,” said Sabienn. He could also sense the urgency. *Think and think quickly.*

“But I have to do it.” Bray was loosening his arms preparing for a suicide dash.

“Wait.” Sabienn held Bray back and noticed at his feet a branch that had fallen from the surrounding trees. It was about a metre in length and straight enough to look like a rifle but was cursed with a brown and white speckled bark.

He found himself on the eastern flank of the field so the shadows were not in Sabienn’s favour. The sun was coming over in front of him pushing the shadows behind. But there was a single large tree in front of Sabienn. *If I could use the tree’s shadow, it may look like a gun. The guard’s old. His eyes less than pinpoint. Fifty-fifty I get shot. But act and act now.*

Swiftly, Sabienn dropped his cloak to the ground and stood to let his wings find full and brazen stretch as he went forward to pick up the stick. “Stay here,” he said to Bray. “Or get behind me.” Much to Bray’s credit, he dropped his floral cloak and made his wings look the same.

Sabienn faced across the fifty metres distance between him and the guard who was in the process of lining up the next head in his sights. “Aarghh! Hey! Hey! You!” From the depths of his socks, Sabienn summoned as much hard front and hubris as he could. His chest was way out and he beat it with his right hand. “Hey, you!”

The guard looked up and saw Sabienn and Bray still very far away. Sabienn raised his stick to his eyes as if to line up the guard in his sights. All the time he made sure his stick was under shadow. “Aargh!”

The guard picked up his rifle and aimed it at Sabienn who saw this and felt his legs turn to jelly. Bang! A bullet hit the tree shading Sabienn and shards of splinters and bark showered over him and Bray. Sabienn thought, *Hold your nerve. Don't drop to the ground. Dig deep now.*

Bray flinched considerably but retrieved his composure. “Weak as piss!” shouted Bray.

“Now, stand still!” shouted Sabienn. He started to advance now with the guard in his sights, not caring if his weapon looked like a stick or not. Sabienn continued, “Shoot something without a sack on its head. You are dead meat!” Bray followed beside him in steady pace.

It was enough for the guard. He quivered and dropped his rifle and ran to the nearest access road just north of where they stood. Sabienn and Bray rushed to the bound prisoners.

Sabienn handed Bray the knife to free the men while he picked up the rifle and worked its breach. “Three bullets left,” he said. “My chances were better than I thought.”

“Is that Feel?” The voice came from under the sack of one of the men.

“Who wants to know?” replied Sabienn.

Bray had cut the ties on the man and the bag quickly came off the head. It was Storkinn Keel. Last time Sabienn saw Stork he was being thrown off a bus after pushing Captain Cannon's buttons. He was bare-chested and of average physique with a number “22” pasted on his arm.

“Why couldn't this guy get shot?” said Bray. “He's been winding up the guards acting like a dickhead all morning.”

“Who's your friend?” countered Stork to Sabienn.

“No time, Stork,” said Sabienn, slinging the weapon on his shoulder. “We need to keep moving.”

The second man had the sack removed from his head and his wrists freed. The first thing that struck Sabienn about him was that he was big. He was tall, well-formed and magnificently proportioned. And much to Sabienn's surprise, this man had a black wolf tattoo on his chest. Looking at it, he had to admit to a

stab of envy. *This guy can handle himself. He's got the mark. And unlike me, he looks like he deserves it.* Like his companion, this man was also marked to die with the number "70" scrawled on his arm.

"What's your name?" said Bray.

"Dippinn Trayne. Thank you." He looked towards Sabienn. "Both of you. I can't thank you enough." It was noted by Sabienn that the man's head was not unattractive but his teeth were awful; all crooked and discoloured. And his hairstyle was strange with long sideburns and shoulder length ragged black hair. *His head's been stuck in a time machine and sent back fifty years.*

"No time for introductions," said Sabienn. "We need to go. That guard will raise the alarm." Looking around the grim surrounds, Sabienn spotted the tree he had come to see with the distinctive white "Y" shape on the southern edge of the field. "There," he pointed for Bray's attention. "That's it." Another thing Sabienn had noticed in this area was that there didn't seem to be a lack of shovels.

"Guys, grab a shovel," Sabienn said.

"Not again," protested Stork.

"Just work with me on this." Sabienn took a closer look at Stork who was now carrying the same wings as he did which marked them both as different. *Stork. Never hung around him. But I know him. I know his humour. His intelligence. I know his loyalty to his friends. He can be abrasive. But he's full of shit. Just like me. I can respect that.*

"What about our old mate?" said Stork, indicating the poor fellow in the trench. "You know who this is? It's Willninn Fateel."

"You're kidding," said Sabienn. "Fat-boy Willninn."

Sabienn looked down at the poor figure still with the sack on his head issuing blood. Fat-boy was lying on his back and he had his black wolf on his chest for all to see.

*Poor Fat-boy,* thought Sabienn, intently viewing the wolf and suddenly thinking of the ranking. *I'm 99. Fat-boy was 100. Jarrnee Krenn's 101. At least no-one can say it's not mine now. I should give you a send-off for that.* "Well, quickly, come on," Sabienn said. The four winged men started tossing soil on to the body in the pit.

"I'll say some words," said Stork. "Oh Fat-boy. Poor Fat-boy. We knew Sabienn was really cruel to you as a kid."

"Yeah," Bray tossed some soil in. "He was a real prick."

"And believe me he hasn't changed much," continued Stork. "But forgive him that he didn't come sooner. But despite that we thought you were OK. You were a nice man. And you were OK. Good luck now."



After finishing tossing enough soil, Sabienn and the others stood back with their shovels. "Well that was beautiful," said Sabienn, commenting on the ceremony. "Can we go now?"

The four men with shovels and rifle in hand moved to the white tree and stood by looking up into its gaunt branches.

"Here," said Sabienn, stamping on an area of ground. "Dig here."

"How will we know it's him?" said Bray.

"I'll know. Dig." Sabienn was the first to push in his shovel to the ground at his feet.

"What're we digging for?" Stork pitched in enthusiastically more out of "follow the leader".

"No time to talk. That guard'll be back," said Sabienn.

Dippinn got to work without comment or fuss. Sabienn watched on as the big man moved a lot of soil. He was a striking physical unit in action.

"What was your name again?" Stork asked his fellow prisoner.

"Dippinn," the big man replied.

"Dippinn?" Stork spat. "Dippinn's a girl's name."

The big man heard the comment and bristled. "What?"

"I'll call you Deep," continued Stork. "From now on, you're name's Deep."

"Who says?" Bray had to weigh in, being the self-appointed scales of justice.

"I say, I guess," said Stork completely impervious to the surrounding furore. He kept digging cheerfully.

"Guys, can you dig please?" Sabienn tried hard to get them back on point.

"Nobody," said Dippinn, spearing his shovel into the dirt. "*No-one* calls me Deep." He was now moving to stand over Stork who was still sweetly shovelling away. As a physical presence, he was a fierce looking contender. The animal display was making Sabienn tremble and he wasn't the one threatened. If Stork had cared to turn and look he would see the big man's chest, almost spanning the horizon. But Stork just stayed in his own world digging.

"Look, your name's Deep," said Stork. "If you're with your woman, what do you want to hear?" He mimicked complete with sound effects. "Oh .. Dip in.. Dip in.. Oh." or "Oh. Go Deep .. Go Deep.' No no. You're Deep. You're *Deep*. End of story."

The big man looked stunned by the comeback and all the venom seemed to drain from his stance. He looked to Sabienn and they seemed to share an understanding. *From a carnal point of view*, thought Sabienn, *and what man our age doesn't see things from a carnal point of view*, Stork's making a logical argument.

They all got back to digging and the big man really laid into his shovel

making short work of it. “Hey, Deep, be careful,” said Stork. “I’ve never dug up a body but I’ve sure cut up a few pigs. If you hammer like that, you’re going to crack up the bones.”

“OK,” said Deep. With that, the big man seemed to accept his new moniker without too much more of a whimper. Sabienn kept digging but made eye contact with Bray who seemed to be still adjusting to the new arrivals.

“Here,” Sabienn said. “Stop.” He placed his shovel down and dug the soil away with his hands. There was still some uniform here and it was Haydd cloth. He worked his way up to the skull and the blindfold was still in place. Brushing the dirt aside, the white lettering on it was faint but still discernable. It was the word, “Coward”.

“This is him,” said Sabienn. He turned to Stork and Deep, “This is Sergeant Oololo.”

“Like the “Unreliable” Oololo?” said Stork.

“I’ll talk to you later,” said Sabienn, stroking the skull’s brow. “This man was a good man.”

They all pulled soil away from the skeleton draped in its deteriorated cloth. Around the pelvis, they found the items they were looking for wrapped in their protective plastic.

Sabienn pulled the maps from their cover and opened them up for all to quickly peruse. The personal letters and photo he passed across to Bray. “This is the photo I spoke about,” he said to Bray. Bray studied the items with care and looked hard on the photo. Sabienn watched Bray’s face and it seemed to affect him a little in the same way Oololo responded. Bray placed the items into his own pocket for safe keeping.

“How’d you know these were here?” said Stork.

“He had a vision.” Bray almost sounded a little star-struck in his reference. He said it like “my friend has visions and yours don’t”.

“What? You eating mushrooms, Feel?” said a bemused Stork.

“He’s a reader,” offered Deep.

“I’ve heard some people call me that.” Sabienn was tidying up the corpse, now that he’d plundered what he came for. They all exited the grave and tossed soil back on to the Sergeant’s resting place.

“We need to go,” Deep said quietly but intently.

When the job was complete, Sabienn bent over his shovel and said some silent words. Deep moved silently to be by his side. “We need to go now.” There was an insistent look in his eyes. “Take the shovels,” he added.

They quickly retreated to the cover of the foliage carrying the items as requested and Deep turned to listen. In the dimming light of day, a truck

appeared from the access road the guard had run to and moved into the shooting pit area. It came to a halt with squeaky brakes near where Fat-boy was buried. *Deep picked up the squeaky brakes, thought Sabienn. I couldn't hear a thing. He's got a pair of ears, this big guy.*

The guard that had nearly shot them jumped out of the rear door of the dual-cab vehicle. Three other Secret Police armed with rifles alighted with him. The guard was pointing here and there and speaking wildly about what had happened to the three people before him.

By his hand gestures, it looked like to Sabienn he was trying to wrestle a wild pig. *Obviously trying to talk up his exploits to make him look a lot more legendary than he really was. Old gutless dickhead.*

Looking towards the site where they were, Sabienn to his annoyance picked up that they had left quite definite tracks to Oololo's grave. One of the officers noticed and shouted to his comrades. "Hey, fresh tracks." It was audible to everyone.

Within the confines of their foliage, Sabienn moved with urgency, "Let's go."

"No," Deep held him back. "They'll catch us." Sabienn knew he was right and Deep held out his hand for the rifle. "May I?" Sabienn relinquished control of his weapon to the big man.

All four officers were now walking towards them, chatting animatedly about how the fugitives would be miles away by now. Deep worked the weapon to become familiar. He had three bullets and four combatants.

Raising his weapon quickly, Deep fired three shots in quick succession. Bang! Bang! Bang! Three people dropped dead in their tracks taken out by fatal head wounds.

The remaining officer was the stunned guard who was in shock looking at the death around him and he was unscathed. He still held his rifle and was searching around, looking for the enemy somewhere in the forest. For a second time he ran away, this time with his rifle following the well-worn path that he had come.

Sabienn like the others around Deep were also stunned but Bray was the first to find his voice. "Why didn't you kill the guard?"

Deep still was perched over the weapon mumbling some silent words to himself. Without speaking, he then got up and walked purposefully to the people he had killed lying on the field. The others followed suit.

Sabienn, forever the analyst, was fascinated by the choice of quarry and the philosophy behind it. At a distance he walked behind Deep and came close to Bray for a one-on-one.

"Interesting. This Deep's good," whispered Sabienn to Bray as they walked to the bodies. "It was a deliberate targeting. Of the four people in a line, those

shot were one, two and four. There was no mistake that he was leaving the guard. The guard's the man that he may have felt a pang of revenge to kill. The man who killed Fat-boy. There must have been a desire to get even. But he was left untouched."

"Why?" said Bray.

"It's what I would have done," said Sabienn. Bray offered a puzzled look as Sabienn continued, "The guard had the most to lose. He'd just tried to kill three people on his own. Probably at the annoyance of passing officers. He was interrupted and ran away without his gun. He then brought back three colleagues who were then shot with pinpoint accuracy. With his own gun, mind you. And the guard was left without a scratch on him. His options now are One, go to his superior officers and explain to them how three officers were shot. They would suspect collusion or carelessness. Both would usually lead to court martial. Option Two, jump on an ant's nest or Option Three, remove himself cleanly with his own rifle."

Bang! There was a distant single gunshot from a rifle somewhere in the forest near the access where the guard had left. All discussion was now over. Sabienn looked to the distance at what sounded for all intents and purposes like Option Three.

Sabienn turned to look at Deep, crouched over the people he had just shot saying quiet words to them treating them with tenderness. It was a terrible situation to watch but for Sabienn it was a fact. *It's either kill or be killed. We certainly won't get any quarter.*

Stork had no personal involvement in their demise and had no problem committing the practical savagery of stripping the dead officers' pockets of documents, orders, ammunition and cash, which they would have no further use for. There of course was the best plunder of all, the keys to the truck. They divvied up the rifles and Stork took to the wheel as they all piled in. "Where to?" he said.

Sabienn thought quickly. *These people have cuts and abrasions. They're starved and stressed. And I need to get rid of them. They don't need to die for my Supreme Order. There's only one place I can think of to offer a safe harbour. And maybe they won't want us.* "There's this place," said Sabienn pulling out his map. "Ambia Vee. Go to the highway and head west." He pointed to a place on his map. "This is where I want to go. We ditch the vehicle when we get here." He pointed again to a mark on the highway. "Go." The batteries came to speed and the truck made its way to the highway.

Looking around at his companions in the vehicle, Sabienn had a sudden dawning of recognition. *I know these people. Stork I've known forever but never*

*really knew him. But Deep and Bray. They were at Salt Stadium. I remember seeing them in the crowd. My eyes were drawn to them. Why would that be? It's not like we're going to be long-term friends or anything. I'll just lose them and go.*

In the back seat, Bray found two STL caps and two jackets which he handed to Stork and Sabienn in the front. They draped the garment as best they could over their wings and placed their caps on. It gave them the necessary front of officialdom for anyone looking head-on.

"You know," said Stork, guiding the truck through and around the pot-holes. "I've often said Say, we just don't get out and about enough together. We really need to make up on lost time."

"Well blame Bray," said Sabienn. "I would have let you get shot."

"Of course you would," Stork was spinning the wheel. "You had no idea it was me."

"If I'd known it was you that *would* have swayed me," Sabienn was keeping the mood light.

"Would've swayed me too," said Bray blankly.

"So who are you, Bray?" enquired Stork.

"My name's Braylenn Skenn. Bray's my name and that's how it will stay." He was very pointed in his reply.

"And you knew Fat-boy?" Stork said, turning to look at Bray.

"I did primary at Salt," said Bray. "Fat-boy was picked on and so was I. After Salt I moved to Coriander. From there I never looked back."

"Coriander," Stork spat. "Please say you didn't say Coriander."

"Yes, yes, this is what I've come to expect," said Bray feeling peeved. "Anyone who tries to aspire for something higher, is always to be laughed at. Go on. You're not the first. I'd sooner sit here and say it how it is. I don't know if you could handle the truth."

Stork looked across to Sabienn and replied blankly. "You know, he's right. I'm glad you brought him. He tells the truth. I mean, I'm a liar, you're a liar and Deep's one too obviously. But Bray tells the truth. Here's his opinion, dished up, free of charge, just a service he provides."

"Stop," said Bray.

"He tells the truth," said Stork, letting the vehicle accelerate on a quick patch along the service road to the highway.

"No, Stop!" said Bray more insistently. "Stop the truck."

"What's wrong?" said Sabienn.

"Stop the truck!" Bray had his eyes firmly on something in the distance.

"Pull over," said Sabienn and the truck was brought to a standstill on the

verge.

“Look,” Bray pointed into the distance further up the road. All everyone else could see was thick foliage on the side of the road. From the back seat, Bray pointed more firmly to something in the field of vision in front of the windscreen.

It was then Sabienn made out part of the rear of a utility which there had been an attempt to hide under branches. On the rear of the vehicle Sabienn could now just make out the sticker of the lamb of the Chard Fleece. Now as they looked on they could see a rope across the road attached to a log on the other side ready to be pulled and block the path.

“It’s our friends,” Sabienn said to Bray. “Good spot.”

They were within firing range of the vehicle and Sabienn had a bad feeling about this situation. “Out. Everyone out. Take your rifles,” he said.

Stork’s driving door opened just in time to allow him to move his head as a bullet hit the windscreen. The others luckily had vacated the back to allow the hot metal to land limply on the rear seat.

“To the trees. Move,” Sabienn was following his friends jumping into the undergrowth and ducking down for cover. Deep moved up to be alongside Sabienn.

“How many?” said Deep.

“Two unknowns.” Sabienn kept eyes on the vehicle.

“I’ll come round behind them.” Deep began to move but was held back.

“No, I’ve got a feeling about this. Just sit tight.” Sabienn crouched with the others.

Just as he spoke, the vehicle moved quickly out of its dense undergrowth and fish-tailed in the grass. It moved swiftly to the road and headed towards the highway. Suddenly it committed itself to the most radical of U-turns and came back to park beside the truck. Out of sight of the men in the forest, the occupants jumped out of their utility and ran and jumped into the cabin of the truck.

“Hey,” said Stork. “That’s ours.”

“Quiet,” said Sabienn bringing his rifle off his shoulder for use. “It’ll take them some time to hot-wire.”

Within seconds, the truck was in motion and speeding down the track to the highway. The four men stood in the forest blinking at the missing truck. Sabienn turned to Stork, “You didn’t take the keys?”

“Was I supposed to?” replied Stork sheepishly. They all looked at one another.

“It would have been good,” said Sabienn blankly.

He and the other three walked out of the cover to inspect the vehicle that had

been left behind. Most of the watermelons had been off-loaded from the rear tray but as Sabienn lifted the rear tarp, there were still three ripe ones left to roll around the back. He took his knife and sliced all three up into generous slices which all four took and ate ravenously.

A perusal of the vehicle showed its keys intact and just less than five percent charge on the battery. It wasn't going to get them far but anything beat walking.

"No offence, Stork," said Sabienn, pulling his jacket in as close as he could around him. "But I need Bray's eyes in the front." He pulled his cap down lower and took the wheel.

Stork relinquished his jacket and cap to Bray, "None taken. I can handle the truth."

The eyes of the two men met on the hand over as Sabienn looked on. "Take it Bray," Sabienn said. "You saved his life and he knows it. Let's all be a family now."

Bray sniffed and took his place in the front. Deep and Stork piled into the rear tray and found two blankets soaked in watermelon juice and the tarp which they arranged to provide some cover for them.

As Sabienn took the wheel next to Bray, they couldn't help but be disgusted by the state of the cabin they'd inherited. There were takeaway wrappings and drink cups and pictured magazines showing carnal practices a little bit more expressive than the musings of brown-robed monks. The console was a piece of garbage. There was no radio, there was no air-conditioning and the glove box was busted and dangling. The windows were permanently down so they were a little vulnerable.

With the magazine in his hand, Bray opened to the middle page and looked long and hard at it and turned it upside down. "Wow! I didn't think a girl could do that. She looks like Captain Cayninn."

"You know Captain Cannons?" said Sabienn.

"Everyone knows Captain Cannons. She did a stint at Coriander. She taught Science. Love to teach her Science." Bray ogled at the page on view.

Sabienn was trying to get everyone back on point. "Well stay sharp."

"I think I already am." Bray still hadn't put down the pictures.

As he looked across, Sabienn saw she really did look like Captain Cannons. Her face was contorted in an over-the-top expression of agony and ecstasy with some impossibly endowed man. Looking on, he had an unwelcome remembrance of his accident on the bus. He grabbed the magazine and tossed it behind the seat.

"Eyes," he said, forking two fingers at his own head. "Here." He stabbed towards the windscreen. With that they were off following the trail to the

crossroads with the main road.

Sabienn turned the wheel and they turned westward. Just as he turned on to the road, he was facing them. There was no chance not to avoid them. He was completely blindsided. There was nothing either he or Bray could have done.

Two armed Secret Police officers were walking on the side of the road. One saw the utility and moved into the centre of the road to stop them. He had his gun ready if the vehicle failed to comply. The other man had his weapon pointed directly at Sabienn who had no window to at least shatter and take some of the force.

*Shit! This is no check-point, thought Sabienn. This is a straight commandeering. They're walking and someone lesser's driving. They want, they take.*

Bray was unnerved. "What do we do?"

Sabienn had to think fast. They had a basic cover as Secret Police but any perusal of the back would show two winged men. *This is not good.*

Sabienn had an idea Deep was probably lining up his rifle for a quick ending but a strange feeling came over him. *Wait a minute. I'm getting that rush. My chances are fifty-fifty. I can do this.* "Everyone, stay calm," he said, loud enough for the people in back to hear. "I've got this under control." *I haven't a clue what I'm doing. But the right option will present itself. Gun the engine and we're dead. Let's slow down. See what they have to say.*

The vehicle slowed so Sabienn could chat with the hand-waver. "Hey," said Sabienn. "Hard day?"

"Who wants to know?" said the hand-waver. By his reaction, he wasn't expecting a uniform in the front seat. He seemed rattled and was looking the vehicle over with razor-sharp eyes. His fingers were now on the door just next to Sabienn.

"Listen, some helpful advice please," said Sabienn, his heart pumping. "We're in .." He looked to Bray who was just looking ahead. "No, *I'm* in deep shit. I lost my uniform in the creek. And I lost a truck."

"You lost a truck?" The hand-waver was suspicious.

"Gone. Someone took it." Sabienn was trying his best to seem dismayed.

The second man pointing his rifle at Sabienn's head piped up. "A truck? I wouldn't want to be you."

"I wouldn't want to be me either," said Sabienn rubbing his eyes. "So we commandeered this piece of shit. We've been dropped in from head office. We didn't have a clue what we were doing. Now we've gotta look for a command post to report, we lost a truck. OK, I lost a truck. Which command post is going to give us a good hearing?"



The hand-waver took his fingers off the car and wiped his prints with his sleeve. Sabienn wasn't sure what that meant but he hazarded to guess. *Anything with the stench of failure and you could get contaminated. But maybe they'll help a "dead-man-walking". After all, they're only a stone's throw from making the same mistake themselves.*

They both appeared to be Sabienn and Bray's age, but the one pointing the rifle looked a lot younger. He looked as if he was desperately trying to grow a moustache. He was the one who offered the most advice. "Down that road you're going. Get to Walk-Don't-Run. The command post is the police station. Major Seff. Your chances with him? Slim. Up that road. Get to Chees. Major Mayne?" He looked at Sabienn and shook his head. "Slimmer."

Sabienn reached around and grabbed the magazine and proffered it to the baby-faced officer. He knew it was a complete gamble. The leadership forbade any such material within any officers' quarters. "Here."

Baby-face's eyes opened up like dinner plates as he saw the front cover and stuffed the rolled document into his jacket. "Thanks."

"Any road blocks along here?"

"Why do you want to know that?" The hand-waver still seemed to have suspicions about the situation.

"Well I can talk with you guys. But others. I'm really out of luck today." Sabienn did his best to look crushed.

"What kind of truck was it?" said the hand-waver. *He sounds like he's from Interrogation*, thought Sabienn.

He looked across to Bray as a signal and Bray offered, "It was a charcoal Surewheel dual-cab. Rego SE030464. It has a broken windscreen and a dent in the rear bumper bar. Left side." The detailed description set the hand-waver back on his heels.

"We'll send it on," said Baby-face, still glowing with the receipt of the magazine into his jacket. *I've got this guy*, thought Sabienn. *Look at him. A bit of stuff between his legs sharing a nudge nudge wink wink moment. He has as much success with women as a dog chasing a car.*

"D'you know the prison?" said Baby-face.

"They don't need to know," said the hand-waver.

"Well what harm is it?" Baby-face stood firm and the two officers turned to glare at one another. There was a tension here between these men. "Put it this way," continued Baby-face. "If you go past the prison. There's two guys in a car. I can guarantee you'll be shot."

"Thanks guys," said Sabienn. "You guys want a lift?"

Even as he said it, Sabienn could sense Bray tensing beside him. But Sabienn

was hoping that the stench of failure he had been cultivating was enough to make them turn down the offer. He watched the hand-waver thinking, looking the vehicle over. *Fifty-fifty*, thought Sabienn.

“No,” he said finally. “We’re good.” He stood back and waved them on. “Go.”

Sabienn didn’t need another invitation. He was off like a shot.

## 21. The Prince of Liars

With the uncontrollable adrenalin still pulsing through his body, Sabienn was in the fits of a bout of nervous giggling. He had the steering wheel in hand and just kept pushing the car at speed faster and faster up the road. The charge on the battery was two per cent going on one. Soon science would put an end to their rush.

Sitting beside him, Bray was a man who seemed to have adopted a script of one sentence. "I don't believe it," he said. His head was back and shouting at the roof. "I don't believe it."

There was tapping on the rear window and the two men in the back tray offered thumbs up to the men in the front. Sabienn and Bray repaid in kind with hearty thumbs up and smiles all round.

"Whoah!" Sabienn started belting the car horn. "Thank you Captain Cannons!"

Bray was in a fit of laughter, "Thank you Captain Cannons! I don't believe it! You are one liar. You are THE liar. You are the Prince of Liars. I bow to you. I don't believe it."

"Whoah!" Sabienn started belting the car horn again. Crazy thoughts filled his head. *I've just walked to the edge of the cliff, faced death and watched it back down. How good was I? Not even Deep could do that. And he's a real wolf.*

Another tap at the back window came and he turned to see Deep's beaming grin and thumbs up. Sabienn felt a little shame for the bad thoughts about the big man and gave him an enthusiastic return gesture.

"Nothing can stop us now," said Sabienn partly to himself and partly to Bray.

As if on cue, the battery cut dead and the vehicle decelerated and was guided to the verge to stand still in the grass. Sabienn turned to Bray, "Lose the uniforms and caps. I don't want to go walking into Ambia Vee wearing this."

The light was fading now and Sabienn and his friends still had about two hours walk through the forest to an uncertain welcome. They had no torches so they gathered their bearings from the maps at hand. Any rations in Sabienn's pockets or water from the bottles, he divvied out. And he kept his knife handy as he knew there'd be a plethora of stoneberries to crack along the way to keep the boys happy. "Let's move," he said.

It was a cheerful march through the forest. Sabienn saw they all worked well together and they all kept good pace with no stragglers. He kept his thoughts on point. *Two observers in a car out the front of Ambia Vee. And if there were two at the front, were there more within the compound? Why would the Secret Police be bothered with surveillance here?*

"Nice shirt," whispered Stork looking at Sabienn's army issue green shirt. Sabienn looked on at his group, all bare-chested and filthy with an assortment of cuts and abrasions and then looked down at his own shirt. Stork came over to feel the handiwork and meticulous stitching around the back hole for the wings. "Do a spin," said Stork. So Sabienn spun around and modelled it as if it were the latest thing that stylish in-fashion winged-men were wearing. "I want it," Stork added. "If you ever get shot, try not to get it in the chest. I don't want holes."

"I hope the native women can find it in their hearts to make a few more," said Bray also feeling the stitching.

"Don't know if they can make a hole big enough to go over your head, man," said Stork to Bray.

"Or make fabric to keep in your shithouse personality," replied Bray pointedly. Stork turned to Sabienn and winked. Sabienn smiled, *He throws out the bait and Bray keeps biting.*

It was almost dark when they found their way to the outer edge of the prison. A snap of a twig ahead brought the group to a quick stop. Sabienn craned his head to see through the thick green. As luck would have it, it was one of the ladies he had called his room service. She was alone and foraging through the forest for berries and firewood.

"Hello," Sabienn waved his hand and offered enough volume for her ears. She turned to see him and was initially startled at the intrusion but her eyes made out the figure of the person they'd tended to the night before. He was surprised to see an overjoyed look on her face and she pushed through the undergrowth to where the men stood. She broke through the green and suddenly found herself surrounded by three other sweating smelly winged men.

"Please," Sabienn indicated. "My friends." She looked at them all and her face blushed. She waved her hand over her face to cool down. "Ma'am, please," he continued. "Grey Cape? Argent? Mr Same? Anyone?"

"Wait please," she said. She disappeared back into the forest towards the compound. Sabienn held his rifle at the ready. "Stay on point. This could be good or could be an ambush. I'm not reading anything here."

After a period of minutes there was a noise in the distance coming from the compound like a herd of wild pigs rushing through the undergrowth. Sabienn still had nothing. "Hold tight." They each gripped their rifle in readiness.

In the distance he could now make out heads coming through the forest. He was desperately looking for STL caps on their heads to indicate trouble. He could make out some that may be the old men of the group but he wasn't sure what was going on.

"Mr Feel!" The shout came from the group. It was Argent and he didn't appear to be under any pressure of surveillance. He sounded overjoyed. The boys relaxed a little at the sound.

Argent broke through the growth and came unashamedly to Sabienn and gave him a bear hug as much as the wings would allow. "As I live and breathe. You're safe."

As Sabienn disentangled himself, he turned to the others, "These are my friends. You know Bray. This is all we could save. I'm sorry."

The welcome brown robe of Grey Cape came through and shook Sabienn's hand. "We've had a visit from your friends. We were worried for you," said Grey Cape. More and more people seemed to be crowding in and standing anywhere where they could get a look.

"There's a checkpoint on the road," said Sabienn.

"That's gone," said Grey Cape. "I'm a prisoner but I'm not without influence." He then announced grandly to his people. "It is with luck that we killed the fatted pig today. For tonight we are joined by the Stone Shepherds. Gentlemen, check your weapons with Argent please. And do we have any volunteers to help wash these men? We'll need their wounds tended to prepare them for the feast." There was a rush of both male and female villagers to lead the other three away.

"Please," Grey Cape spoke to his people rushing to attend Sabienn, "Let me walk with this one for a while." Grey Cape led the way and pushed his way back through the forest with Sabienn in tow. "I'm glad you're safe," said the old man.

"I'm glad you're safe too. These Police mean business. It's terrible what they're doing," said Sabienn. He relayed concisely the events of the day that may not have been relayed to him from Argent. "Why are they doing this?" said Sabienn. "Why are they killing us?"

"Because you're dangerous," said Grey Cape. "Argent advised me more of your Supreme Order. You're still committed to this journey?"

"I have to."

"Well you're a young man, you must do what you feel is right," said Grey Cape. "As much as I can say you have a much wider mission, you must follow your heart."

"These three men," said Sabienn, "I need to find them safe lodging. This journey I need to do on my own."

“How noble of you.” There was a tinge of mockery in Grey Cape’s voice. “And you’ve spoken to them about it?”

“No.” Sabienn kept pace with the old man. “But it’s what’s best for them.”

“You can’t choose what people want to do,” said Grey Cape. “If people want to put their hand in the fire, they’ll put their hand in the fire. There’s nothing you can do about it. Look. We’ll talk more later.” They broke through into the edge of the compound. “Please, get yourself cleaned up. I’ll call for you all later.” He summoned some girls to take Sabienn down to the water’s edge for his wash down.

The others were already there and there was a mass of bodies in the water lathering in some soap. Girls were scrubbing down their bodies in some places with abrasive pads to make their skin raw and in others tenderly cleaning with delicate fingers so as not to hurt. They tended their charges with loving care and now Sabienn was stripped and drawn into the water.

He immersed himself into the water and pushed himself way under. Then the hands came. His eyes closed and he just let himself shut down. He was rubbed and scraped and pushed and prodded and washed and wiped and every crevice of his wings was tenderly touched.

The actions must have taken him to another zone for when he finally opened his eyes, he noticed his friends were no longer there in the water with him. The girls led him to the shore and wiped him dry. Then a warm brown robe was draped around him.

At that moment, Sabienn panicked. He saw his clothes missing. His pants, T-shirt, trunks, socks and boots were all gone. As if sensing his predicament, a paper bag was passed to him which he looked inside and to see all his possessions. His precious maps, his knife, his compass, his wallet, his watch, his fishing line and some rations. There even were some cracked stoneberry shells and old ration wrappings. All had been salvaged from his pockets.

With the knowledge his possessions were secure, he let himself be led away. He was taken back to be within the room that he’d started the day in. There was the bible he’d left behind, the picture of The Great Leader and the bucket for a toilet. *Toilet? How about that? I peed in the water. Those poor girls. Swimming in my urine.* The girls offered a smile back. *I’m sure I was swimming in theirs too.*

The girls removed his robe and sat him in his chair. One of the girls removed from a jar what must have been a native remedy of antiseptic leaves which she dabbed on his cuts and abrasions. After moving at pace through the forest he was surprised to realize the nicks and cuts he’d picked up on his arms and neck from the trees. It stung but it had the odour of medicine so he trusted it was going to

clean up the wounds.

As Sabienn sat there completely naked in his chair, another woman entered the room carrying garments. She had the air of not being in the slightest bit interested. As if she'd seen everything before. She placed his nicely smelling cleaned boots down and hung on hangers his freshly laundered socks, trunks, pants and shirt.

Without speaking she showed him a new garment that she had altered. It was a standard civilian issue hooded cloak but she had added slats in the back which she poked her hands through for Sabienn's view. He was pleasantly surprised as this could allow him to cover his wings and look like a hunchback if need be or let them out for comfort to have air if the chance arose. His facial expression was thanks enough for her and she left quickly.

Sabienn was now left with two girls who led him to his bed and sat him down. They sat down either side of him and one girl produced a condom, still sealed in its packet for him to peruse its integrity. There was no doubt what their intentions were now. The girls kissed him on each cheek and let their fingers do the walking. But Sabienn pushed them back politely. "Please," he said. "Maybe later." *I hope Stork doesn't hear of this. I'd never hear the end of it.*

Without any air of disappointment they politely withdrew and lay together down on the rug next to the bed and closed their eyes to rest. Sabienn pushed himself between the sheets of his bed and quickly fell into a deep sleep.

His dreams were filled with red. There was blood everywhere. He saw people being eaten, people that had been shot and people that had just had their throats cut bleeding and a stream of blood resulting. The stream passed by rocks where there were red-ribbed black snakes sunning themselves in the joyous day's warmth, completely oblivious to the passage of fluid going by.

There was a knock at the door and all in the room roused. Sabienn held his head as if he'd been hit by a truck. But he felt a little refreshed now.

His garments were still damp so he donned the robe again and followed his female companions out into the darkened compound. It was now night and preparations were in full swing for the feast. There were gatherers coming from all directions carrying platters of fruit covered in leaves to a freshly stoked fire in the compound.

Argent appeared and came up to him. "A moment of your time, please. Grey Cape would like to see you." He followed him to Grey Cape's quarters where Argent let him enter but stayed outside on the door.

Inside around a table all his friends were already assembled. Bray and Deep appeared in good spirits but something about Stork's demeanour was unusual. He had the good nature of someone floating on a cloud.

“Welcome,” said Grey Cape. “These occasions get a little crazy. I just wanted to sit down with you while I had the chance. I wanted to welcome you all. Sabienn, spent last night here. I’m sure we can look after you all. Is there anything we can get you?”

“I saw some sketchpads and pencils around. I’d like to borrow some,” said Bray.

Grey Cape reached within his room gathered items and proffered them to the artist. “They’re yours,” he said. “Do any of you know who I am?” Grey Cape continued.

“Look, I’ll take a stab,” said Stork, clearly in an altered state of reality. “You look like the GIP. The head of the Secret Police. The guys trying to kill me. But equally significantly, about half an hour ago I had the best sex of my life. Why would you want to kill me and then let a young woman bounce up and down on top of me? You’re either not him or you’re truly evil.”

“It’s not him,” said Bray confidently. “Apart from the hair and beard, he’s a little shorter than the GIP and has a slight stoop. And his face has scarring like he’d been hit when he was a child.”

Sabienn listened to Bray’s description and then remembered the scarring on the back when he first met Grey Cape bathing. He didn’t pick up the scarring on the face but now it had been pointed out to him it’s all that he could look at now.

“What I want to know,” continued Bray, “is why I’ve never been told the GIP had a brother?”

“This man is sharp,” said Grey Cape.

“Yes, he has a warm welcome. Like an airborne mosquito,” said Stork. “Why are you in prison?”

“Well I can’t say,” said Grey Cape almost apologetically. “My name is Rutherlenn Hyde. But around here, I’m known as Grey Cape. It’s less threatening. My brother is indeed the Grand Inquisitor Profound Murrlock Hyde. Much more than that, I’m sorry I can’t say.”

“We’ve been getting a lot of that,” said Stork. ““I can’t say”, “Where do you want to take us?” “I can’t say.”, “Why do you want to kill us?””, “I can’t say”. I’m really feeling the love,” Stork continued. “I’ll need a backpack with army field rations. Enough for four.”

“Done,” said Grey Cape. It was almost as if the request was anticipated and the backpack was passed and placed at Stork’s feet. Grey Cape then turned to Sabienn. “Of course, there’s something you wanted to say.”

All eyes turned to Sabienn who cleared his throat. “I just think,” he paused, “I think I should do this on my own. I’ve been given a Supreme Order. It’s mine. Already I’ve put you in danger.”



The table went silent as they all looked at one another. Stork finally piped up, “Wow. Are you worried bad things’ll happen to us? Oh, that’s so sweet. That’s really lovely. Let me tell you about my day. Before you came along I was kneeling to take a bullet. After I met you, I had a young honey bouncing up and down on top of me. So if bad shit’s gonna happen, can you tell me when it’s going to start?”

“I’d prefer to be on my own.” Sabienn was trying to be definite.

“Look, listen to me,” Stork continued. “You haven’t adopted us. We’ve adopted *you*. So shut-up and get used to it.”

“If you have a Supreme Order,” said Deep, “and you succeed, you’ll be in favour.” Sabienn noted that when Deep spoke, everyone shut-up, as if the mountain was speaking. “If we help you, *we’ll* be in favour.”

“That’s exactly what I was going to say,” said Bray tapping the table.

“I didn’t call him Deep for nothing,” said Stork, staring at the ceiling as if to rest his case. “So what’s your Supreme Order?”

Sabienn reluctantly relinquished information. “Jarnnee Krenn took an assassin’s blade.”

“The one from his dad’s museum?” Stork was keeping up spritely.

“Yes,” said Sabienn and paused. “And he’s going to take that and assassinate The Great Leader. I have to kill Jarnnee who was last seen outside Mission Ginger.”

Stork sat there digesting what he had just heard. “OK. Is there a punchline?”

“That’s the Order,” said Sabienn. “I almost killed him this morning on the bus.”

“On the bus?” said Stork. “He wasn’t on the bus.”

“Yes he was,” said Bray.

“No he wasn’t.” Stork was adamant. “I had a sack on my head and even then could tell you he wasn’t. If he was on the bus, he’d let everyone know he was on the bus.”

“He was on the bus,” said Sabienn. “I had him by the foot.”

“It was the first time I saw him,” said Bray. “But I’ve heard of him. Him and his sister.”

“And the General’s dead,” said Sabienn.

“Krenn’s dead?” Stork was incredulous. “Jarnnee was on the bus? And he’s out to kill The Great Leader. With a toothpick? None of this makes any sense.”

“He left a satchel,” said Sabienn. “There were two business cards. They’re back in my wallet. One was for The Battleground Trek Shack. The other’s a portrait place called We Are All Family near Mission Turmeric.”

“That satchel was being tracked,” said Grey Cape. “Argent found a screen

sewn in the base. They tossed the satchel in the bush just after you left.”

“Wait a minute,” said Stork. “You were told to go to Mission Ginger to find Jarnnee. All the way from Salt. And he conveniently left a satchel for you. I’m still trying to get my head around this,” said Stork.

“None of this,” said Sabienn, feeling a sense of exasperation. “*None* of this makes any sense. Yet it was given to me as a Supreme Order. I have to do it. Look, you guys are my friends but I need to do this on my own.”

The table went silent for a few seconds before Bray piped up. “Look, I don’t know if this is the right thing to say. I know you’ve got problems, but I want to talk about *me*. I had my whole future ahead of me. The world was in my hands. I just won the Gold Lion for patriotic painting. At the rally, on the screen at the back, there was “The Great Leader Gazes On Prism Gorge.” That was *mine*. My painting. Then I grew wings, and I was thrown on the scrap heap. I went from here,” he held his hand up high, “to here,” he put his hand down low, “But you know what? Since I got wings, my memory’s better, my eyes got sharper and my hand got steadier. I’ve actually got better at my craft. Why is that? And why is it I’ve been thrown on the scrap heap when I’m at my most useful.”

“It’s the same here,” said Deep. “Since I got wings, my ears are better. I can hear a leaf drop.”

“If you guys are trying to make me feel better, it’s a big fail,” said Stork. “I’m still bone-crushingly average. I got wings and I’m just the same.”

“I think your jokes got worse,” said Sabienn.

“Well thank you,” said Stork. “But just listening to our curly-haired bitch has given me the need to share.”

“The bitch is still in the room,” Bray protested.

“When I was at the Academy, I went to the counsellor,” continued Stork unperturbed. “I said, “I’m feeling really suicidal. You know, is that normal and does it matter?” Her response really helped me.”

He left a few seconds silence so Sabienn had to ask, “Which was?”

“Come back after lunch,” said Stork. “I thought, why should I care if she didn’t? I felt liberated by her apathy. Oh, and then I got wings. Things *really* improved. My future prospects just became so sparkingly stunning. And my social calendar was just brimming to overflow. I mean, the point to this story is that there really is no point to this story. But who else are you going to hear this brainless shit from except your friends. Am I right, Bray?”

“Oh, the bitch approves,” said Bray still keeping some distance.

“You’re so worried about your Supreme Order not making sense,” Stork continued. “Look around the table. *None* of this makes sense. And the only guy who can shed light.” He nodded towards Grey Cape. “He can’t say.”

"I don't know," said Sabienn.

"*Nothing* here makes any sense," continued Stork. "I feel the need to do something lame and pointless." Stork put his fist forward over the centre of the table. "Freaks together, freaks forever."

Almost without blinking, Deep placed his fist in to touch Stork's.

After a few seconds hesitation, Bray put his fist in to touch the others. "F.T.F.F."

They all looked to Sabienn holding back watching the display of fists in the middle.

"We need the Prince of Liars," said Bray.

"What do you say?" said Deep.

It was pointless to argue. Sabienn's destiny with his Order was now tied with these people.

"OK," he said quietly. He reluctantly pushed his fist forward to touch the others gathered in the centre.

"Tomorrow you can leave to fulfil your Supreme Order," said Grey Cape. "Tonight you can enjoy. Eat well, drink and rest. After the feast, I'd like to speak with you more about your wider purpose. As Stone Shepherds. But you're safe for now."

Sabienn then remembered his vision of the gathering of the stones. How the four winged men they called Stone Shepherds came down from the air to stand on the stage. *They were so large. Bigger than big. Then there's us. Look at us. All bickering and broken. I'd feel up for it if I wasn't so inadequate.*

His three friends left their chairs to individually pat Sabienn on the back. No matter what now, they're paths were all intertwined and one. As Sabienn and his friends moved to leave the room, there was a knock at the door for which Grey Cape attended.

The door opened and one of the girls who had attended Sabienn in his room reluctantly poked her head in. She looked like she had seen a ghost such was the pallor of her face.

Grey Cape looked towards her and by his facial expression sensed something was wrong. "Have your fingers gotten you into trouble again?" he said. It was delivered without warmth or amusement and it was taken by the girl with what appeared to be utter despair. The old man went to confer with her in an urgent and whispered discussion. She spoke quietly to him and sobbed gently. He comforted her by stroking her hair and offered quick instructions for her ears only and she left, silently closing the door.

"We have a problem," Grey Cape said. "There's a truck coming. It'll be here in a minute. All your clothes and belongings are being taken to the edge of the

forest where you came in. We need to move now.”

The four young men gathered what was given to them and made their way out of the door and moved quickly to the edge of the forest. Sabienn didn't need super hearing to hear the rattle of a large vehicle and another car hitting the pot-holes in their transit to where they stood.

Argent quickly came forward and offered each their rifles. They gathered beyond the trees past the clearing of the compound, dropped their robes and dressed quickly into their clothes. Each now was dressed identically. Boots, socks, pants, T-shirt and cloak with a rifle slung on the shoulder. Stork threaded his backpack around his wings and Bray kept hold of his sketchpad.

“Keep to the original plan,” said Argent. “Meet at Second Best Hill. If I'm not there by nine, just go.” With that he left the four men and with the other attendants, retreated back to the compound.

They worked quietly sorting themselves out. Sabienn stowed his precious maps, pocketed his wallet and other items. They were ready to move just as a truck rolled into the compound followed by a black car. From where they stood they had clear vision of the actions within the compound but were still concealed by the foliage.

“Let's go,” said Deep.

“No, wait,” said Sabienn. “Stand still.” On a gut feeling he stood his ground. “They're not looking for us.”

Officers piled out of the back of the truck. There were eight in total and they pushed the onlookers back with their rifles to create a protective detail around the occupant of the car.

Standing beside him, Bray waved to Sabienn to get his attention and then pointed to his shoulder. He could see what he meant. They weren't just STL foot soldiers. It was a numbered insignia of a protective guard.

The back door opened and the occupant alighted from the vehicle and stood to his full height in his full black cloak, his powerful bald head picked up the light of the camp fire. The men in the forest almost let out an audible gasp.

Standing in the compound surrounded by his loyal Ten-68 was the Grand Inquisitor Profound Murrlock Hyde. *Why would the second most powerful man in the land be standing in this dusty compound?*

From the edge of the gathering, Grey Cape appeared and moved stridently towards his brother. “This is a complete outrage.” Even from where they stood, they could hear he was absolutely livid. The guards moved in to block his way.

“Please,” said Murrlock. “Let him through.”

“This is a breach of conditions,” shouted Grey Cape. He moved towards the man in the black cloak and started pushing him in the chest.

Sabienn couldn't believe his eyes. This was an act punishable by death and the guards raised their rifles to accommodate this accordingly.

"Stand down," shouted the GIP to his guard. To Sabienn's utter disbelief, Murrlock held up his hands as if to make peace with his brother and reason with him. They spoke quietly together and Grey Cape heard the words and bowed his head in the resignation of receiving terrible news.

The figure in black moved forward and offered a comforting pat on the shoulder. But Grey Cape broke away from any semblance of pity his brother was offering and quietly walked away.

"Move," the GIP shouted to his detail.

The guards worked their way through the compound, opening every door of the huts and searching. A sudden panic hit Sabienn. *Maybe they are looking for us after all. Should we run? The boys are looking for a sign. No. There's something not right here.* He waved to his friends to stand still.

The searching continued and Sabienn became more unsettled. Just as he was about to give up and order a quick retreat, the woman who attended Sabienn, the one who knocked on the door and spoke with Grey Cape, was suddenly dragged out of a hut and hauled before the crowd.

An ordinary STL officer, who had been travelling in the car with the GIP, dressed in her black fatigues, came forward and identified the woman. She pushed her hands into the native woman's pockets and pulled out a woman's watch and also what he believed to be a twenty kee note by its colour.

"This is the thief," she proclaimed to the crowd.

Sabienn was stunned and was lifting his weapon when he saw his companions stare him down. There was nothing they could do. The woman's fate was sealed. Retribution was swift and brutal and was carried out within a few seconds before them.

The native woman was made kneel and the officer moved behind her, pulled out a pistol from her uniform and quickly placed a bullet in the back of the poor woman's head.

The officer watched the body drop forward as if swatting a fly. She placed the watch back on her wrist. "I took it off to wash my hands," she proclaimed loudly, as if her actions met with everyone's approval. "That was lucky."

Then three guards circled the officer and she started protesting. Rifles were raised and aimed at her and she was made subsequently to kneel beside the dead woman.

Without a second thought as if it were second nature to him, the GIP walked over to her kneeling figure, withdrew a pistol from his uniform and shot a bullet into her. Her lifeless form fell forward and he walked back to the car, more with

an air of annoyance than any empathy with the person he'd killed.

Two officers came forward to remove the watch from the dead woman's wrist and picked up the twenty kee note. A bag was then produced which swallowed up the body of the dead officer and was zipped up for clean transit. She was then carried and dumped unceremoniously on the back of the truck.

Bray took a chance with the heavy work occurring in the compound to come and whisper intently in Sabienn's ear. "What's going on?"

"Politics," whispered Sabienn. "The prison is off-limits to the Secret Police. But you can't ignore theft. Especially by a native. And that woman officer. Executed for carelessness. It would have been bagging. The GIP lost face in front of his brother. The compound should not have been violated. He killed the officer as some sort of peace offering." He looked to Bray and added, "Not a happy gathering."

Bray didn't find amusement in the comment, "There's no peace here. No celebration."

The officer's watch was placed into the GIP's hand and then the twenty kee note. Sabienn watched on at the GIP in profile as he received the objects.

As Sabienn watched him, suddenly the GIP's head became alarmed and went bolt upright. He then turned to look directly at where Sabienn and his friends were standing. It would have been impossible to see them as it was dark enough and they were concealed within the foliage. But there he was standing by his car staring at them as if feeling his presence there. Sabienn's legs turned to jelly and a tingling went up the back of his neck. The adrenalin pumped through his veins. Sabienn looked to the others and they seemed equally petrified. *How could he possibly know we were here?*

The familiar figure of Grey Cape came over to his brother and they stood staring at one another. They engaged in intense discussion. Sabienn could only pick up the words "harbour" and "support" from the GIP and the words "violation" and "mother" from Grey Cape. He witnessed an intense disagreement between them that kept the words heated yet a bond of brotherhood that kept them civil.

There was one more word that he could make out from Grey Cape that stirred his interest. "Forlorn". Grey Cape held out his hand and Murrlock passed back the twenty kee note. Without further discussion, the black figure returned to his vehicle and his henchmen returned to theirs. The vehicles slowly vacated the compound towards the dirt track to no warm farewell. The compound was left in stunned disbelief and horror.

The boys looked at one another in their place among the trees. Sabienn wasn't sure what to do. There was then a grim realization that came upon him.

He quickly retrieved his wallet and checked his cash. *That note. That twenty kee. That came from my wallet. I'm sure of it. Last time I opened it was at the shop back in Walk-Don't-Run.* The others looked on at his actions and immediately understood what was going on. *The girl must have taken it. And it ended up in the GIP's hand. Why did he sense me? He must have the same sensations.*

Deep made the decision for everyone. "Let's go." He pointed towards the depths of the forest and started walking. Everyone else followed.

Sabienn walked silently as did the others, digesting the horror he had just witnessed. In particular he felt for the woman he had shared a room with. *Why would she take something from me I'd only be too glad to give her? Why did she feel the need to steal? The note's nothing. It's only money. But why'd she need to do that?* Tears started to well in his eyes. *What's happening to me? A week ago I wouldn't have given her the time of day. A native. Now I'm thinking how I'd feel. At that moment. Would I have the strength and grace?*

After about an hour's walk, Deep at the head of the party stopped and addressed his companions quietly. "May I suggest we make camp here?"

The area had a good clearing and was relatively flat. Sabienn could sense from his friends that they were absolutely exhausted, so this place was as good as any. The night was mild and the wind was down and the green moon was passing overhead bathing them in an eerie low green light.

"I have a feeling we're safe," said Sabienn. "Let's eat something and get some rest."

"Who'll go first watch?" said Deep. "I think we should. He knew you were there."

It had slipped Sabienn's mind that Deep may have heard a lot more than him in the discussion between the brothers. "What did they talk about?" Sabienn like the others gathered in to listen.

Deep recounted what he had heard. "The GIP held the note and said, 'You are aware you can't harbour anyone. You're only alive because of my support.' And the other said, 'I have no control over who comes and goes. Much more than your violation, I've kept to my conditions.' Then the GIP and this is strange, 'Our whole military campaign depends on you being alive.' Then there were whispers and something said about 'the Forlorn.'"

"The Forlorn?" Sabienn was dumbfounded. "Let's eat something," said Sabienn. "I'll tell you what I know."

Stork rummaged through his pack and opened up a glowstick that let them see and walk in green glow. He tossed out some cans for each of them. "Pork and vegetables, guys. Served cold. Just imagine it's a steaming fatted pig." A large bottle of water was passed around and cans of fruit salad and wrapped

chocolate bars were also tossed around.

As Sabienn settled in to eat, he recounted to the others the visions that he had in the previous days. He spoke of the visions with The Holy One, The Forlorn and Emperor Ryo. He spoke of the captured thief and the Stone Shepherds and of the seven women in the cell and recounted what he saw in all his visions about this place Mission Cinnamon. The conversation he had with Grey Cape was also recounted about Mission Cinnamon being a place in the north of Deerland. He also mentioned how he saw himself as a baby being held by the GIP at this place.

"I don't expect you to believe any of what I've just said," Sabienn said finally. "I have problems believing it myself. But the visions were so vivid. That's just how they came to me." The others sat silent still trying to comprehend what had just been said.

"You mentioned Stone Shepherds?" said Bray. "That's what some of the people were calling us."

"One of the head people, Argent," said Sabienn. "He keeps calling me a Stone Shepherd."

Bray was quiet for a few seconds before replying. "But I don't want to be a Stone Shepherd. I want my job in art. I don't want people telling me I have to do something. Just because someone expects it."

"Hey I'm with you," said Sabienn, sensing his friend's protest. "I wish everything would go back to the way it was."

"Sure everything will go back," said Stork. "And we'll all live happily ever after. And then we'll all wake up from this lovely dream. Are you going to finish that chocolate?" Sabienn passed his untouched sweet back to his friend. Stork continued, "Hand your cans back to me." Stork started packing up. "What a day. Sex, drama and an uneaten pig. I wonder if it will get any better. Huh. And you guys want to wake up? Am I first watch?"

"No, I'll go," said Sabienn.

They made an arrangement for watch for Sabienn, Deep, Stork then Bray. Deep and Stork settled in for their rest covering themselves with their cloaks.

"Goodnight," called Deep.

"Night Deep. 'Night Bitch," called Stork happily.

"Will you stop calling me Bitch?" Bray came back with a little heat on Stork's remark that brought the group to attention. He seemed to have a limit to the amount of niggle he could take.

After a few tense seconds, Stork replied, "Sure. And thanks for being *you* today, Bray. And thanks for giving up your art career for us. Oh, and thanks for saving my life today too." He settled down to cover himself in his cloak. "'Night



Bray-Bray.” With that he covered himself and went to sleep.

Bray moved to Sabienn and whispered for his ears only. “Do you think that guy’s got issues?”

“Who hasn’t?” came the reply. “Just cut him some slack.”

“Bray-Bray,” spat Bray. “I think I’d prefer Bitch. Can I borrow your maps? I’ll make copies.” He retrieved his sketch pad now rolled in his cloak. The maps were passed across and Bray joined the sleepers.

Sabienn settled in with his rifle close to keep watch and listen for sounds. The forest was alive with animal sounds and insects chirping. There were frog noises indicating water nearby. Rather than feeling apart from the forest, Sabienn felt he was at one with everything. His head went back and he stared past the green moon to view the vaunting reach of space.

Once again his thoughts went back to the girl that had just died. He let his cloak drop and gave his wings full stretch. *Ten thousand years ago something happened. In that woman’s world. And it’s living through me and my friends. Why?*

But for Sabienn one thing was certain. He was beginning to like his wings. They could fold themselves up now or extend with nimble dexterity. *I can’t imagine myself any other way.*

At his allotted time Deep roused himself from his slumber to relieve Sabienn of the night watch. The man seemed to operate with an internal alarm clock. Without a word he sat next to Sabienn and listened with him to the noises of the forest.

Sabienn took his leave and found a spot on the ground to cover himself with his cloak. He quickly found sleep.

## 22. The Middle Men

When Sabienn awoke, the light of the day made the clouds in the sky crimson and peach against the blue. The blue moon was high and there was a light breeze.

Sabienn saw Bray sitting cross-legged completing his night watch, making use of the light to do sketches in his book. He had the maps lying around as well as the young girl's photo, all the items that they had found on Oololo. His pencil was moving swiftly on the page in front of him.

Deep was off away from the group with his cloak and T-shirt off performing some crunches and push-ups to try keep in shape. Near Bray completely concealed by his cloak, Stork slept on, having been relieved by Bray from night watch duties a few hours ago.

After completing his morning ritual, Deep came over to pull his clothes back on. "What's the plan?" he said.

"What would you like it to be?" said Sabienn.

"We should go to Second Best Hill," said Bray, tuning into the conversation, but not taking his eyes from his work. "We have an appointment to keep. It would be impolite not to."

"Impolite?" said Sabienn. "After last night?"

"Especially after last night," continued Bray. "If they turn up and we're not there."

*It's logical, Sabienn thought. But there would be no way they could make nine o'clock. And to do a four hour slog through the woods to a no show. That's not appealing.*

As if reading his mind, Bray countered, "They'll wait for us."

"How do you know?" said Sabienn

"They just will." Bray was adamant.

"No they won't." Stork came alive and rolled over flinging his cloak off. "Hey, great moments of Bray's strategy recorded just for you." He lifted his leg and let out the best high-pitched flatulent gas emission that sputtered at the end. It gave Sabienn and Deep a chuckle but Bray was unamused.

"The Secret Police will have all eyes on that compound," Stork continued. "They're not going to move."

“Well what do you suggest asshole genius?” said Bray.

“This asshole genius suggests we do exactly what you say. But not for your reasons,” said Stork with a happy lilt. “The canteen at Second Best Hill has a dumpster at the rear. They chuck out all the good food in bags. We can borrow one of their portable barbecues, take it into the woods and I’ll fry up a feast for us. In the meantime,” He reached into his backpack to retrieve items which he threw to his friends, “It’s cans.”

The thought of getting a decent hot meal perked Sabienn up and he attacked his cold beef with relish. After their breakfast, they packed and stowed their things to prepare for their push into the trees.

“Here,” Bray handed out hand drawn maps of Oololo’s documents to everyone and returned the originals to Sabienn. They surveyed their maps that Deep and Stork received and they were almost better than the original. They showed topography and towns and marked all the Turr supply depots. Sabienn actually wished he had one of these maps than his own.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” said Stork perusing his map in detail. “But these are *really* good.”

“Good?” Bray sniffed. “They’re fantastic. Ten years of skill went into that.”

“I can see,” continued Stork. “Look, you’ve even put fish in the Knife Reef Sea.”

“They’re islands, you idiot.” Bray was indignant that they couldn’t be recognized. Stork offered a wink to Sabienn. They decamped and started their push eastwards into the forest. Sabienn led the group followed by Deep. Bray followed him keeping Stork who was hot on his heels in a downwind area.

Sabienn called, “OK. No slog. Let’s keep it a pleasant hike.” He then let his wings find freedom through his garment. The others except Stork, lumbered with his backpack, followed suit.

After a time of steady movement, they pushed into a small clearing and looked up at a daylight starburst of hope tree flowers. It was a breathtaking canopy of five pointed white stars forming a heaven on earth intertwined around dead growth being brought back to life. Sabienn took a moment and looked up in silence at the floral display. *Why do I feel so temporary?*

Then Deep became alert quietly indicating his companions to stand still. They stood for a minute and kept listening. Sabienn suddenly heard it too. It was a very faint sound like the scraping of metal on the bottom of a can. It sounded like someone else had breakfast in the forest eating from a ration pack.

Pointing in the direction of where the noise came from, Deep brought his rifle from his shoulder awaiting further direction.

Using hand gestures, Sabienn split the group into two, he and Bray in one and

Deep and Stork in the other to approach the area in a pincer movement. Sabienn held his rifle at the ready and the others followed suit. Sabienn and Bray moved to the left. Each step Sabienn paid careful attention to. He didn't want to risk another bout of clumsiness.

They had moved several metres when Bray touched his shoulder and pointed. Through the branches he could see a man lying up against a tree polishing off the final contents of a can. He was dressed already in his brown monk robes and his rifle was up against a tree two metres away. Sabienn saw it was one of their two dangerous acquaintances again.

He and Bray surveyed the area ahead for the second man but couldn't see him. Suddenly a noise came from within the forest. The man lying up against the tree called towards where the noise came from. "Who goes into the woods for a dump and doesn't take paper? Why should I get it for you?"

Sabienn's senses were tingling. *This is not right*. But he wasn't quick enough to convey that to Bray. All Bray saw was a chance. A man with his gun far away and another with his pants around his ankles. Taking the initiative, Bray led the way closer to the clearing where the leaning man was. They both saw the new utility acquired by the monks who had made themselves a hiding place from a pathway off a forest track.

Still uneasy, Sabienn took the lead and led them out towards the man against the tree. Their rifles were gripped and ready to fire. The monk against the tree saw the pair come out of the cover of the leaves. "Hey! Who're you two?" He looked towards where his friend was taking a dump and shouted, "Hey!" Bray moved out to cover the man and Sabienn moved forward to place the other under surveillance.

"Drop your guns." At the opposite end of the area, the second man was in a crouch with his weapon ready to kill them both. Sabienn and Bray complied and slowly placed their weapons on the ground. The man with the gun picked up a rock and through it towards where they thought he was taking a dump. The stone hit a tree giving off the sound that they had heard.

"You boys make enough noise," said the gunman. "You sound like pigs in the forest."

"Thank you," said Sabienn with genuine appreciation. "But we'll take your car and be on our way."

The gunman smiled. "Huh. I'd love to, you know. But we have an appointment. And we're late." He worked his rifle a little and prepared for firing. "So we'll get this sorted quickly."

"What are the chances of you making your appointment on time?" said Sabienn calmly.

“What are the chances of you making it to the car?” the gunman said, lifting his rifle. “Just try it. Give me some sport.”

At that moment the bones shattered in the gunman’s hand which was steadying his weapon. “Shit shit shit!” The rifle dropped to the ground as he favoured the bleeding mess of the hand hit by a bullet.

“Better than average,” said Sabienn. He gathered the monks’ rifles and kept them both under guard until Deep and Stork broke through the trees.

“Over this way please.” Sabienn ordered the gunman to the tree where the other was now standing. “Now strip.”

“Strip?” said the can eater. “We are but poor monks on a mission. We sell water melons to get by.”

While they were talking, Stork was taking it upon himself to rummage through their backpacks. He pulled out some items which he held for all to see. “I’ve got about 50,000 kee in packeted bills. Must be premium water melons.” He stashed the cash and any other food cans or toiletries he could find into his own pack.

“Strip,” Sabienn repeated.

“You’re willing to steal from an orphanage?” said the can eater to Stork. “How do you sleep at night brother?”

“You almost blew my head off,” said Stork. “I sleep very well thank you, brother.”

“CH074757,” said Bray, quoting the registration of the vehicle they first had. “We’d like to see the knives you killed the police with.”

Sabienn watched the two men’s faces turn pale. It was like watching a couple fall after having the rug pulled out from underneath them.

“Who are you?” said the gunman. “Wait a minute. You shot from the bush. You saved our lives.” Sabienn quietly raised his rifle to his eye and put the gunman in his sights. He nestled his finger on the trigger. “OK OK.” The gunman and the can eater let their robes drop to the ground. At Sabienn’s urging the shirts and pants followed suit. The men stood in their trunks with girdles around their waists packed with rectangular blocks of something grey. “Who are you?” said the gunman. “You’re not the police.” Sabienn could see the gunman was doing what he would have done. Desperately trying to find a purchase of trust for his own survival.

Moving in warily, Stork pulled the garments away from the men, keeping an eye at all times on them. “Oh yeah,” said Stork, looking at the girdles. “We’ve got soso here. High-grade. Enough to kill a thousand people.” The pockets yielded more weapons. There were two hunting knives and two service pistols with a small box of appropriate ammunition. All were stuffed into Stork’s pack

for closer attention later. The gunman's robes also yielded the most precious prize of all, the car keys.

The pockets of the pants of each of them were raided and the men's wallets were brought to Sabienn for his perusal. Stork relieved about five hundred kee in notes from them which he placed in his pack.

The wallet of the can eater yielded a personal photo of a small girl, a tab for drinks in a strip club at Walk-Don't-Run and a business card for a Doctor Redd Benn at the Chard Provincial Children's Hospital. A check of the gunman's wallet yielded nothing but small coins.

"What's wrong with your friend?" said the gunman looking towards Deep. "Why's he looking at us like that?" Sabienn glanced at Deep with his rifle trained. His face was so full of loathing that he was committed to putting a bullet in the gunman's head. The gunman said to Sabienn, "Sir, you seem to be the man of reason here."

"My friend wants to kill you," said Sabienn. "We all want to kill you. We're here to do the will of The Great Leader. And what's his decree on soso? Any dealers, any addicts or anyone in possession were to be executed. Have you been living under a rock?"

"Sir, I'm just a middle man," said the gunman.

"What about your friend?" Sabienn nodded toward the can eater.

"We're both just middle men," pleaded the gunman. "You may as well kill us. We're both dead. Our master will kill us if we don't make our meeting. He gave us orders."

"Hey," Stork turned to Deep. "I bet you couldn't shoot that girdle off the guy."

"How much you want to bet?" Deep raised his weapon and fired a shot without blinking that smashed through some of the rectangular material on the right hand side of the gunman, taking a small chunk of skin with it too.

Both men unclasped their girdles and let them fall to the ground. They were now panicking for their life.

"Now lose the trunks," said Stork. It was the ultimate humiliation for the men but their underwear fell to the ground leaving them naked, exposed and vulnerable. Their faces showed resignation as all their options had run out.

"Get down on your knees," Stork said to the can eater. "Now what are you?"

The can eater complied and said, "I'm a father. I have a sick girl."

"Wrong answer," said Stork, standing over the captive. "Answer my question."

Sabienn watched on at his friend's cruel streak. And he looked at the can eater bowing to be killed. It triggered a long forgotten memory. *It's the tethered*

*dog. Years and years ago, thought Sabienn. That dog I saw at parade. It had the disease. They toyed with it before it was shot. I didn't like that. And I don't like this.*

"I'm scum," said the can eater looking at the dirt in front. "I'm no gentleman thief. I deal in death without conscience. I'm backstabbing. I'm lying. I'll never see the light of day. I'm worth no trust. And no loyalty. Now please let me live."

"Shoot them, Deep," said Stork, walking away from them. Deep's rifle was raised to aim at the can eater's bowed head.

*I can't believe I'm thinking this, thought Sabienn. These men are scum. But even scum have a journey.* "Stop!" he called.

"What?" cried Stork in disbelief.

"You heard me! Get the rifles!" Sabienn was definite. Stork stood rooted to his spot looking at the others. "Get the rifles or stay!" Sabienn was more insistent. Stork moved reluctantly gathering the men's weapons and tossing them in the back of the vehicle.

"Say," said Deep, using Sabienn's familiar. "Let me deal with them. I'll be quick."

"It's not our call. Let's go," said Sabienn. "Keys. Where're the keys? Get me the keys."

Sabienn's colleagues came in close to him. "I knew a girl who was killed by these people," said Stork.

"Me too," said Deep.

"Here as well," said Bray.

"She wasn't given a chance." Stork's logic was compelling. "The drug didn't spare them."

"And what if they toss it in the creek? How many people would they poison?" Bray's face was in close. *It's fair comment.* Sabienn weighed up what was just spoken.

"I couldn't do that," said the can eater. "I have a sick girl."

"Save your lies for the soft touch!" Stork wheeled on the can eater with venom.

Sabienn pushed his face up against Stork's. "You think I'm a soft touch?"

"I don't know what to think," Stork wasn't backing down. "I've lost friends because of them."

"So have I," said Sabienn.

"Well then what's wrong with you?" Stork was livid.

"You think I'm a soft touch?" said Sabienn. "You kill 'em. But you stay. Understood?" He held his hand out. "Keys?"

After a few more seconds glaring at each other, Stork slammed the keys into

Sabienn's palm and stamped the ground with his foot.

"This is wrong," said Deep, watching Sabienn walk to the driver's side.

"It's not our call," said Sabienn not even looking back. "Let's go. Move!"

The colleagues quietly gathered themselves and their belongings and walked to the vehicle. One last look at the men against the tree and Sabienn saw two men still expecting a final fatal shot. And even Sabienn wasn't sure it wouldn't happen. His two hot heads on the issue, Deep and Stork, were in the back tray. *What if they killed them anyway? What would I say? I've lost a lot of skin here. Was it worth it? They're probably right, you know. The men deserved to die. Why hold my friends back because I have a gut feeling?*

The utility was brought to power and Sabienn reversed out the pathway. He kept an eye on the dealers expecting at any second to see them lose their lives. Bray sat tight beside him keeping a watchful eye out the front. There was no joy in this trip.

He found the track and brought the car to speed taking them in the direction of the main road. In his mind he kept mulling over the events that just occurred. *What's wrong with me? Where'd this feeling come from?* Sabienn thought.

It was then he realized that the cabin of this vehicle was very familiar. He reached over to the glove box and let it drop to see the fishing lines inside. There was no doubt about it. It was the vehicle that belonged to the man who gave him his ride from Walk-Don't-Run. The cheerful guy whose watermelons he'd sat on in the back and sung to.

*That poor old guy,* Sabienn thought. *Dealt with by those pricks. Going about his way selling watermelons. He would have been stopped at an ambush, taken out of the car and done over by the side of the road. I can see his face, poor guy. Hell, I want to go back and kill them now.* He hit the steering wheel with his hand in frustration but kept his thinking to himself. *My friends were right. Those dealers should have died.* He hit the wheel again. *Why do I think the way I think? All my decisions are wrong.* He hit the steering wheel again.

"Could you stop doing that?" said Bray. "I'm trying to watch the road. Look for what it's worth," he added, not taking his eyes off the road. "We're all with you. Even Stork."

The comment was all that Sabienn needed. It was like a treasure chest opening and viewing a long lost glowing precious metal hidden within and how he'd almost missed finding it. "Thanks," he said blankly.

The car hit the main road and headed east. The two men in the back lay as flat as they could to avoid attracting attention. The countryside that they'd seen before rolled by them again, this time the other way.

They made some easy silent kilometres and reached the turn off to Second



Best Hill with little drama. Sabienn guided the vehicle to a parking space within a creek rest stop about two hundred metres from the fort. It was an innocuous area and even at this time there were kids playing on the slide in the park.

The four alighted from the vehicle and Sabienn secured the cabin with the extra rifles rolled up in towels within. A small walk into the intervening forest found them in a clearing with a reasonable view of Second Best Hill's carpark. They all sat and Stork pulled his backpack off his shoulders.

"Do you want the good news or the better news?" Stork opened his pack and continued. "We have 47,687 kee in loose notes. We can pawn some of the weapons we don't need to bring it up to an even forty eight. It won't buy us freedom but it sure will buy us a lot of blending in." He opened his map and pointed within. "The Trek Shack is near Geer here. We can stay at a hotel but their registers have to be open to the police. As a fall back there are bed-and-breakfasts all around here that get by the rules. If we ever need to get a good night's sleep and smell the coffee in the morning." Stork had a way of explaining things that left them all quivering in anticipation. "Also on the up side," he continued, "Deep's got himself a new rifle, courtesy of the dealers. Show 'em that thing." Deep relinquished his new acquisition to the admiring Stork who held it and ran his hands up its length as if to sell it. "The Blue Hunter 5000. Flagship of the Blue Hunter plant. I couldn't put a price on this. This weapon is sex." He turned to answer an imaginary voice at the side. "This weapon is *not* sex? Well what's sex then?" He came back and tapped Sabienn on the arm. "Best to get such a beast from a living person than a dead one. There's more sport." The weapon was passed back to Deep who mothered it in his arms.

"Wait," said Deep, picking up a sound. "Shh." All fell silent.

There was movement in the trees coming towards them. They didn't appear to be making a stealthy approach. It was as if they didn't know they were there.

The four became alert and took cover among the trees. In the distance Sabienn could see the familiar grey hooded figure of Argent and another hooded figure walking with the gait of Mr Same. They were coming from the north where the forest had some depth and they stopped to gather their bearings.

Deep chirped like a bush fowl to get their attention. It was a very good impression and as it was a mating call Sabienn hoped it didn't attract any amorous males. The new comers noted their position and the wave of Sabienn's hand and trudged wearily to their gathering. They all shook hands but there was no warmth in the meeting.

"You're early." Argent took a seat on a rock heavily green with moss.

"We have a car," said Sabienn, expecting this to get a cheerful reception.

"We have something for you," said Argent earnestly and reached into his

pocket. He retrieved a twenty kee note and handed it reverently to Sabienn with both hands. Sabienn failed to see the significance of the gesture and took it casually off the old man.

“Why don’t you keep it?” said Sabienn.

“This can’t stay at Ambia Vee,” replied Argent. Sabienn looked toward the note and just saw a twenty kee note. He tossed it towards Stork to join the rest.

Watching this, Argent wheeled on Sabienn with fire. “You *ingrate*! Have you no shame?” Sabienn was stunned by the response. The old man continued, “You sham of a man!”

“What’re you talking about?” Sabienn was back-tracking over what had happened.

Argent was beside himself, feeling annoyed that he had to spell it out. “We can’t keep this object because it is *yours*. You brought this to *our* camp.” He then turned to help Mr Same rummage through a pack that he was carrying. “We have food.”

Sabienn turned to Bray standing close and whispered, “What did I do? Did I say something?”

Quickly Bray offered, “Say, there’s money and there’s money. There’s a whole bunch of money lying in this backpack. It’s like a party of disinterested units. It’s ready to band together in a gang. It’ll do something good or do something bad. It doesn’t care, it’s just money.” He then pointed to the twenty kee casually tossed to the ground next to the pack. “Then there’s a lone twenty kee note. Probably conveyed here with whispers and reverent fervour. It was delivered as a man’s mission to honour a memory. What he believed was right. This is art. The art of guilt.” He moved in closer to Sabienn. “Be a man, Say. Assume some guilt.”

“I didn’t do anything,” said Sabienn in slight protest.

“Yes you did,” said Bray. “We all did. By being there.”

Mulling over what he had just heard, Sabienn walked over to Argent. “I’m sorry,” said Sabienn standing to hug the old man with feeling. “Please forgive me. I didn’t realize.” The old man took the hug but disengaged quickly. Mr Same unpacked some paper bags and unwrapped them to reveal sandwiches.

Stork looked longingly towards the dumpster and some portable barbecues nearby. “Nothing I like better than cold sandwiches,” he said.

“I note your sarcasm, boy,” said Argent with venom. “They were made with the washed hands of women who had just buried their friend.” That shut Stork up. That shut everyone up. “You’re weak as piss,” said the old man with feeling to Stork. “You’re all weak as piss.” He swung around and addressed Sabienn. “Just one last thing,” he said. “Give up your fool’s mission. It’s folly. Pure folly.

That's all."

With that last comment, Argent and Mr Same without a word gathered their items together, stood and made their way back into the forest. Sabienn sat there feeling humbly chastised and watched the pair disappear into the trees from where they came.

After a period of silence, Stork picked up his sandwich and took a bite. "Well, that would have been worthwhile hiking full pelt across the country for." He took another bite. "This isn't half bad."

After that, it was a quiet breakfast. On the most part the four sat in silence eating their sandwiches.

There was a curious male bush fowl poking his head into the clearing, darting his funny knotted head left and right but ultimately disappearing into the bush not finding the mate promised to him by the call. *I should get Deep do another call*, thought Sabienn, looking at the bush fowl. *But then poor little guy. Why mess with his mind? I'm in enough shit as it is.*

At that moment, there was the sound of sustained gunfire coming from the direction of the shooting pits. It pierced the tranquillity of their little sleepy hollow in the woods with its rotting logs, mossed rocks and new trees sprouting.

Looking in the direction of where the noise came, Sabienn commented, "Nine o'clock. Another one bites the dust." *It's all temporary*, he thought. *I wonder what Joallee's thinking? I wonder what Raajaa's doing? Where's my old life?*

Bray sat eating his third sandwich. There was enough in the bag for two feasts. Sabienn sat down next to him. "Bray," Sabienn said. "You knew me when I was in primary?" Bray nodded with a mouthful. "Was I that bad?" continued Sabienn. "I don't even remember you."

Bray looked at him and his eyes darkened a little, "You don't remember my sandwich?"

"What sandwich?" Sabienn was at a loss to remember.

"You don't remember you spat in my sandwich?" said Bray, with feeling.

"No." Sabienn lay back on his log with his own half eaten sandwich. "I'm sorry." They chewed their food in silence for a bit longer.

"It was a crap sandwich. Pickles, I think. Something sour. It was so long ago," said Bray chomping down. "I was going to throw it anyway."

"Here," Sabienn leant forward and presented his open sandwich to Bray to return the favour of years ago.

"I'm not doing that," Bray found the gesture idiotic.

It was at that moment, Stork moved over Sabienn's shoulder like a bird of prey and pulled from the most disgusting region of his nasal passages the most awful, greenest, stickiest snot gob he could and let it drop onto the sandwich

presented. Sabienn looked stunned at Stork's nasal contents lying steaming in his food.

"Never let a chance go by, bitch," said Stork, going back to the pack of fresh sandwiches. "Especially when he's whipping himself." He picked up a new one and handed it to Sabienn who had discarded his other to the unfortunate fungus in the undergrowth. "So what are we doing?" continued Stork. "And don't go getting all touchy-feely and say 'Let's have a vote.'" Stork sat down and they all looked to Sabienn. "Lead us."

The act really sobered Sabienn up. "I have a Supreme Order. Given to me by The Great Leader. I need to get to The Battleground Trek Shack to follow a lead to fulfil my Order. I need to get there today."

"That's good enough for me," said Stork and he started to pack away the excess food for later.

"And me," said Deep, placing his new weapon on his shoulder.

"And me." Bray tidied his belongings and readied himself for the next trip.

Sabienn made short work of his sandwich, pushing the final morsel down his throat. When his mouth was clear, they were all packed. "Listen up," he said. "We need to plan this."

He pulled out the map and laid it down on a rock. "This Order is now two days old. Bray and I were the last to see Jarnee yesterday on the bus. Stork knows him. What about you?" He directed his attention to Deep.

"We both did primary at Cumin. More recently I met him. He visited on a chess tournament," said Deep. "I saw him tip up one of the boards on my girlfriend. If you don't kill him, I will."

"Good old Jarnee," said Stork. "He really spreads his love."

"He's wearing a purple and white 'Place' cloak," said Sabienn. "With blood on the white patch of the left shoulder."

"That's your blood, right?" Stork enquired of Sabienn who acknowledged with a nod.

"What?" Bray was aghast.

"Our boy almost killed him a few days ago," said Stork to Bray. "Almost choked him."

"Why would he be given an Order to kill someone he would readily kill anyway?" said Bray. "It goes against the whole reason for the Supreme Order. To fight against your urges for the will of The Great Leader. It would have made more sense if his sister was given the Order. Do you ever get the feeling we're being set up?"

Bray's remark put the group to silence. Sabienn stated finally, "Of course I do. But what else have I got?" Sabienn pointed one last time to the Shack on the

map. “Look, we go to the Shack. Park here near the lake. We walk through the forest and do a reccy from the woods.”

“Works for me,” said Bray. The map was stowed and they hiked back to the vehicle.

The sun was warm and the morning bright. Kids in the park were going about their business doing the things kids did under the watchful eye of their guardians. Some girls were in the cold water of the creek splashing water on their friends. *Kids*, thought Sabienn. *I was a kid once. Apparently a very bad one.*

He took to the wheel and brought the battery to power and silently guided the utility out of the carpark and back to the road.

## 23. The Worm Hole

When Sabienn reached the T-junction with the main road which was to take them east, the traffic had increased considerably. He waited for his turn to enter the steady stream of cars.

There were all sorts of cars of different styles, colours and personal status. Sabienn watched a small red hatchback driven by a woman gripping the wheel with two kids in the back belting each other around the ears. Then there was a green truck from the Walk-Don't-Run solar plant with its rear compartment filled with battery replacements.

Looking down at his own gauge, Sabienn saw that the car they'd acquired still had 95% charge. There were still plenty of kilometres in it before it needed to be unlocked and reloaded with a new one.

His eyes were then transfixed on a yellow luxury coupe driven by a grim faced young man dressed stylishly in a floral cloak. He kept eye contact a moment longer than necessary.

"Look," said Bray with surprise.

"What?" said Sabienn.

The next vehicle was a black dual cab utility, not unlike the ones used by the Secret Police. But this one didn't have the official black background licence plates of the Police. The initial gaze didn't register too much attention but Sabienn saw the man in the front passenger seat. It was the dealer they'd met earlier they knew as the gunman. Sabienn looked at him petrified and Bray saw him too.

"Shit," said Bray. "Do you think he clocked us?"

"I think we're OK," Sabienn replied. "What can they do?"

The black vehicle suddenly braked violently and fishtailed to a stop on a right-angle with the road. Car horns blared of the following vehicles forced to make evasive manoeuvres to stop ploughing in to the back of the stopped vehicle. Sabienn looked on at the vehicle with one thought, *Should've let the boys kill him.* "Hold tight!"

He planted his accelerator and took his vehicle west again. The black car jammed up the traffic in both directions so it allowed a space to enter. The vehicle was pushed to speed as quickly as its hot little battery could let it. The

black car was now behind them and gaining. A shot hit the back glass panel and shards flew everywhere.

“Heads down everyone,” said Sabienn coming up to an intersection. At speed he took a left turn and came on to a dirt track.

Bray had the map of the area in his head. “You can take the next left.”

The intersection Bray had mentioned loomed and Sabienn was still pushing the car at speed.

“Left. Left! LEFT!” cried Bray.

The vehicle sailed right past and rolled on south.

“Not this one,” said Sabienn. A bullet smashed the side view mirror followed by another that shattered the back brake light.

“Where’s the next left?” called Sabienn.

“Here!” cried Bray. “HERE!”

Sabienn drifted the vehicle into a left turn and gunned its little battery.

“Deep,” he cried to his friend in the back. “See the branch overhanging?”

“I’m on it,” came the reply. As they passed under the branch, two bullets from the Blue Hunter smashed into the hanging limb causing it to fall in front of the wheels of the black utility. It wasn’t large enough to halt their progress completely.

The black car pulled to a stop at the branch to reverse and manoeuvre around.

“Is there a track to the left up here?” Sabienn called to Bray.

“Should be anywhere here. There! THERE!” Bray pointed feverishly. Sabienn took the left turn at speed and almost ploughed into a tractor coming the other way. Its horn blared at their car and a familiar finger gesture was displayed.

With all his skill Sabienn veered them away from collision and took his car north to the connecting road they’d passed seconds ago. The tractor driver pulled to a halt and jumped clear into the forest. The intersection loomed to take them west. They saw it coming and Sabienn planted his brakes bringing the car to halt right dead square in the middle of the “X” facing west.

“Take your time, Deep,” said Sabienn. “Just give me a sign.”

“Copy that,” said Deep. There was a few seconds silence. Deep took a crouching position on the back tray.

At that moment, the black vehicle took the turn evading the parked tractor. And Deep saw it coming. Eight quick rounds aimed low were pumped with all the accuracy capable of the Blue Hunter in Deep’s grip and the skill and precision in his gaze and hands. Two tyres blew on the vehicle making it teeter without anchor and roll on its side.

“Go. Go!” cried Deep, whacking the back of the cabin. Deep dropped and braced himself in the tray. Sabienn needed no second invitation. The gravel shot

from the back wheels as he brought the utility hurtling westward.

“Whoaah!” Sabienn started belting the steering wheel in celebration and turned back to shout. “You’re a hell shot, man!” Deep responded with a thumbs up.

Sabienn got to the intersection and veered the wheels north. The battery was gunned for as much acceleration as could be mustered. “Whoaah!” cried Sabienn with ebullience.

“Watch the speed,” said Bray. “Check yourself.”

“I think I’m going to hurl,” cried Stork.

“That way.” Deep pointed to the outside of the vehicle.

“Hold it, Stork,” cried Sabienn. “The road’s coming. You can paint some cars.” He beat the wheel some more.

The intersection was coming up that they couldn’t break into before. Bray saw them hitting the crossroads with too much pace. “Hey. Slow! Slow Down!”

Sabienn pushed the vehicle through without stopping, narrowly missing an eastbound car which had to hit its horn and take a skid on the verge. A westbound truck nearly clipped them as they traversed in front of it. Once again the customary finger was displayed out of the truck in warm recognition of Sabienn’s safe driving as the driver called, “Dickhead!”

“Thank you,” Sabienn cried to unappreciative ears and turned to the rear. “How’s it back there, Stork?”

“Oh, the hurling’s not the problem,” cried Stork. “It’s the full underpants.”

Sabienn settled the vehicle into the eastbound flow of traffic. He saw a road sign, “Geer. We’re on course.” He pushed on enjoying the breeze in the cabin, being sucked out the hole in the back.

The countryside changed as they sped along. This part of the world the forest had been tamed to fields where they grew corn and root vegetables. There were also massive greenhouses in the distance where market vegetables were grown.

“Let’s get some tomatoes,” called Stork from the rear. “They’re the best in the country.”

“No time,” called Sabienn.

Coming up on the right of them was one of the largest billboards Sabienn had ever seen, showing The Great Leader’s face and upper torso in portrait. It showed him in the casual garb of the field worker, as if he’d just stepped off a tractor and was suddenly caught by surprise by an easel and stood smiling towards the painter. There was the usual slogan “Obey Me” at the bottom.

“You know, The Great Leader fought tooth and nail for the farming industry here,” said Sabienn proudly. “Now it’s the food bowl of Hayddland. They love The Great Leader here and so do I.” Bray kept silent beside him with his eyes



forward. "Are you OK?" inquired Sabienn.

"Yeah. I'm good," said Bray blankly.

The vehicle was coming up quickly on the physical landmark that separated Sett from Chard. "The mighty Crystal River," called Stork from the back. "Show respect, guys. No fishing, no spitting, no pissing and no loitering for suicide. Unless you're a Chard." They hit the bridge at speed and Sabienn experienced once again that ribbed surface of the structure that made the car go clickety clickety clickety.

They looked out over the disgusting murky and opaque water of the Crystal River on its ceaseless meandering down to Foundation City. "Who'd want to spit in that?" called Stork. "It would only improve it."

Upon reaching the other side of the bridge, Sabienn said, "Boys. We're now entering Chard. Prepare to leave the planet."

They passed a few locals on the side of the road. There was a man, a woman and three children dressed in ragged hand-me-downs with no shoes. Their sullen faces turned to the vehicle and stared them down without welcome or warmth. "Look at them," called Stork. "Any bridge-crossers are viewed with suspicion. They wear inferiority like a badge of honour."

"Well you don't have to live here," turned Bray with some heat. "How would you like it?"

"I'm sitting here with wings, Bray," said Stork. "It's a joke."

Time passed as Sabienn drove further into Chard. There was a tourist sign pointing the way to The Battleground Trek Shack and he guided the vehicle into the service road to take them there.

The river formed several lakes in the area which Sabienn knew were popular for fishing and camping. There were also a lot of little car-parks where people could stop to revive themselves, have lunch and take a dip in the cool water. Sabienn guided his vehicle into a car space at the nearest area to the store.

They took all the items that they could from the car and walked a timber tread deck-way raised just off the ground to allow dry shoes for the tourists. The pathway gave way to the open edge of the car-park and they had full view of the store.

"What the ..?" Sabienn gazed with stunned amazement.

A banner had been raised across the top of the front awning with a message. "Under New Management."

The old sign of The Battleground Trek Shack was now resting limply up against a post. It had been removed by two men who were putting the finishing touches to screwing in the new sign. It proudly displayed the new name. The Worm Hole.

There was a waste bin nearby and Sabienn saw something and reached in to find an old brochure that someone had discarded. *A business in happier times*, thought Sabienn, as he viewed the happy photo on the front. *Yesterday, it would seem.*

The brochure boasted a hearty welcome to all tourists to The Battleground Trek Shack and displayed all services that they had on offer. There was a list of all the camping, fishing and hiking supplies that could be either purchased or hired. There was also a list of the guided bus and hiking tours that patrons liked to undertake to get a genuine feel of the countryside.

Sabienn knew there was a history of the battles of the Curl War around here that drew the usual war aficionados and offered a close hand experience of the soldiers of old.

On the front of the brochure was the usual photo offering the patron the trust of a true family business. There was Crayne Jasspick, the head of the house, his daughter, Peep Jasspick and his step-son, Borr Jasspick, who was married to his daughter.

There was a wry smile that went across Sabienn's face and he passed the brochure to Stork who also saw the humour. "What a beautiful family," said Stork. "Proud sprigs of the blurred family tree. Welcome to Chard."

"Hey," said Sabienn, seeing a man in the car park. "It's him."

There was a man, possibly in his early fifties working around a car with a dust bin beside him. It was the spitting image of the father figure in the photo, Crayne Jasspick. Only this man working around the car looked like he went fifteen rounds with a heavyweight. When his face turned around they could see the abrasions around his eyes and the bruising on his cheek bones.

"There's surveillance here," said Bray. They all noted the cameras pointing into the car park so they would already be on record. Their eyes came back to the sad and sullen man.

"Let's just act like tourists," said Sabienn. The four men brought their hoods up in a vain attempt at anonymity and walked to the man at the car.

"Excuse me, sir," Sabienn said and immediately reeled back when he copped the full force of the man's breath. He'd been drinking something potently alcoholic that rendered what fumes were coming out of his mouth almost inflammable.

"Wow. You're not driving, are you?" Sabienn was trying to keep things light hearted. "Are you Crayne Jasspick?"

They got a better look at the man's face as he turned to acknowledge the name. His left eye was practically closed from swelling. From Sabienn's limited knowledge, the wounds appeared to have been inflicted possibly the night before

and it was obvious that they hadn't received any medical treatment.

"Do you want us to call a doctor, sir?" said Bray.

"What's this 'sir' business?" said the man slurring his words.

The man pulled a poster from out the back of the car. It had a happy slogan of "Welcome to The Battleground Trek Shack" with a cheerful smiling sun. He took the poster in his hand and ripped it right down the middle, then into four and then tossed it into the dust bin beside him.

"You're late," said Crayne, surly and slurred.

"We're what?" Sabienn wasn't sure what to make of this.

"Not what? You're not what, you idiot. You're late!" Crayne was starting to get aggressive now.

"Who're you talking to?" Sabienn was accommodating to a certain extent but losing patience.

"You're the four freaks. You're Feel. Something about .. Something about a Supreme Order," said the man, retrieving another poster from the car. "You've got to kill some man with a purple cloak. Blah blah blah! Ha! What a joke!"

He took the cheerful welcome poster and ripped it from top to bottom and side to side and tipped it into the bin.

Sabienn and his friends were aghast at what they'd just heard.

"Excuse me?" Sabienn was still in shock.

"Are you hard of hearing or just stupid?" As he spoke Crayne didn't look at any of them. He just held on to the side of the car and retrieved another poster.

"What'd you just say?" Sabienn said with the fire rising up in him. *Who is this guy? He knows my Supreme Order. The singular most important event in my life. And this drunk is mocking it.*

The man continued to ignore Sabienn and it pushed his blood to boiling point. "Listen to me," called Sabienn. He grabbed the drunk by his shirt and man-handled him against the side of the car. "Look at me." Crayne's eyes continued to evade the younger man's stare. "You're Crayne, right? Crayne? I can see why someone beat you to a pulp. What'd you say again?" His fist was lifted up clenched to the drunk's face to show he was prepared to add further injury.

The drunk was still being held by his shirt and under Sabienn's gaze he suddenly became a little morose and contrite.

"Let's see," Crayne recounted. "What did I say? Um.. I said.. I said, you're the four freaks. And I said.. Something about a Supreme Order. And what'd I say then? ..Oh yeah. I said." He moved his face in close to Sabienn's staring him in the eye. "Blah." He moved his face in closer. "Blah!" Closer still. "BLAH!" He was right up against the younger man's face. The stench from his breath was

making Sabienn gag. “Go to hell and wait,” said Crayne. He then broke away from Sabienn’s grip and went back to his car, not caring if he received further physical punishment.

“Old man, we’ve had enough of you,” said Sabienn waving away the drunk. “I’m guessing this “New Management” doesn’t include you. I’m glad you got the boot. It’ll be better for business.”

“Check the records, fool,” said Crayne. “Business was never better.” The comment must have piqued Crayne.

“Records lie,” said Sabienn. “Show me some vision. Where’s yesterday’s surveillance? I want to see how many people are here.”

“I don’t have to listen to you. Look at me!” Crayne turned to face Sabienn. His eye was practically closed from a beating and his face had bruises and abrasions. “This is the happiest day of my life! No more customers! No more people like you. Go see him.” Crayne pointed to a man with a box in his hands coming down the front steps.

“That’s your son?” asked Sabienn.

“He’s no son of mine. Now, are we done?” Crayne went back to his car not waiting for a reply.

Sabienn could barely hold his contempt with the old man as he walked away from him. “Have a nice life.”

“I intend to.” Crayne struggled to get into the driver’s seat. “It’ll be longer than yours.”

The four friends walked to Borr Jasspick placing a box in the back of a car. “Mr Jasspick?” Sabienn opened tentatively.

“Who wants to know?” The response was blunt and delivered without turning to address them.

“Your father sent us here,” said Sabienn.

“I have no father,” said Jasspick, as if to spit his response. “What do you people want?”

“Can you tell us when happy hour finishes?” said Stork. “I’m scared we might miss it.”

“What?” Jasspick closed the car and faced them with his fists clenched.

“Do you have surveillance? From yesterday?” Sabienn was in Jasspick’s face and was in no mood for nonsense.

“I repeat, who wants to know?” Jasspick pushed his face closer to Sabienn’s.

“Well that guy knows us.” Stork thumbed back to Crayne who seemed to have collapsed on the front seat of his car. “He seems to know us really well.”

“I haven’t spoken to him in two years,” said Jasspick. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“When’s your next reunion?” said Stork. “He says he knows us, you say you don’t.”

“Look, unless you boys have any business,” Jasspick was tensing up. “I suggest you move on. And for your information, I don’t officially take over until midday.”

“That’s an hour. So where’s surveillance?” said Sabienn.

“With him.” Jasspick pointed back to the drunk. “Now go away. Talk to the manager.” With that he left in a huff and went back up the stairs to go inside. The four men looked at one another.

“So far I can’t fault the service here,” said Stork watching the man go. They made their way back to the car and looked through the window at Crayne passed out on the seat. There were some boxes on the back seat which they pulled out on to the carpark ground.

With deft hands they riffled through the contents, placing stuff on the ground that didn’t interest them. There were photos of happy times. Wedding photos of his daughter and the idiot they’d just spoken to. All smiling and striking glasses with good cheer for the future. There were dog biscuits, fishing lines and an appreciation award for acting in a local play. There were magazines for wedding dress design and right at the bottom, well dog-eared copies of pornography, stained in such a manner that they decided to leave them put rather than touch them.

“Can I help you gentlemen?” They were so engrossed in their searching that they failed to notice the woman of the house arrive.

Sabienn held her wedding photo displaying the young carefree laughing bride and looked up at the reality before them. *Peep Jasspick. A woman who’s been beaten around the head with life and had so many of her soft edges knocked off.* Her hair was displaying shades of grey through the black and there were craggy distrust lines in her brow.

“Ma’am,” said Sabienn with respect. “We spoke with your husband. We’re looking for surveillance records. He said they were here.”

“Ma’am. Do you know us?” said Stork.

“Am I supposed to?” she replied. She then noticed Deep’s tall and commanding frame, “Although I’d like to get to know you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too, Ma’am,” said Deep. Sabienn saw that he seemed flattered by the attention and appeared not unreceptive to her advance.

“We’re looking for someone who was supposed to be here. We think yesterday,” said Sabienn.

“Where’s my father?” asked Peep.

They all looked toward the front seat. She followed their eyes and rolled her

gaze in disgust. "Meet me at the kitchen door," said Peep, reaching into the car to retrieve the old man who was now vaguely conscious and slurring in his sleep but complying with her guidance.

"Come on," she said to him. "It's to the dog kennels with you."

"D'you need a hand?" Sabienn rushed forward to guide the slumping man.

"No." She swung around annoyed but then softened. "No.. thank you. Call me Peep." She shot another sweet glance to Deep who smiled back. The boys watched her take Crayne for a stagger and looked amongst themselves.

"Deep and Peep," said Stork significantly.

"Shut up." Deep wasn't to be trifled.

As he helped place Crayne's personal effects back in the car, there was relief in Sabienn's movement. *Finally I'm getting somewhere*, he thought.

At the back door that led to the kitchen, they didn't have to wait long. She appeared with a device that she shared. The date stamp was for yesterday and all the figures of people doing business that day were moving in fast forward pace as from the security camera on the front porch.

"There, There!" Sabienn spotted a figure and it was rewind. It was unmistakeable. The purple cloaked figure with the hood firmly placing his face in concealment. Once again the other cloaked figure was with him. The one he had seen him with at Mission Ginger.

"That's him," Sabienn said, happy that they were still on the trail.

Peep looked on at the image and was less than impressed. "He was trouble. Has he broken the law?"

"We have business with him," said Sabienn. *Better not give too much away*, he thought. *Even though the whole mission had been sprayed around the carpark less than half an hour ago.*

"From memory, he's taken the standard six-man overnight hiking trek to Red Ghost Hill," said Peep. "The next tour leaves in two hours. Unfortunately it's fully booked. I can get you on tomorrow's."

"Why do we need to go on this?" said Bray to the others. "Why don't we go straight to the other place we have a card for?"

"That wouldn't be for a family portrait place in Turmeric?" Peep was quite matter-of-fact and polite. The boys stood aghast again as she continued. "It's no mystery. It's our partner at the other end. Tours start this end here and the other there. But they finish all over the place. If your friend received our card, more than likely he was given the other one as well. They're generally given together." She held up the image of Jarnee in his purple cloak still on the screen. "Your best bet is to stick with us. Will we see you tomorrow?"

Sabienn looked to his friends and they looked back as if to say, "Don't look at

us. Make the decision.”

“You’ve been very helpful,” Sabienn said. “But we need to get moving today.”

Deep looked into her eyes gently and she seemed to warm to his approach. Sabienn continued, “We are prepared to pay extra to get on that tour.”

“Extra?” By her response they could sense that money could be a determining variable. “How much extra?”

“Double,” said Sabienn.

She stood silently considering the amount for a period of time, staring blankly at the boys and was about to give her response when Bray stepped in. “Triple,” he blurted. “And we get to be the only ones on the tour.”

The amount and request took her by surprise. She cleared her throat briefly. “I’ll see what I can do.” With that she left them and went back inside the kitchen.

Stork turned to Bray and said light-heartedly, “It’s lucky you stopped, man. We’ve only got fifty thousand.”

“What do you care?” Bray turned on his friend with a little heat. “It’s not your money.”

With a business-like manner, Peep returned with her books. “I’ve made a few calls. And you’re in luck. People were prepared to cancel. Seems like they were struggling to get here. Looks like it’s worked out for everyone. Just a question of payment.”

“Please,” Sabienn bowed in appreciation and indicated Stork. “Speak with our treasurer.”

Peep added cheerfully, “Are you boys off to see The Great Leader? He’s there in Turmeric in two days.”

Sabienn was stunned. *I wasn’t aware of that but I better not let on.* “It’s our duty,” he said. “We’re on a pilgrimage.”

“If you want tickets, I’ll call my cousin,” said Peep. “Four tickets, front row. She has connections.”

*Turmeric Stadium, he thought. This would be where Jarrnee makes his move. This meeting with Peep has been valuable.* “That’s very kind, Ma’am.”

“She runs a hotel called The Blue Air,” She reached into a card folder in her pocket, pulled out a card and proffered it to Deep. “All I ask is you, sir,” she spoke directly to Deep, “Come spend breakfast with me on your return.”

“I can make him breakfast,” said Stork, miffed that Deep was getting the attention.

“Not after what I can give him,” she said.

“How can I say no?” Deep was obviously enjoying the encounter.

“You boys seem to have stirred up a lot of noise,” she said. “I can’t say too

much. But it's got nothing to do with me. I just want this man," she said looking at Deep. "And I will *get* this man."

Sabienn was a little stunned at how forward she was but they left Stork make arrangements and retreated to the car-park to check themselves down. They were packed and ready for another session of hiking.

With the appearance of the weight of the world on his shoulders, Stork rejoined them. "Look .. um. Good news, our tickets are waiting at The Blue Air. Bad news. They needed names. So we were in the kitchen. And these are our names."

He handed a voucher to Sabienn, "You're Cutting Bordd."

One was handed to Deep. "Mr Ovenn Blakk."

To Bray he handed one, "Fuller Sinkk. And I'm Binn Bagg."

Sabienn took his voucher with his name for the trip and stared at it in his hands. He thought, *Just as my sacred journey reaches a stage when it's like absolute farce, an opening appears to send it down into something more ridiculous.*

"It's not your fault," said Sabienn to an affected Stork. "Good work."

"Good work?" countered Bray. "Fuller Sinkk?"

"I'm not good under pressure." Stork looked at his feet. "I'm sorry. It was either that or Cleever Steel."

"Wh..?" Bray didn't say anything but just left them briefly and huffed around in a bit of an unmanly petulant display. "Why does everyone get a better fake name than me? Fuller Sinkk," he spat. "Cleever Steel is much better. Why couldn't I get that? This is ridiculous."

"Can we get back on point?" Sabienn collected their thoughts firmly. "We've got over an hour. Let's get cleaned up."



## 24. The Fishermen or The Fish

Close to the car-park, Sabienn noticed there was an ablutions block for people to shower down after a dip in the lake. As chance would have it, a cleaner had left a bucket and a “Closed for cleaning” sign nearby.

Sabienn placed the sign at the entrance. The hot water was a relief and there were a few cakes of soap left behind that made them smell a bit better.

“Who?.. Ahh!” A startled cleaning lady appeared. She was a mature native woman.

“Oh come on,” said Stork towards her. “Don’t tell me you haven’t seen anything like this.” Three of the men placed their hands over their privates to cover up in the manner of what was expected of a gentleman, but Stork couldn’t care less.

“It’s true,” she said. “It’s true.” She fell to her knees before them. “The Stone Shepherds are here. I didn’t believe them.”

There was an awkward silence for a moment. “Ma’am,” said Bray. “Any shampoo I can borrow?”

“Mr Sinkk will then require a massage and a rub down,” said Stork, washing his inner thighs openly in front of the lady.

“Of course,” the lady disappeared for a minute then reappeared, this time with both her daughters in tow. They went about their task with business-like precision.

Shampoo was handed around and fresh towels were divvied out. Once again, their clothes were placed into separate bags and went sailing out the door. Sabienn called, “I have precious maps. And other things.” It was with a pang of discomfort that he watched his clothes leave.

They cleaned themselves quickly and robes and sandals were given to each. “To the laundry,” said the older woman. “No cameras.” Stork grabbed his backpack and weapons before the overzealous helpers could get their hands on them and followed the others out the door.

In the laundry near the kitchen, Bray was made to lie on a table and one of the daughters went to work pushing and kneading his back muscles. “Well I’ll be,” said Stork musing quietly to Sabienn. “They’re giving him a massage. Lucky I didn’t tell them to cover him in honey and lick him down.” Stork called

to Bray, "Hey, I bet Cleever Steel wouldn't get that."

"I bet he would," said Bray still slightly miffed but enjoying the good agony of muscles worked. They sat as their clothes were emptied of contents, which were passed lovingly to their owners, and the garments then placed in machines.

"Thank you," said Sabienn to the woman. "Do you know who we are? Some people know us, some people don't."

"You are known," said the woman. "Please I can't say more. For the safety of my daughters. Only you must be careful."

Stork broke out the left-over sandwiches from breakfast and placed them on the table for everyone. "This food was made by women I know," said the woman. "I see their hand-work."

"We caused a lot of pain for these women," said Sabienn. "We appreciate your help."

"Ma'am," said Deep. "You know we have an Order?"

"I know this," said the woman.

"We are like fishermen looking for a fish," Deep continued. "Sometimes we don't know. Are we the fishermen or are we the fish?"

The daughter working Bray's shoulders turned and stated in a matter-of-fact manner. "You are bait." When the comment hit the older woman's ears she leapt from her chair and slapped her daughter across the face. After her daughter left crying from the room, she then turned to the door desperately checking no-one had heard what was said. The woman then turned to the men.

"Please." There was panic in her eyes. "Please, not a word to anyone."

"It's OK." Sabienn tried to calm her down.

"She's only young." She was now crying in Sabienn's arms. The four men looked at each other.

"It's OK," said Sabienn. "Take some of our food." But it wasn't necessary. At that moment, more parcels of wrapped sandwiches arrived courtesy of the second daughter and with Stork's help were packed away.

Their clothes were soon cleaned and pulled from driers and placed on all crisp and warm. At the laundry door, the woman appeared not to want to go any further and wrung each of their hands. "Be careful."

They then went to the car-park to the allotted meeting point. Sabienn sought out Deep and conferred quietly, "What do you think? Bait?"

"Bait hangs safely on a hook," said Deep. "It's neither hunter nor hunted."

"Exactly," said Bray coming in close. "But we're being watched."

"Hey, I'll be back soon," said Stork. He disappeared briefly into the foyer of the building and retrieved some brochures. When Stork returned, he held one for them to see. "Here's the usual hiking trek. There's the winding track into the

woods. The camping area, Lake Loom. From here, it's an easy walk in the morning to the lookout of Red Ghost Hill. At Red Ghost Hill there's an office where tour guides sign a book as to whether their clients continue or leave the tour. Just a thought. You want to jump and run there? See the book?"

"We stay," said Sabienn. "There's a reason why we're here. And if all hell breaks loose, we conceal ourselves in the woods."

"Everyone for the Red Ghost Hill tour," a familiar voice was heard shouting from the outer edge of the car-park. "Front and Centre." They looked towards the voice and their spirits sank.

The scowling face of Borr Jasspick stood ready to lead them all into the unknown. Sabienn said sardonically to his friends, "Looks like it's all going to get off on an even keel."

"Gather round!" called Jasspick. His attitude hadn't improved. It was as still as abrasive and confronting as he had been an hour ago.

Sabienn noticed also that there was an elderly couple, a man and a woman possibly in their late seventies standing nearby. Jasspick referred to a clip board and continued without pleasantries.

"OK. Do we have Cutting Bordd and Ovens Blakk?"

Sabienn and Deep raised their hands in response.

"You have no tent," said Jasspick. "Weather forecast is good. You'll sleep out tonight."

"Have we paid for one?" said Sabienn. He thought it was worth a try.

"Yes, you have. But we don't have one." Jasspick held the voucher out for all to read the microscopic small print. "Management reserves the right to change conditions. Please read."

"Excuse me." The elderly gentleman appeared agitated and annoyed.

"I'll get to you soon, sir," continued Jasspick without looking towards the man. "Do I have Binn Bagg and Cleever Steel?" Stork's hand went up slowly but Bray's shot up like a rocket. "You pair have a tent," said Jasspick looking at the backpack Stork already had to bear. "Looks like you carry it, Mr Steel."

Bray turned excitedly to Stork. "You changed it."

"It's no big deal," said Stork blankly. "Peep said it was OK."

"That's decent of you," said Bray with his chest out. "Cleever Steel. That's a fake name a man can be proud of."

"Just stay on your side of the tent." Stork pulled his pack on and moved away.

Jasspick continued, blankly reading from his check sheet. "OK, front and centre. Lyall Tagg and Marriell Spoon." He looked up briefly from his sheet. "You have a tent. It's yours to carry, Mr Tagg."

All looked toward the frail man standing there barely able to take steps of his own. "This is outrageous," said Lyall.

Bray chipped in. "This is completely unacceptable. We paid extra. For a tour on our own."

"So did they. Your point being," Jasspick barely looked from his check sheet. He had all the care of swatting a fly.

"But my wife and I paid triple," said Lyall, almost red with rage.

"They did too," said Jasspick, looking at his watch. "Time is of the essence people."

"And I can't carry a tent. This is .. This is robbery." Lyall was trying to be calmed down by his wife. "This is not what we paid for."

"Did you read the ..?" Jasspick held up the voucher.

"Well that's the other thing," said Lyall still seething. "The voucher has us down as Jasspick and Jasspick."

"Yes." Jasspick was impenetrable. "Is there a problem?"

"But.." Lyall was floundering as where to begin. "That's not us. That's not our names."

"Yes," replied Jasspick.

"But.."

"It's perfectly simple, sir," said Jasspick. "You're travelling as our grandparents. If you travel as family, we don't pay tax on you. Will that be all?"

Mr Tagg's face was glowing red. "Charlatan!"

"If you don't like it, sir." Jasspick directed Lyall's gaze to the car-park as if to suggest that the terms are to be accepted or he needn't take the trip. A worried hand of Marriell held her husband's fingers and urged him quietly to back down.

"Excuse me." Bray wanted to bring Jasspick back on point that there still was another grievance. "We paid good money, sir. We paid extra because we need to move. I mean .. no offence to the gentleman, but we can't be held back. We need to *move*. We need to make tracks. It's important."

"As soon as you're done yapping, we'll get going," Jasspick was blank and disinterested.

"Sir, I'm not sure what I find most offensive about you," said Bray. "Whether it's that you're so corrupt or that you couldn't care less flouting it. Now I intend to report you, sir. The Chard Tourism Board will hear from me. Or I'm not Cleever Steel."

Jasspick was as blank as ever. "Well, chances are you're *not* Cleever Steel. And .. Good luck." He ticked a few boxes in his check list. "Sort it out amongst yourselves. We leave in five minutes."

With his face in his paperwork, Jasspick returned to the office.

Bray turned to confide with his friends feeling a little chastened by his encounter. "This guy knows about us." He quietly looked around at the trees in the vain hope that the plant life might give up some secrets. "Everyone seems to know more about what we're doing than us."

Seeing the old couple looking crushed that their holiday was in tatters, Sabienn went to them to offer comfort.

"Sir, I know this is not ideal. But can you allow us to carry you and your wife? He'll carry your tent." He nodded towards Bray. "It's just that we need to move."

"Carry us?" The old man was suspicious.

"Piggy back. We'll be careful," said Sabienn.

The old man appeared before him to be shattered and distraught. Marriell moved in one more time to hold his fingers. "It's alright," she said. "We're committed. Take your heart pills." She turned to Sabienn. "We'll do as you say. He just needs his pills."

The four men readied themselves but all watched the couple fumble with their pack. Marriell produced a cup and filled it with water from a container. "Why'd you pack this one? Why'd you do that?" said Lyall.

"What's the difference?" she replied.

"The green cup," insisted Lyall. "I always have the green cup."

"This is just as good," she said offering a red cup in her hand.

"I told you to pack the green cup."

"Where was it?" said Marriell.

"On the table," said Lyall becoming visibly upset. "I left it on the table."

"Just drink it please," she said.

"The green cup. It's always the green cup. It's *my* cup."

"What's the difference?" she said.

"It's the cup for my pills." Lyall's head was shaking.

It was at that moment Jaspick returned fully laden with a backpack complete with his tent and cooking gear. "We're all sorted?" he stated blankly.

"He needs his pills," said Marriell quietly.

"I can't take my pills." Lyall was adamant.

With absolute vehemence, Jaspick rounded on the poor old man. He grabbed the cup from Marriell's hand and sloshed some of the water out in his rush. "Shut up and take your pills!" Lyall looked up into the eyes beaming anger at him and quickly acquiesced. The pills were taken, the water drank and Jaspick took the red cup and threw it into the dirt.

"Just a word of advice," Jaspick continued. "Everyone does what I say. My old man, my wife, everyone. They all do what *I* say. And that goes with my

customers. Will that be all, old man?" He left them to scratch around with their pack to have it ready in time.

Sabienn looked on and thought, *What a nasty piece of work! But why are they just taking it? These old people are free citizens. They should just leave and complain later. Why put up with this crap? And should I step in? I'm quiet while these poor people are bullied. I know about bullies. I look in the mirror. But it's best not to make waves. We've got the most to lose.*

Bray spoke up without qualms, "You're a disgusting and boorish oaf. I will report you."

"Thank you," said Jasspick without heat. "And you're a complete nobody. Your proud words are like an unmarked grave. A bit like yours. Looking for someone to put a headstone. Will that be all?"

With a few deft steps, Sabienn made his way to the tossed cup and picked it up.

"Hey," said Sabienn. Jasspick turned expecting a fight as the cup was returned to the couple. "My friends and I will carry them. There'll be no problems."

There was a moment of silence as Jasspick stared back at Sabienn. He then walked slowly towards Sabienn without letting his gaze leave his face. Sabienn just stood there, preparing himself for the caustic spray of abuse.

Jasspick was now standing right in front of Sabienn staring squarely into his eyes. "OK," he said. It took Sabienn by surprise but his manner was uncomfortably smarmy. "If you're OK with that. And someone can carry your stuff?" Jasspick was coming on to him like a long lost friend. "We'll be taking an even pace. If you have any problems, just let me know."

With that remark, Jasspick walked away. Sabienn rejoined his friends who witnessed the whole thing. Stork was the first to start. "We'll be taking an even pace," he mimicked in almost an effeminate manner. "If you have any problem."

"What the hell was that? Did you guys see that?" said Sabienn, still trying to get over his encounter.

"Just watch your fingernails," said Stork, still half-serious. "Would you like a manicure with that? Mwah, mwah, mwah." He blew three kisses.

"Just shut up, will you?" Sabienn was drained and confused. "The last thing I need now's your rambling."

"OK," continued Stork, securing his pack on his back. "But you go first. We can drop back a bit for you. Give you and your boyfriend some space."

The blood rushed to Sabienn's head and he gave Stork a solid push in the chest which put Stork flat onto his backside.

"Hey!" Deep now stood over Sabienn pointing him fair in the eyes. And he

was fierce. "Don't touch Stork!" Sabienn cowered back a little humbled as the big man continued. "I'm not asking you. I'm *telling* you. Don't touch him." Sabienn receiving this sobered and shut up. "Are you holding out on us?" said the big man, pushing his face into Sabienn's.

"What?" The question was a shock. "No." Sabienn moved and held a hand out to Stork and pulled him to his feet. "What the hell's going on here?"

"We're being divided," said Bray, pulling on his two tents and extra rifles. "And it's working." There was a moment's tense silence among the four.

"I'm not holding out," said Sabienn. He had no stomach for any further argument. The four quietly moved to take up their positions for the hike.

With care and consideration, Sabienn helped Marriell on to his back and started walking in the footsteps of the objectionable Jasspick, now far away up the track.

Deep helped Lyall tenderly onto his back and with the strength in his legs took off easily in pursuit.

Bray and Stork playing pack horse pulled up the rear, letting their eyes dart among the trees and keeping watch for danger.

Sabienn looked around him. They were five encumbered walking units making their way up a well-worn track deep into a forest that saw so much bloodshed a hundred years ago. He kept his eyes peeled and moved forward.

## 25. Jasspick and Jasspick

Sabienn now moved at a fast hiking pace, easily and effortlessly carrying the lady on his back. He had pushed on for ten minutes in silence and was barely cracking a sweat. He was so much physically stronger and his endurance had improved immensely.

“Are you boys brothers?” The voice of Marriell came softly into his ear. She’d kept quiet up until then.

“No, Ma’am,” said Sabienn.

“I saw you fighting back there.” Marriell gripped him tighter.

“It’s nothing, Ma’am.”

She kept quiet for a time but re-entered the conversation. “Family’s important.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

She went quiet again. Her conversation seemed to be falling into the rhythm of his footsteps. It was almost like she was counting steps to gauge her pauses. “You from here?” she said.

“No,” said Sabienn.

“I lost both my sons. For possession. Shot on the spot.” Marriell spoke almost blankly.

Sabienn felt his hair stand on end on the back of his neck. *I really wished I’d killed that dealer.* “Sorry, Ma’am.”

There was silence paced with his steps. Then she said, “Family is so important.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Sabienn said and his mind raced. *What else do I say? I have to fill the void with something.*

“Of course it’s my fault. But they never listen,” she said. Her voice was surprisingly matter-of-fact. “My boys never listen.”

The comment was left unanswered for a set number of steps. “Are you here for the history?” said Sabienn.

“No,” she said. Her thoughts seemed far away. “Look at these trees. They seem endless.” The tree cover was starting to break apart and portions of blue sky came through. “We’re here to make an even fifty,” she said. “What a beautiful day it is.”



*An even fifty? What's that? Sabienn thought. And be honest here. She's pleasant and polite. But if she's got problems, they're her problems. I've got enough of my own.*

After a time of steady pacing, she started tapping him on the back. "I'm feeling something solid here," Marriell said. "Are you a hunchback?"

"No, Ma'am," he replied. Her silence indicated that she really was expecting an answer. "I have wings."

He couldn't see her but he could sense she was stunned. "Really?"

"And the three men behind us? The same," Sabienn added.

There was another pause. "I've seen people with wings being rounded up," Marriell said. "At midnight. People who'd done nothing wrong,"

"I've seen things too, Ma'am."

"These are dark times, sir," said Marriell. "I am old and will be gone very soon. But you're young. I fear for you."

Sabienn kept his eyes forward and pounded his feet down the track. "Maybe, Ma'am. But I still believe if we all hold firm with The Great Leader, times will get better. I believe that."

They came to a clearing that looked out over a gently sloping valley heavily wooded. The day was now warm and the two moons held sway in a perfect blue sky. Down in the valley above the trees, a flock of ghost finch rose and spiralled and then, almost as a single organism, shifted from left to go right in a split second.

"Five minute break," called Jasspick. "Please see your guide books. A lot of things happened here." With that he walked off to keep his own company and drink sparingly from his canteen.

"What guide book?" said Sabienn.

"Use mine," said Marriell, rummaging through a small pack which must have stored personal items for her and her husband. She handed her guide book across and took Sabienn's arm and then led him across to where the valley sloped away.

"Here. Right along here," she said, pointing along the area left to right of where they stood. "The Turr army held the upper ground. Our troops came up from the valley," she indicated clearly where in the south they would have come from. "They wouldn't have had a chance. This was the Battle of the Loom."

"This is the Battle of the Loom?" Sabienn was genuinely surprised. "I thought that was further north."

"Read the book," Marriell said.

"You've been here before," he said.

"Years ago," she said. "I have friends. Turr friends who live on Cajj Cajj. To this day they apologize to me. "We're sorry for the Battle of the Loom," they

say. That was a hundred years ago. They're still sorry. People are funny."

"Do you worry about your friends?" said Sabienn.

"Every day," she said. He could see her eyes go a little tearful in memory of them. "There's a darkness coming. But it's not for me to worry about. Excuse me, I must see Lyall."

With that she walked over to see how her husband was faring. Sabienn looked on at her as she left him. *Nice lady, he thought, but totally talks in riddles. She is concerned but she's not concerned.*

Sabienn took the guide book and opened it at a page bookmarked by a piece of paper. It appeared she had an interest in the events that occurred on Red Ghost Hill. He knew vaguely of the battles that occurred there.

The text was straight-forward and unexciting but his attention was drawn to the bookmark, and how it had pen marks and underlining.

The piece of paper was an article from a news bulletin. He read some of the text, "The efforts of the local authority to implement safety precautions at the lookout at Red Ghost Hill ground to a stalemate. There was fierce debate on whether safety barriers should be erected following the supposed popularity of couples undertaking what must be assumed were suicide pacts. That is, jumping together to their death from the heights of the cliff. The heritage and the traditional appearance of the site were argued and fought for, as it had immense historical significance. Despite the fact that 24 couples, that was 48 people, had jumped to their death within the past year."

The number 48 had been underlined. The text of the article in Sabienn's hand stunned him. *That's what she said. They were there to "make an even fifty".*

Sabienn looked on at the old couple sitting on a rock together sharing a cup of water. *Be honest with yourself, he thought. Do you really care? How can I help them? I can't. If their minds made up that that's what they want to do, that's what they want to do. Hey, I've faced my demons. I've been to the brink myself. But saving people's not my style.* Seeing the group together, Sabienn walked to join them. *Keep this to yourself.*

Stork unpacked some sandwiches and water and passed them around. Food was offered to the old couple but they politely declined. The four friends sat together within a ring of stones, eating and drinking.

Deep took a big bite of his food and mouthed words around the load on his tongue. "Do you want to take the old man?" Deep said to Sabienn. "I thought you were depressing."

Sabienn welcomed the refreshing insult at his own expense from his friend. "I am depressing. It's the company I keep," he said.

"Oh, you can make new friends," said Stork. "Just make sure *you* bring the

rubber.”

It was about as near as anyone was going to get to an apology for previous events and it seemed to be roundly accepted.

“The old lady’s a bag of laughs too,” Sabienn replied.

“Not like this guy,” said Deep.

“OK,” said Sabienn. “We swap.” He just didn’t know how he was going to break it to the old lady. Not that he won her over with his incredible charm but he’d have to hear what she had to say.

After refreshing himself, Sabienn took the guide book back to Marriell. “Dear,” Marriell said. “Please don’t be offended. But Mr Tagg’s legs are acting up being spread around your friend. Any chance of a swap?”

*Should I ask how she’d feel spreading her own legs?* Sabienn thought. *There’s just some things you don’t ask a lady.* “No, that’s fine.”

“Time,” shouted Jasspick. Packs were tidied and secured and the piggy-back riders settled on to their new rides.

As he grabbed Lyall’s legs, Sabienn noticed the old man was a heavier by a factor of one and a half. He took off down the track with ease following Jasspick. The immediate difference between Marriell and Lyall soon made itself apparent as soon as he opened his mouth.

“Thank you, sir,” said Lyall. “Marriell said you were very kind.”

The old man’s breath was putrid. *Pwarr. It smells like he’s eaten a shit sandwich. With several slices of shit. All in descending grades of disgusting,* Sabienn thought.

Sabienn turned to view Deep’s face beaming back in enjoyment. Further on he saw Bray and Stork, who obviously were let in on the gag, as they laughed and held their noses. *You swine, Deep. A bit of payback, hey? You’ll get yours.*

“Are you of the Bordds from northern Chard?” Lyall breathed.

“No, sir,” Sabienn replied, gasping for clean air.

“I knew some Bordds. Good people. Good family. I met some in the war.”

“You were in the war, sir?” said Sabienn.

“Yes.” With that the old man seemed to sink into a silence.

*A Bol War veteran,* thought Sabienn. *I can forgive him a little bad breath.* And like his wife, Lyall appeared to count steps before replying.

“I .. I don’t want you to think I did anything important or anything. I drove buses,” said Lyall.

“Doesn’t matter, sir,” said Sabienn. “Buses get hit. Your life was on the line.”

“Well you make it sound more risky than it was,” said Lyall. “I’ve driven buses all my life.” There was another pause before sadly adding, “I survived and a lot of my friends didn’t. Why is that?”

“If you survive, you survive,” said Sabienn. “There’s no shame in survival.” After a pause, he continued, “Did Marriell tell you we had wings?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve seen winged men shot,” said Sabienn. “I’ve seen one dissolve on an ant heap. But I’m here. I ask “Why me?” And I still have a long way to go.”

Sabienn thought, *There would be buses at Red Ghost Hill. Having a bus driver provides an option for survival. Watching a bus driver going sailing over a cliff face would be a wasted resource. One that I can manipulate to my advantage. For survival. The old man’s suicide is not to my advantage.* Moving his head, he saw Deep hiking at pace behind him. Marriell looked at peace with her head almost asleep on his shoulder. *OK. Suddenly I care.* Then out of nowhere came the face of Joallee Krenn. *Buses, let’s talk buses.*

“Sir, you drove buses?” said Sabienn nervously. “Do you know the bus routes round the crispie’s war cemetery?”

“The Deerland War Memorial?” said Lyall.

“Sorry.” Sabienn chided himself on not showing respect for the allies around a war participant.

“I know them well,” said Lyall.

“Maybe you can settle a bet,” said Sabienn. “A friend of mine thinks there is a hundred percent safety record for the cliff road, the one near the cemetery, for this century. That can’t be right, can it?”

The old man went quiet for a while. “What do you want to know that for?” Lyall said suspiciously. “Are you Secret Police?”

“No.” Sabienn was shocked. “I’m sorry. Just forget I asked.”

Sabienn padded along the track wishing he hadn’t broached the question. *Idiot. Why’d you say that? He’s not going to open up now. That bus crash. My parents. It’s central to my identity. And I blew it.*

“Your friend’s right,” said the old man in a low voice, speaking as if the leaves of the trees had ears. “There’s a hundred percent safety record for the cliff road.”

“What about the bus crash?” said Sabienn.

“Is that the real bus or the ghost bus?” said Lyall. As Sabienn heard the old man’s words, the hairs stood up on the back of his neck. “In ’98, six Deerland tourists died,” continued Lyall his voice still low. “The bus sheered off the cliff near Port Tyla. On their way to the crispie’s war cemetery. ’99 the cliff road fell into the sea.” Sabienn’s mouth was gaping as he listened. “Next we hear, in ’01 some army boys put up a plaque,” continued the old man. “Plaque reads 60 people died on a road that’s not there. Someone’s got their wires crossed. Bus only takes 50.” Lyall went quiet for a moment. “I don’t care anymore. But not a

word to anyone.”

Sabienn knew what he was saying was true. *Why would a man with one day to live want to lie?*

The young man padded down the track on automatic pilot, he held the old man’s legs like a fork lift and he sucked in all the noxious fumes the man had to offer like a mechanical exhaust. He operated more like a machine than human because something had just reached inside of him and ripped his guts out.

*Does anyone tell the truth?* Sabienn thought. *The central pillar of my existence. My mother and father, heroes of Hayddland. They died in a bus crash, with the love and the pride of their only son foremost in their mind. And it’s not true. What shaped me is false. No more substantial than a house of cards that had a wind pass through it. It’s all toppled. All gone. Why won’t anyone tell me? Why can’t I be trusted with the central truth of my existence?*

“Son, you’re hurting me,” said Lyall.

The young man hadn’t realized that while he was off in his little world, he was crushing the old man’s legs.

“I’m sorry,” said Sabienn.

“Have you been crying, boy?”

“No, sir.” Sabienn had tears running down his cheeks.

“I know you wouldn’t have asked those things if they didn’t mean anything to you,” said Lyall. “What I said was true.”

“You’re more talkative than your wife,” said Sabienn light-heartedly.

“There’s many things we don’t agree on. But I know she’s right. I couldn’t live without her,” said Lyall. “I could *never* live without her.”

The group came to a clearing that had the remnants of old camp fires. Adjacent was an inviting lake with a small island in the middle like a rocky outcrop. Jasspick in the lead let his back pack fall to the earth and turned to the others. “This is Lake Loom. This is where we stay the night.”

But Sabienn saw red. “No. Mr Jasspick!” he placed Lyall on the earth and confronted the guide. “We need to keep moving. That’s what we paid for.”

“Break out your tents please.” Jasspick continued as if immune to complaints.

“There’s still light in the day,” said Sabienn in desperation. “We need to keep going.”

Jasspick divested himself of all his packs on the ground before him and turned to Sabienn. “Listen!” He took Sabienn by the arm and led him to where he could talk candidly.

“What’s this? Get your hands off,” protested Sabienn.

“I’m sorry,” said Jasspick. “I can’t say it any clearer than this.” He looked in Sabienn’s eyes. “It is in your *best* interest to stay here the night.” The instruction

was issued with a strange cross of an order, a threat and friendly fatherly advice. “Now please,” said Jasspick. “Why don’t you go help the Jasspicks with their tent?”

With that comment he left Sabienn alone. *My best interest? What’s that?*

## 26. Lake Loom

Sabienn looked around at the idyllic scene. It was a beautiful afternoon and the sun was warm.

There were basic facilities on the site. He caught a glimpse of a makeshift shit box further into the forest for relieving oneself. There was a simple timber shelter draining into a rain water tank. They'd need to boil water for drinking.

But the lake was pristine and clear and calling them all for a swim. He felt the fish within him want to rip his clothes off now and go for a running jump into its water. His three friends came up to him for the news.

"We're staying here," Sabienn said. "He said, it was in our *best* interest. What d'you make of that?"

They all looked at each other. "It means what it says, I suppose," said Stork blankly. "Tents first, strip off, then swim. Who's with me?"

There was no argument. The four left to get all the shelter sorted. Sabienn and Deep put up the old couples tent and placed their bags inside. All tents were up and everything secured in no time.

Lyall provided an extra padlock to secure the boys tent and Marriell turned to the four friends. "For goodness sake. Go swim."

"You want to post a watch?" said Bray to Sabienn.

"We're puppets on a stage waiting to have our strings pulled," said Sabienn. "Who'd want to shoot the entertainment?"

They stripped down to their trunks and Marriell came down to the water's edge, fascinated by the wings. "I've never seen such things." Her hands moved over Stork's back, fondling every crevice of his outstretched appendages. "They're amazing," she said. "There's no stitches, no zippers, no clip-on things. They're part of you. Excuse me for saying, but where they come out, they're like boobs on your back."

"Do you like mine better than his?" Bray forever the competitor muscled into the conversation. He allowed Marriell the full extent of his wings to survey.

"Turn it up, Steel," said Stork. "I've got bigger tits than you."

"In your dreams." Bray was pointing across the lake. "Talk's cheap, fat man. Last one round the island and back gets a night in a tent with Jasspick."

"Huh. Oh yeah. I hear he's got the tripod and camera out just waiting for

you,” said Stork. “Give us a challenge, will you? This’s too easy.”

Sabienn turned and whispered to Deep, “I’ve got twenty kee on Stork. He’s got the beer gut. But he’s strong.”

“No argument,” said Deep.

“Count us down, Marriell,” said Bray.

Marriell gave the two boys a count. “Three, two, one.” And they were off.

The men jumped in and started swimming the way they had all their lives. But it was obvious from the bank as the three looked on, something changed in the swimmers. It was as if they became fish.

Through the clear water, they could see them shooting like bullets under the cool flesh of the lake. Their heads had no need of surfacing. It was a good two hundred metres to the rocky outcrop, but the boys turned, reappeared and swam back towards them. They pushed themselves faster and faster and upon reaching the smooth beach, slid and skidded like skipping stones to rest just past Marriell’s feet.

Stork had won by a length but the race was all forgotten. “Whuh-Whooah!” Stork was on his back laughing and screaming to the sky.

“That was unbelievable!” cried Bray. On his knees, he was wide-eyed and alive. “I don’t believe it!” continued Bray, feeling his ribs and finding his fitness as fresh as if having a casual stroll in the park. “I had no idea! Unbelievable! It’s unbelievable!”

“Guys, you’ve got to try,” Stork was on his feet now pleading with his dry friends. “Get in the water. You’ve got to go!” He didn’t care if they followed or not. Stork was already jumping back into the water. “Go go go!”

His head went down beneath the surface and he was gone. He shot like a shell from a cannon out into the centre of the lake.

Bray didn’t need a second invitation. “Whooaaaah!” He followed in hot pursuit and dived in after his friend.

“Get in, boys,” said Marriell, feeling animated amongst the excitement, as she pushed Sabienn and Deep towards the lake.

Sabienn dived first and, as he was familiar with the sensation, pushed casually towards the bottom of the lake and let the fish within him take over.

He looked up at Deep struggling on the surface, his legs kicking wildly trying to tread water. Pushing up to the surface, Sabienn grabbed Deep’s foot and pulled him downwards. The resistance he met was violent. The foot came alive in Sabienn’s hands and kicked him forcefully in the head which left him briefly seeing stars.

Struggling hard, the big man made his way back to the surface to breathe air the way he had done all his life.



Once again, Sabienn went to the surface and grabbed Deep's arm and pulled him down. The reaction was fierce and Deep pushed his hands into Sabienn's face. He was gagging for breath and wanting to move back to the shore.

Sabienn pushed in front of the panicking man's face and pointed to the single slits on each side of the head. "Let go!" he mouthed. "Breathe!"

Deep's face was distressed as he was looking up to the surface but slowly he became calmer. Seconds past and he didn't move. He just stared up towards the light.

Sabienn started to panic now. *Oh no! I've drowned him. He's not moving. I've killed my friend.* Deep was still and looking upward.

Slowly Deep's head lowered and he found eye contact with Sabienn. There was cognizance there but he didn't seem to recognize him. Almost like he was stunned.

Sabienn put a cheerful thumbs-up in Deep's face to get a reaction, any reaction. Slowly Deep raised his hand to return a very limp similar gesture. Again Sabienn pulled him in and shoved another more insistent thumbs-up in his face with the most over-expressive smile he could manage.

Looking into Deep's eyes, Sabienn could tell his life had been irrevocably changed. Every concept he had of water before this moment had gone. The thumbs-up came back from Deep, this time with an infectious smile. And then he was off. Pushing with his wings slowly, and gradually picking up more pace.

Meanwhile Stork and Bray, flew past cork-screwing and hurtling around each other. It always appeared to be Bray trying to push a competitive edge on his rival but then suddenly Stork would just stop and hang back and admire the scenery.

Sabienn followed Bray picking up speed and pushing faster and faster. He flew past some blue swirl eels below him. And above him, red-ribbed black snakes swam on the surface making their way to the rocky outcrop.

An army of red soldier crabs marched on the lake bed beneath Sabienn and he stopped in his travel to gaze at them. Three yellow-beaked tortoises scattered out of the way of the crabs' nipping pincers. A school of straight faced black ranger fish passed before him, not offering a sideways glance to the new winged arrivals. It was as if the strangers had been there forever.

Suddenly before his face, Deep appeared after doing a single round of the lake. He ecstatically was holding up two very insanely enthusiastic thumbs-ups and he had a smile that beamed from ear to ear. Just as quickly as he appeared he pushed away for more twists and turns.

Sabienn held back and surveyed everything. The tortoises and crabs on the lake bed and the eels and fish swimming through the lush green water grasses.

*Water, Sabienn thought. One droplet can be measured in millimetres. But after one droplet falls in a lake, it measures from one side to the other. I've come home. And now my friends are here too. It's a good feeling.*

After a time, the four found their way to the shore of the small rocky outcrop in the centre of the lake. They made truce with the five venomous snakes already there on the rocks and made the effort to keep a polite distance so everyone could enjoy the sun.

The four men lay on the pebbled shore in high spirits with the rush of adrenalin still pumping in their veins. No more so than Deep. In the few days that he knew him, Sabienn had never seen him so alive and animated and giggling like a schoolkid.

From the lake shore they heard a bang bang bang bang of a mug against a metal plate calling for their attention. "Eat now! Or go without!" Jasspick shouted, standing there for as long as it took to deliver his message then he was back to his campfire.

Stork smelt the wind. "Mmm. Beans. Beans means farts. And Jasspick's already eaten." Deep rolled around in uproarious laughter at the unfunny joke. The others just laughed at him laughing.

Sabienn looked across at the elderly couple already enjoying the communion of the campfire, each with a steaming mug in their hands. It was at that time of day when the sun had slipped low and the shadows were long and the light still had a warmth. The four men slipped back to the water and quickly swam to the camp.

"Mr Jasspick?" enquired Sabienn. "Any chance of a group photo?" He held a device before the guide for him to take the photo.

Jasspick paused looking briefly annoyed but took the device. For Sabienn's ears only he said, "OK. But just for you."

The four friends with their wings extended surrounding Marriell and Lyall with the snake island in the back still taking warm light. The two photos taken by Jasspick were swift and mechanically harvested yet were of surprisingly good structure and of professional quality.

With the photos out of the way, along with the others Sabienn served himself a plate of beans steaming on a metal platter. The taste was ordinary but it didn't matter. He could have been eating nails for all he cared as he was still on a high. *What a day!*

"This needs something." Stork offered some salt and spices from the backpack to the pot which brought its standard up from bearable to enjoyable. There was also a block of chocolate packed away that he broke out and shared with everyone except Jasspick.

On a log with a cup of coffee in her hand, Sabienn watched Marriell sit between Stork and Bray looking like a lady with an angel on each shoulder. The boys were flapping their wings like two excited puppies moving their tails, and their energy was infectious.

“It was a crab. And he was like this,” said Bray doing pincer movements with his fingers. Marriell laughed her head off as Bray continued, “No no, that’s not the funny part.”

The sunlight faded and evening came and they chatted and laughed like old friends who’d known each other all their life. And Sabienn thought, *Tomorrow all six of us may be dead. The cliff jumpers may have jumped. And the puppets may have had their strings pulled and were no longer worth keeping.* He shut the thought out and bit into more chocolate. *Live for the moment.*

“Can I bore you?” enquired Marriell. A small book of photos was brought out from Marriell’s pack and she shared around to the on-lookers moments of her life. “This is us on holidays.” There were photos of Lyall and her taken in front of mountains and waterfalls. Some of the photos showed them much younger, lithier and in better health. Sabienn saw their faces were more happy and carefree.

“These are my friends. The ones I spoke to you, Sabienn,” she said. “Us on Cajj Cajj. I fear for them. Things are happening.” Sabienn noted that the photos he was seeing here were good and taken well. *These are head-on document-quality face shots. Of both of them. Very interesting.*

Sabienn also noted within the book there were no photos of her sons. *Poor Marriell*, he thought.

The events around the campfire played to a natural end around about ten o’clock when the elderly couple retired to their tent. Jasspick was suddenly making himself noticeable and hovered around. He seemed anxious to have everyone in their tents. “Get to sleep,” he called.

“You want to tuck me in,” said Stork.

“Just get to sleep.” There was no humour in Jasspick’s manner and as he passed by Sabienn, he seemed nervous and on edge and glancing at a timepiece. The campfire had its logs kicked in by Jasspick’s boots and the embers were left to light the tents in an eerie red glow.

Sabienn walked to his sleeping bag which he’d placed away from the others close to the lake area. He passed by Stork who was standing by his tent shaking his head and waving for Sabienn’s attention. He was slyly pointing towards Lyall and Marriell’s tent.

As he stopped to listen, Sabienn heard the familiar slap-slap-slap-slap to indicate that Lyall not only went hiking with his heart tablets, he also packed

away some erectile enhancement medication for good measure.

Stork whispered to Sabienn, "I can't get any sleep."

Sabienn whispered back, "You're squeamish at two oldies going hard at it in a tent."

"Yes," said Stork definitely. "I didn't think old people did that."

"They've got a big day tomorrow," said Sabienn. "They need to get their blood flowing."

Sabienn passed by Deep who already appeared to be resting comfortably in his unzipped bag with his rifle within easy reach.

The night was mild so he also unzipped his bag open and folded his wings under him and lay looking up at the moons and the stars. With the green and the blue moon in his gaze he closed his eyes and slipped off to sleep. Dreams filled his vision of no particular interest until Sabienn was touched on the shoulder. He awoke with a start.

He was shocked to find the concerned face of Jasspick leaning over him looking into his eyes and urging him to stay quiet. "Come on," said Jasspick.

"What?"

"We have to go." Jasspick was holding a small pack.

"Go?" Sabienn said bewildered.

"We have to meet some people," said Jasspick, standing now and waiting for Sabienn to follow. "Leave your rifle."

Sabienn sat looking at him blinking, "What time is it?"

"It's twenty minutes to midnight," Jasspick replied. "Come on." It sounded more like fatherly guidance than an order. Jasspick pulled the hood of his cloak over his head and started walking the track to Red Ghost Hill.

Sabienn stood and pulled his cloak around him and placed his hood to disguise his face. He walked into the darkness behind the guide.

Jasspick kept a steady pace moving up the track. Sabienn followed without difficulty keeping the guide well in sight. The sounds of the night were alive with insects and chirping ground animals.

To Sabienn's relief, distantly to the rear of him he heard the reliable call of a bush fowl mating cry. *It's Deep*, Sabienn thought happily. *Thank goodness the big man has my back.*

"Stop please." The order came from a male voice at the side of the track.

"Stop?" Jasspick was perturbed. "I was told the car park on the hill."

"Change of plan, sir." A hooded figure appeared in front of them. Other figures appeared and shone torches into Jasspick and Sabienn's faces so they couldn't see.

The man with the hood moved forward to Sabienn and he could sense he was

large and muscular but had the polite skills of someone versed in crowd control.

"Please don't be alarmed, sir. Just a precaution." The man patted Sabienn down feeling for blades. "Clear."

He pointed in toward what must have been a picnic area and urged them to follow him. The attendants fanned out around Jasspick and Sabienn standing close to a wooden table and stool. The lights of their torches still held steady on their faces.

Another male voice was heard which was more elderly and commanding. "Please take a seat." The voice came from a figure on the edge of the area still concealed within the trees. Sabienn and Jasspick complied with their instruction.

"Don't be afraid. We mean you no harm," continued the voice. "Which one of you is Mr Feel?"

"Him," said Jasspick pointing to Sabienn.

"Mr Feel," continued the voice. "We are a group of people who have an interest in the safety of The Great Leader. Do you share our concern?"

"Of course," said Sabienn, still unsettled with the torches in his face.

"I understand you have an Order?" said the voice.

"Yes," said Sabienn.

There was silence, presumably to allow Sabienn to elaborate.

"Please," continued the voice. "You are under no obligation here. But what you may tell us may help The Great Leader. You want to help The Great Leader, don't you?"

There was silence again.

"You have an Order to kill someone?" continued the voice.

"What's in it for me?" said Sabienn.

After a time the voice returned, "It depends on the information."

"What's in it for him?" Sabienn was now pointing toward the cringing Jasspick.

"Me?" A shocked Jasspick moved away from Sabienn on the stool. "I'm just .. Just a servant. A loyal servant for The Great Leader."

"Please," said the voice staying controlled and polite. "You have an Order. You must fulfil your Order. We have no wish to interfere."

After a long moment of silent stand-off, Sabienn relented. "I have an Order to kill Jarnnee Krenn."

"General Krenn's son?" came the reply. There was another pause.

"My Order states he will assassinate The Great Leader," said Sabienn.

Sabienn suddenly became aware of more people in the trees before him. None of which he could make out with the light in his face.

"How?" continued the voice.

“With an assassin’s blade. Stolen from his father,” Sabienn said. Immediately there was a mocking guffaw from a younger man concealed in the woods. There were efforts made to shut the intruding voice up.

After Sabienn’s statement, there was a long silence as if the main voice in the woods was trying to digest what he had just heard. When the reply came back, there was surprise in the voice, “Mr Feel... Are you .. Are you a hunchback?”

“No, sir.” Sabienn’s need to conceal his identity seemed of little importance now. “I have wings.” With that he let his cloak drop around the stool he was sitting on and spread his wings for all to view.

There was a tense pause from everyone in the woods. And gasps as if they were viewing something alien. The voice then came alive with urgency. “Secure the perimeter. Everyone out! Just back out! Back out now!”

“Wait!” shouted Jasspick. “What about our payment?”

“Keep the torches on them,” said the voice. “There’ll be no payment. Move, everyone. Move!”

“We need to be paid,” said Jasspick. “He needs to be paid.” He pointed to Sabienn. “We’re begging you.”

Another voice within the trees said, “We should pay.”

“Give them nothing,” said the main voice. “Move!”

“You want payment?” mocked the younger voice from the trees. “For that crap? Sure. Here’s twenty cents.” He must have reached into his pocket and threw something at them as it hit the table and rebounded somewhere on to the dark ground.

“No! No!” shouted the elderly voice. “You fool!”

“What?” said the younger, believing the response was out of proportion.

The elder shouted to the torch bearers. “Find that coin!”

As one of the torch bearers dropped the beam off his face, Sabienn took the chance to jump up from the stool and rush back to the woods from where he had come. A shot was fired from the woods. It came from one of the followers adjacent to the elder. Everyone including Sabienn dropped to the ground.

“What the hell are you doing?” cried the elder to the gunman. Once in control, he was now in abject panic. Jasspick was now scrambling around on the ground to find the coin that had been tossed.

From their rear, a shot came which must have been from Deep’s rifle. The bullet harmlessly hit a tree away from the action.

“It’s an ambush,” cried another voice. “Get out of here!”

“Not without that coin!” The elder himself moved forward and threw himself to grovel around on the ground in search of the thrown object.

“Find that coin!” he kept shouting. “The coin!” The torch bearers were now

deserting the area.

“Come on, sir,” they shouted.

“No!” In the darkness lit by the moonlight, they could see the figure once completely poised and in command now reduced to a pathetic figure lurching around the ground in loss.

Jasspick had now slunk back to the cover of the trees from where they came, not far from where Sabienn hid. They watched as the elder was quite literally pulled away from the scene by his followers. The elder acted like he was leaving his child he was trying to save behind to die.

After a time there was silence. All the people had vacated the scene. Sabienn and Jasspick looked on and waited until there were no noises out of the ordinary.

Behind them quietly making his way through, Deep joined them and knelt next to his friend. “You OK?”

“Thanks,” said Sabienn heartily, appreciating his friend’s input.

“You trying to get us killed?” said Jasspick darkly to Deep as he moved towards them. “I had this under control.”

“Obviously,” said Sabienn. “You set us up!”

“I was told to,” said Jasspick.

“Who told you?” Sabienn pleaded.

“I can’t say.”

“You set us up, you prick,” Sabienn was wild now and pushed Jasspick in the chest.

“What was that all about?” said Deep. “What was thrown?”

“This,” said Jasspick, producing the twenty cent coin in the palm of his hand. It was a freshly minted shining silver object with the head of The Great Leader emblazoned on one side.

“Here,” he offered it to Sabienn.

“No,” said Deep. “Don’t touch it.”

“Take it,” said Jasspick.

“Keep it away from you,” insisted Deep.

Jasspick then tossed the coin towards Sabienn. He could have let it hit the ground but he instinctively held out his palm to save its fall. The coin rested within his warm hand. And the sensations began.

The visions appeared.

## 27. The Man From Reef Six

With the coin in his hand, Sabienn was transported to a street of a plush residential area. One collection of luxury houses looked the same as any other to him so he had no idea where he was. It was just after sunset and the houses were still lit by twilight. The street lamps one by one flickered into life.

Two men were walking up the street both about the same age as him. He moved alongside of them and watched them furtively looking around to see they weren't being followed or overheard. They were both cloaked and hooded but their faces shone with the zeal of youthful purpose.

"The old fool always wants to do things the old ways," said one.

"I'm with you, brother," said the other. "The only real change will happen with this." The man quickly pulled a pistol from his cloak checking that he wasn't seen doing so and secured it away just as quickly. "It's the only way the people will wake up."

Sabienn was shocked at what he was hearing. *It sounds like treason. Or maybe not. Watch with interest. People who talk big and those who act big are never the same.*

The voice of one of them sounded familiar. It sounded like the young man in the woods who threw the coin.

They arrived at the entrance of a large elegant two storey residence and walked the pathway to the front door. The pathway was guarded by metal arches linked with strands of wire and the whole structure held a canopy and side cover of grape vines, full with generous bunches of ripe fruit. The men picked some grapes as they walked and plopped them into their mouths.

*I've seen these entrances, thought Sabienn. With the grapes. The person who owns this must be in Chard's wine industry. It was always custom to share fruit that they made money from.*

They reached the front entrance, a large double doored access painted blue with small black metal digits "276" and they pushed right through as someone with the familiarity and rights to do so. Following them through the door, Sabienn looked around the entrance area and some burly black-shirted gentlemen came up to meet them.

"Good evening, Mr Finn," said one of the security staff. Sabienn recognized



his voice as the polite professional that patted him down in the forest for weapons.

“Has the meeting started?” said Finn, obviously in no mood for pleasantries or introductions.

“Very soon,” came the reply. “They’re already assembled in the basement. Please could you check your guns?”

“I only have a pistol,” said Finn’s friend. “But it always stays with me.”

“Well it won’t for the next hour,” insisted the security man.

“This man is with me,” said Finn indignantly.

The security man turned to his colleague, “Number Two, please advise Mr Finn’s father that Mr Finn won’t be attending.” His body blocked Finn’s way to further access.

Without another word, Finn’s friend handed over his pistol to the security staff and the rather miffed and wounded pair continued on their way. Finn gave a look back to the security guard and flicked his hair grandly in disgust. He turned and whispered to his friend, “When the revolution finally comes, it will be us who’ll be remembered.”

Sabienn also saw the face of the security guard and heard him whisper to Number Two, “What a wanker.”

The stairs to the basement spiralled downward and Finn and his friend gripped the ornate hand rail. There were toilets and a bathroom and a larger room which they walked through the doors to. It appeared to be a large private cinema for personal entertainment. The room was now in semidarkness and there were already a collection of shadowy hooded figures in the audience enjoying the dim light’s anonymity.

An elderly gentleman was already on the small stage at the front with the screen behind him tapping the microphone of the lectern to see if it was on. He was unhooded and had the cheerful face of a man who may have imbibed his product to excess in happier times. His bearded face was round and his hair was neat and shoulder length. “Ladies and gentlemen, could we please get started?” Sabienn recognized the voice of the man to be the main voice in the forest. “For those I haven’t personally met, my name is Ramsess Finn. Welcome to my home. And let me make this perfectly clear, this household pledges its allegiance to The Great Leader. This household holds no ties with the CLA and in accordance with custom I ask you to pledge.”

At that moment a painting of the smiling face of The Great Leader filled the screen behind him and he turned to it to announce, “Hail, The Great Leader.”

The audience offered a half-hearted response with only half raising their voice, “Hail, The Great Leader.”

“If there are spies here, you may want to be more enthusiastic,” said Ramsess.

“Hail, The Great Leader,” replied the audience, this time with a bit more starch.

“Our allegiance is always with The Great Leader and our discussions concern only who may come after him. His eventual succession which we will all view with sadness. Our thoughts are with him tonight as he addresses the faithful at Salt Stadium.”

Sabienn was amazed. *This is happening now. But I’m at Salt Stadium. Seems like a lifetime ago.*

“We will turn directly to matters that most of you have been invited here for,” Ramsess continued. “For the purpose of discretion, we will agree to refer to the item in question as “the package”, is this understood?” There was a murmur of agreement within the audience. “Our guest this evening is an officer well placed in the Deerland Reef. He has requested anonymity and shall be referred to as “T””

Sitting behind old Finn was a man of solid build who not only had a cloak with its hood in place but had a mask that only revealed his dark eyes.

*This is obviously serious, thought Sabienn. But this guy looks ridiculous. Reminds me of a mystery food critic. Invited to score the feast.*

“How can we be sure he’s well connected?” asked a voice from the audience. Sabienn could have sworn it was another voice from the forest.

“You may call me “Captain T”,” said the mystery guest pointedly, as if requiring recognition in his anonymity.

“Sir, if you please?” Old Finn politely directed the guest towards the lectern.

There was no acknowledgement or clapping of hands which the guest must have picked up on. “Thank you for your warm welcome.”

Right then and there, there was an audible murmur of dissent from his audience to show that he had only been there less than a second and he already had them offside.

“By way of introduction, I have been.. well, let me put it to the audience. Has anyone heard of the Deerland Reef? Or more specifically my station, Reef Six?”

“Reef Six?” replied the previous voice in the audience. “Sounds like a complete wank.”

“Not quite, sir. But thank you for your interest,” said the guest. “And I suppose you have an interest also in the .. uh .. the package, as you put it.”

Even Sabienn picked up on his tone which was condescending. Like an alien that suddenly appears at a ceremony held sacred by its participants and instead of meeting it with understanding, launches into his own brand of holier-than-

thou mockery.

“Typical Deerlander,” replied the voice in the audience. “Full of shit. And not afraid to fling it. From behind a mask.”

“Oppo, please,” Ramsess was trying to rein in the cantankerous friend in the audience. “Look, maybe I can speak for a minute. The matters to be discussed here are important. I won’t have this descend into a rabble. Now, the gentleman here has come, as I understand it, at great personal risk.” Ramsess paused then continued, “For those of you who don’t know the Deerland Reef, it’s a specialist unit within their Army Intelligence. It’s similar to the Hayddland Shadows and the Turrland Sleeves. It concerns itself with the occult and sacred objects. Or more to the point, the Symbols of Military Success. These are the items an army must find and hold to give them the advantage. The advantage in the mind. The advantage to win wars.”

Ramsess paused again and said. “Tonight on this very stage .. Look, I’m just going to have to steal some of his thunder. I’m just so beside myself. This man is going to present to us, lost for twenty-three years .. the package.”

There was an enthusiastic murmur throughout the audience but the Captain leaned forward in his chair. “No! That’s not what I said.”

“What?” said Ramsess, taken aback as the audience calmed down.

“I don’t have the package,” replied the Captain. “That’s not what I said to you.”

“We were .. When we spoke before, you clearly said, you had it.” Ramsess appeared to feel the eyes of his audience seeing him make a fool of himself.

“Well you’re wrong, Minister,” said T with a noted air of superiority. “You misheard me.”

The auditorium was stunned.

“WHAT?” Minister Ramsess Finn was indignant.

“You heard him, Ramsess,” said Oppo from the audience. “You’ve just been told by a man with a mask that you’re wrong. Talk about throwing a pig into a tank of boiling shardee.”

The Captain continued as if not missing a beat. “I have no package. I have no idea where the package is. But you’ve been such a perfect host. I’ve never seen a thousand plates of different luncheon meat. One wonders what the poor people of Chard are eating.”

*Oh my goodness, thought Sabienn watching him. He really was a food critic.*

The Captain continued, “May I say how much I loathe being here? When I said, “Who’d heard of Reef Six?” that was an in-joke. Reef Six will be no more next month, thanks to government cut-backs. But it’s high-time it was disbanded. All the holy swords, all the holy walking staffs, all the holy crap, all to be

assigned to the dust-bin of bunkum. Where it belongs.”

“Captain Strainer, hold your tongue.” Ramsess had had enough. Sabienn noted he blew the anonymity away from his guest. All gloves were off now.

“Thirty years I’ve wasted my life.” The Captain seemed like he may have imbibed a little of the Finn product, his tongue was so loose. “Thirty years! Chasing shit for idiots like you.”

“You *told* me you had the package,” said Ramsess, trying to get edgeways into the rant.

“And why were you so excited when you thought I had the package, Minister?” he said. “Why would I give you the package? Why not the Grand Inquisitor Profound? Only if you were wanting to topple The Great Leader.” He stopped to look around the room. “There’s treason. There’s treason right here.”

“So you have nothing,” said Ramsess.

“I didn’t say I had nothing,” countered Strainer. “I have this.” He retrieved from his cloak a small green notebook. Nothing spectacular, just a standard army issue pad.

“While you’ve been living off the hog dreaming of being the top man,” continued the Captain. “My team’s been .. Will you get the map up, you fool?”

At that moment the map of the occupied lands of the planet Whee showing all the countries and outer territories was projected for all to see. Strainer continued, “Our team’s been there.” He pointed generally at the map.

“Where?” said Ramsess.

“Up there,” said Strainer, not even looking. “Everywhere. No funding, no provisions, no weapons, no food, no ideas, no direction, no morale. I had two readers. One got his head cut off near Mount Farewell. The other was killed in Cajj Cajj. They were hopeless. Both of them. Kept their readings to themselves and took ‘em to their graves. The only thing I wasn’t short on was an endless supply of idiots.”

“Captain Strainer,” said an exasperated Ramsess. “What is this?” He was trying to get the guest back on point and indicated the green book in the Captain’s hand.

Strainer was still in his own world of other people’s failures. “Readers,” he spat, as if trying to remove a disgusting thing from his tongue. “I put more faith in astrology. They wanted to keep their visions for the President. That corrupt bitch. Well they’re dead now. So, what I have for you,” said Strainer finally turning to Ramsess and waving the notepad in his hand, “are eight leads.”

“Leads?” Ramsess was stunned.

“Two years of blood, sweat and tears are in the first four pages of this book. The rest is blank.”

“You don’t know where the package is?” said Ramsess.

“As I’ve told you,” said Strainer. “And I’m willing to give it to you for a mere 20,000 kee. If you don’t want it, I’m sure I can take it to the Grand Inquisitor Profound. Also for your interest,” Strainer continued, removing from the inside of his cloak a bamboo flute. “A genuine relic holy flute from the country of Luck. Absolutely definitely held by the Blue Moon Prophet. I’m willing to part with this for a paltry 30,000.” A lone hand went up in the auditorium. “For the flute? There’s a man who can spot a bargain. See me later.”

The cantankerous Oppo got to his feet, turning to the rest of the audience. “I’ve .. I’ve heard quite enough,” he said and turned to indicate the Captain. “This .. This upstart. This cleanskin. Slagging off at us. Flogging off what his friends died for. Then claims the high ground. Here.” He reached into his cloak and retrieved a twenty cent piece and flung it on to the stage. “I’ll give you twenty cents. The going rate for mercenary beggars.”

There was a murmur throughout the auditorium as all were acquainted with the insult the thrown coin held. The coin landed near old Finn’s feet and he picked it up. “No, Oppo,” Ramsess said holding the shining metal in his hand. “If there is to be an insult,” he turned and placed the coin into the Captain’s hand, “it should come from me. Please, sir, don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

From where Sabienn stood, young Finn’s friend suddenly cried out, “Boo!” It took him by surprise. The Captain surveyed the audience to where the catcall came from and saw the two boys Sabienn was standing next to.

“Get a hair-cut,” Strainer shouted and threw the twenty cent coin out into the auditorium towards them. Whether it was by reflex or not, the young Finn found the thrown coin on the carpet next to him and placed it into his cloak. The same coin that was in Sabienn’s hand.

The room was starting to descend into a rabble of disturbed voices when a lone figure stood up from the back. “I have a question, sir?” The lone figure spoke with a commanding politeness and the crowd shushed themselves into silence.

Looking through the dim light of the auditorium, Sabienn could vaguely make out the figure but he recognized him immediately. His voice and his height were unmistakeable. *My goodness, Sabienn thought. It’s Grey Cape. What the hell is he doing here?*

The Captain peered out into the darkness from the stage. “I don’t recognize the speaker. Anyway, our time’s over here.”

“Oh, sir,” Ramsess turned on the Captain with vehemence. “You *will* answer the question.”

Strainer stood and gathered items within his cloak, "No."

Grey Cape continued, "Sir, we've met once. We discussed statistics."

The words stopped the Captain in his tracks and he looked back at the figure in the audience. His stance appeared to soften as he walked back to the lectern. "I *do* recognize the speaker. A man who refused to behead a Turr prisoner. Sir, I apologize." The Captain's mood had completely changed. "Please, the contempt I have here does not extend to you."

Grey Cape continued, "When we met, we discussed science. We discussed analysis."

"I remember," Strainer nodded.

"There's a belief that the number of earthquakes, the number of storms, droughts and whirlpools and water-spouts in the ocean have increased. Since the year 5000," offered Grey Cape.

"That's right," said Strainer, much calmer now. "And you showed it was a statistical non-event. The same number of disasters occurred in the twenty-three years prior."

"Correct," said Grey Cape. "Yet people still believe it."

"People are fools," said Strainer.

"Maybe," said Grey Cape. "But these are strange and terrible times. It's a fact that in the last two weeks, tens of thousands of men are growing wings. Men from all around the planet. Why men and not women? And why can they swim but not fly? In Hayddland, they're being rounded up as an unknown threat. In Deerland, they're protected by discrimination laws. In Turrland, they don't care."

"This is true," acknowledged Strainer.

"It's also a fact," said Grey Cape, "that tonight in Salt Stadium, The Great Leader is addressing the people. Pinning his colours to the wall. Calling for another war with Turrland. This time we'll be looking for eight million ears. The world is about to be thrust into darkness. The darkness of death, famine and the desperate seeking refuge. Are these facts related?"

Intently, Strainer considered the question, "Coincidence."

"Probably," said Grey Cape.

"I don't have the data."

"Neither do I."

"I'm a man of science, sir," said Strainer. "Like you, I believe in what I can see and measure."

"Sir, I thank you," said Grey Cape. "I too believe in science. But I also believe in mystery. You can't see or measure Love but it exists. And I know for a fact that you've given Love."

The comment stopped the Captain. Sabienn viewed the anguish on his face. *There's a history here, thought Sabienn. Between Grey Cape and Strainer. Over something or someone. The old man's offering something. It seems like sympathy.* The Captain stood on the stage and appeared deeply reflective and slightly teary-eyed as Grey Cape continued, "Sir, I must repeat these are dark times. I beg of you, please tell me anything you know."

Strainer stood on stage in silence looking at his lectern. He slowly removed the hood from his head and unwrapped the mask from his face. It revealed a damaged discolouration on his right cheek, as if he had a bad skin infection or had been hit in the face with acid.

There was a small gasp of surprise from some in front of him but his thoughts were elsewhere. His eyes kept looking toward the lectern.

"I sat with the Tee Lee once," said Strainer. "Way out in the Outer Territories. There were stories. They kept coming up all the time. Of The Holy One and stones. You know of the stories of ten thousand years ago. Of The Holy One and The Forlorn. There were three stones created in The Forlorn's arm. And people have fought and died for their possession. They were offered to the three brothers, the Blue Moon, the Green Moon and the Red Sun Prophets. But they rejected them. "

He paused before continuing, "The Tee Lee said to me in the year 5000 another Holy One was born. This entity has been seen by only one man who is still alive. This man who's seen it lives in a cave somewhere up there," Strainer pointed to the Outer Territories on the map behind him. "They said he was from a tribe they called The Royal Court of Red. This Holy One apparently sits on two stones. Identical. They called each the "five" stones. Are you with me so far?"

"Go on," urged Grey Cape.

"Any whiff that you may have a Holy One in your village is not advisable," said Strainer. "Up past the mountains was a village that did so and our troops burnt it to the ground. For as you know, the Deer claimed they had a Holy One, The Haydds claimed they had a Holy One and the Turrs claimed they had a Holy One. Two of these met an untimely demise. Now you don't want to play with this. To the powerful this is very real. Legend has it that The Holy One is at the head of an army a million strong. People have searched and searched."

His hand pointed to the Outer Territories on the map. "Armies have been right through. There's nothing. Just rocks and dust. But they say this man from The Royal Court of Red has witnessed this army."

Strainer paused briefly to gather his thoughts.

"To the matter you raised of men with wings, I have no hypothesis. And why

just in men and not women. Maybe a genetic glitch. But the Tee Lee are adamant of an event prophesied for thousands of years. They call it The Year of Wings. There was no explanation. Just the title. In their view, the planet is an organism. The planet is trying to heal itself. All five stones, the three original and the two new ones, must sit with The Holy One. They must be gathered in The Year of Wings. Then the healing will start.”

Another pause. “The story of men with wings is not new. There are legends which mention native men with wings ten thousand years ago. They called these men the Stone Shepherds. They were entrusted with the gathering of the stones. When the Stone Shepherds awaken, they then return them to the rightful Holy One. All this, as I say, is for the healing.”

Strainer stood quiet to let the words have an effect before continuing, “And, as you know, some of those who claim to be The Holy One have taken comfort from these legends. They are hell-bent to take the world to destruction and slaughter and despair. And they do so because they are absolutely certain. Certain in themselves. They believe what they do is part of the healing. Do you believe this?”

Grey Cape sighed and after a pause, “And the package?”

“Not much more than you already know, sir,” Strainer shuffled his feet. “The package was stolen by one of seven native women. At Mission Cinnamon. Before being detained it was passed to another person who ran into the woods. The then Colonel Krenn, in his benevolent wisdom, butchered all seven women. Right there in the cell.”

He paused in brief thought before continuing, “Not only butchered, but he cut off their left ears. Like a common Turr. If you are aware of Tee Lee culture, a body can’t enter their heaven unless it’s complete. Every Tee Lee I spoke to knew of this story. They asked me do I know where the ears are. They fear their souls will wander restless here. And here, once again, they said they must be complete by The Year of Wings. Or they’re doomed. But sorry, I digress. The package?” he continued. “No-one knows. It’s possibly in Klear.”

“Klear?” Grey Cape was stunned.

“Buried at the base of a tree,” said Strainer. “If you can believe the half-wits I had.” Strainer waved the green notepad in the air. “I’d give this to you if I could, my friend. But I need the money. It’s the best I’ve got.”

Ramsess Finn who had been standing at the back came forward and waved for Grey Cape’s attention. “We can work out something,” said Ramsess.

Strainer continued towards Grey Cape, “Sir, I have too much respect for you to say this is all bunkum. At least to your face. So I’ll wait until you leave.”

“Thank you,” Grey Cape replied blankly.



Sabienn watched on at the whole exchange with newfound respect for his friend. *He comes on like an eccentric old misfit living in the woods. But when he gets up to speak, everyone shuts up to listen.*

From where Sabienn stood in the auditorium, he was momentarily distracted as two bamboo flutes fell from Strainer's cloak on to the stage and the Captain moved quickly to regather them.

When he turned back to the audience, Grey Cape was gone. His seat and two others around him were empty.

After a few seconds, young Finn stood up from his seat adjacent to where Sabienn stood. "Father, why do you let that man come here?" He pointed to the empty seats vacated by Grey Cape and his entourage.

"Hold your tongue, young man," said Ramsess. "Speak to me later."

"I will speak as a free man," the young hot headed Finn proclaimed. "Do you know who that man's brother is?"

"Stop, *now!*" Old Finn had moved to the edge of the stage glaring out at where his son stood.

"If we sleep with the dogs, we get fleas," said young Finn. "Father, you've done nothing for the people. Except invite men to tell fairy-tales."

"Hey!" Strainer took affront. "Only I can call them fairy-tales. For you, it's an education."

"Leave the stage, charlatan." The young Finn spoke with the unwavering conviction of a man who was right.

"Talk to me when your voice cracks, boy," said Strainer, leaving the stage. "You won't grow to be an old fool." With that he walked into the audience and took a seat.

"The time for talk is over," continued young Finn. "Next week The Great Leader will come to Turmeric stadium. To everyone here, prepare yourself. Something big will happen."

His father was stunned. "Are you.. Have you taken leave of your senses, boy?"

"How big?" said Oppo.

"About as big as there is," said young Finn.

"Cut the lights now!" cried out Ramsess. As soon as the auditorium went dark there was a rush of bodies tripping over themselves to get out the door. Nobody wanted to be found marked in any way with the palpable stench of treason.

"Go to your mother, boy!" cried out Ramsess from the stage in complete darkness.

"I no longer take orders from you. You're no longer my father," came the

young Finn's reply.

Sabienn stood in pitch black next to the man who uttered this. From the stage, which was so dark he couldn't see a thing, there came choking noises. The old man was weeping deeply, loudly and painfully, for no-one to see. The two men beside Sabienn now moved past him to exit. He couldn't see their faces but they moved with all the purpose and emotion of people in a hurry to catch a bus.

He was now alone in the room with the old man still on stage. Another anguished cry came from the depths of his guts, for no-one to see and no-one to hear.

With that noise in his ears, Sabienn felt his coin in his hand and came back to the present.

The first thing he saw was Jasspick who had an eager and expectant expression on his face. He sensed Sabienn's returning consciousness. "Are you OK?" Jasspick said.

"Yes," said Sabienn. "I'm fine." He stretched as if coming from sleep. "How are you?"

There was an awkward pause and Jasspick continued nervously. "Um .. Can I help? .. Is there anything you want to say to me?"

Sabienn looked deeply into Jasspick's eyes, "Yes." He paused thoughtfully. "I think dinner was overcooked." He looked to Deep for confirmation. "But it was OK."

"After-dinner mints would be nice," said Deep.

Jasspick viewed the pair suspiciously, as if they were talking in some kind of code. "OK." He eventually relented, not sure of where he stood. "We'll talk more tomorrow." The guide then left them to walk back to camp.

When they were alone, Deep suddenly turned on Sabienn with vehemence. "What was that about?"

"What?" said Sabienn, taken aback by the heat in his friend's approach.

"You're not holding out on us?" said Deep.

"No!" Sabienn was dumbfounded.

"You're sure?"

"Of course!"

"What's going on?" said Deep. He grabbed Sabienn's cloak and seemed to be threatening violence.

"I'm not holding out," said Sabienn calmly. "Please." Deep relented a little and let go of his friend.

"Get the guys tomorrow," said Sabienn. "Meet on the snake island. 0600."

As Deep calmed down satisfied with the appointment, Sabienn added lightly, "After-dinner mints. Huh!" He slapped Deep on the shoulder and laughed. "You

crazy goose. That's a good one."

They followed their guide back to the camp.

## 28. Red Ghost Hill

It was still brisk when Sabienn and his friends met on the pebble beach of the island in the middle of the lake. The dip to get there was refreshing and woke them all up. The sun had yet to peep over the horizon but the light was enough to show they were not being watched from the camp.

It was six o'clock and they already shared the beach with four venomous snakes, all keeping their distance trying to find a rock for when the sun rose.

Sabienn turned to his friends and started to relay to them the physical events of the past night, of the meeting in the forest and the scrambling for the coin. Deep added short comments of the events from the angle he viewed it all from.

Then he spoke to them of the vision. He spoke of Captain Strainer and his green notebook, of Grey Cape and their discussions about The Holy One, The Year of Wings and the Stone Shepherds. Then he spoke of the encounter with senior and junior Finn and about the thing to occur that was "as big as there is."

Throughout his discourse, Bray and Stork pushed in with comments and appraisals but Deep just sat listening intently.

"I don't know anything about this Holy One stuff," said Stork. "But it sounds like someone else wants to assassinate the big man."

Deep who had kept quiet during the telling of the vision finally broke his pause. "When you have a village. A village with a culture of stealing. The last thing you want to have come cold into your midst is a thief."

"Exactly," said Bray. The depth of what Deep had said went totally over the head of Sabienn. He turned to Bray for a translation. "We've got a Supreme Order to kill Jarnnee," said Bray. "We're stomping through the forest saying, 'Let's find Jarnnee. Let's kill Jarnnee.' The only thing missing is Jarnnee." Bray raised his hands above his head and opened and closed them like twinkling stars. "We may as well have a flashing light above our heads, 'We're here to find a man who is going to assassinate the big man.' You know who gets nervous by people like us? People who *really* want to assassinate The Great Leader. It draws too much attention. Jarnnee is like a stick that stirs up what's trying to stay low on the bottom of the stream." Bray sat back. "I think the father and son called a truce. To find out what was going on."

"That would've been a tender moment," said Stork.

“You know what else I think,” said Bray. “From now on, all hell’s going to break loose. The whole reason we’re here was to get that vision. It feels like the Secret Police have held off on us.”

Sabienn had a momentary lapse of remorse, “Now I’ve told you the vision, I’ve put you guys in danger.”

“If you didn’t tell us, *he* would have pummelled it out of you,” Stork thumbed towards Deep. “I would’ve sat and watched.”

“Where d’you think they’ll hit?” said Bray.

“Red Ghost Hill. It’d be logical,” said Sabienn.

“What are our options?” said Bray. “There’d be cars, there’d be bikes, there’d be buses.”

“Lyall’s a bus driver,” said Sabienn blankly.

“That’s an option,” said Deep. The others turned to him when he spoke.

“Man, what about Marriell,” said Stork, veering off track momentarily. “Feeling our wings, “no stitches, no zippers, like boobs on your back.” Gotta love that woman. Huh! Mad as a cut snake.” He then noticed a reptile on a rock looking at him spitting its tongue in curiosity. “No offence.” The snake seemed a little uneasy. “And try sleeping next to a sex museum.”

“Yeah, we have a problem,” said Sabienn. He outlined to his friends the events of the day before that made him believe Lyall and Marriell were planning a suicide pact. “That’s why they’re at Red Ghost Hill. To jump.”

“Bastard!” said Stork. Sabienn was shocked at the spray, believing Lyall deserved a better assessment. Stork saw he needed clarification, “No, Jasspick. He’s after the wreath. No wonder he got them to sign in his name.”

“The what?” asked Sabienn.

“The funeral wreath bonus,” added Bray. “Officially the Veterans Funeral Assistance Grant. May I?” Bray enquired of Stork.

“I’d be disappointed if you didn’t, Steel,” said Stork.

“In the Province of Sett years ago, a man died and was thrown into a pauper’s grave,” said Bray. “It was only later found out when they’d cleared out his things that the man had been awarded “The Blue Star”. There was outrage and The Great Leader had to step in. He decreed that any man or woman who fought for their country deserved a decent send-off. And this extended to their partners as well. A sum of 3000 kee was allocated to attend to matters upon the person’s death.”

“Oh, and that bonus is easy to access,” said Stork. “The government, who really couldn’t care less if anyone lived or died, just wants to see the books balance. They don’t want to be seen as unfashionably heartless.”

“Any sketchy documents of proof of death will do,” added Bray. “And for the

lucky beneficiary? That money just spits mechanically into an account.”

“You have to hand it to Jasspick,” said Stork. “He’d have things tied up. He’s looking at a neat windfall of 6000 kee. For doing nothing. Tidy work for sitting back and not helping someone wrestle with their demons.”

“That’s why he can be such a jerk,” said Bray. “We’re all marked for death.”

After a pause, Sabienn clenched his fists and addressed them. “This is how I see it. If the Secret Police get us and we give up the vision, we’ve got nothing. They’ll just toss us in a grave. If we use this and save The Great Leader, we’ve got something.”

“They’ve given Blue Stars for less,” entered Bray.

“We save The Great Leader at the stadium,” continued Sabienn. “And we kill Jarnnee for the Order. We’re sweet, we’re gold.”

“They can’t ignore that,” said Stork.

Sabienn retrieved Oololo’s map from his pocket and pointed to a mark. “We have to get to Turmeric. But if things go pear-shaped, regroup here.” He pointed to one of the depots on the missing West-East Corridor which was a good hike into the forest from the city and close to the coast. “Memorise the co-ordinates. In Turmeric, we’ll get supplies. Get compasses, get gear. That’s the best I’ve got.”

“Sounds good.” With Deep’s approval, there was no further argument.

“Let’s get this,” said Bray pushing his fist into the centre, inviting his friends to touch fists.

It was at that moment, the four snakes reared high into the air as if to strike and hissed and spat viciously. The four men cowered together as if surrounded by a four post bed of venomous death.

“What the ..?” said Stork moving quickly as one of them made a perilous lunge for him and retreated momentarily to attack again. As the men pushed their backs and wings together, they stared at each and all of the angry reptiles.

“Stay calm,” said Sabienn trying to reassure his friends. He hadn’t counted on their eventual death coming so soon.

A shot was fired from the camp area across the lake and a bullet hit the rocks on the island, nearly killing Deep it was so close. “Hey!” shouted Jasspick from across the lake. “Snakes! Very dangerous!” At the shot, the four snakes slithered away from the rocks they were peacefully sunning themselves on. *The snakes must have sensed Jasspick with a gun and reacted*, thought Sabienn, his heartbeat still pounding.

“You absolute dickhead!” shouted Stork to the guide across the water. “You nearly killed us!”

“I saved your life!” came back the reply. They watched the guide still with a

pistol in his hand move away from the shore back to the tent. He seemed to be grumbling something like “Well that’s gratitude.” The men saw the camp had come alive. Marriell and Lyall had come out to see what the commotion was about. The campfire was smoking and food was being prepared.

“Whatever happens today,” said Bray in a brief moment of reflection. “It’s been a privilege working with you guys.”

“Working with you’s been a chore, Steel,” said Stork.

“You’re welcome,” said Bray blankly.

Sabienn dived first followed by his friends and made short work of the distance to the camp. As they dried and moved around, there was still a silent tension with Jasspick relating to the shooting incident. No-one really wanted to take it further into an argument. They had greater things to think about.

Their food had been plated and lay steaming for them to enjoy. More beans. There was something lying next to each plate that caught Sabienn’s eye. When he finally worked out what it was, he turned to Deep and elbowed him in the arm. He had no idea why they would have been packed in the first place but when Deep’s eyes met Sabienn’s, they laughed their heads off. It was an after-dinner mint.

They ate and packed up in good spirits. As Sabienn worked helping the elders get their gear away, he felt the presence come up beside him. “That .. with the snakes .. a misunderstanding .. You know that?” said Jasspick.

“Of course,” Sabienn said blankly.

“Is .. um .. Is there anything you want to say?” said Jasspick. The guide had that slimy feel that made Sabienn want to jump back in the lake and clean himself off again.

“No,” Sabienn said calmly.

“Is there anything I can do?” Jasspick came in close.

“I think we’re good,” said Sabienn. “At the moment.”

“Well think about it,” said Jasspick. “You may want to talk to me at Red Ghost Hill.” Jasspick slithered away. *Of all the slimy reptiles in the forest, thought Sabienn. He’s the tallest.*

Upon being packed and in readiness, Jasspick turned to everyone. “Listen up! It’s an hour walk to Red Ghost Hill. There’ll be no rest breaks. Mr Tagg, Ms Spoon please remove any ID. Place it in your bag.” Like cattle being lead up the ramp to a slaughterhouse, Lyall and Marriell complied dutifully. “Any questions?” said Jasspick to no response. “Let’s go.”

“Sabienn. My legs. Please,” said Marriell feeling sore. Sabienn hoisted her on to his back and the men moved in their usual single file. Jasspick took the lead on to the well-worn path.

There was none of the casual talk between Marriell and Sabienn like the day before. It was about ten minutes into the trip when Sabienn realized Marriell was sniffing and trying to hold back tears. The young man kept up the rhythm padding down the track but the realization of his passenger's distress didn't go unnoticed with Sabienn. Tears started to well in his eyes.

After a set time, Marriell broke the silence. "You know," she said. The young man just kept his eyes forward and kept moving. "I'm clearly crying. And you're saying nothing," Marriell said blankly and added, "That's not you." Sabienn stayed quiet. "I'm sorry," she said.

Sabienn kept his head forward as he spoke. "I *need* to talk to you," he said. There was a silence before he continued. "Not here," he said. "Up at Red Ghost Hill."

"You might be too late," she said.

"That's a chance I'll take," he said.

With that they kept silence for the whole hour of travel. Ahead the trees started to clear in the path and the first glimpses of human activity related to a tourist destination were observed. A sign greeted them along the path. "Welcome to Red Ghost Hill," it read. "Enjoy the view but please keep behind the yellow line. Throwing of litter over the cliff may incur a fine of 100 kee."

They broke through into the lookout area and several busloads of people had already arrived. The mood was relaxed and comfortable. It was a beautiful day and it was a beautiful place. Still with Marriell on his back, Sabienn saw a sign outlining the history of actions committed here during the Curl War a hundred years ago.

It shocked him when Marriell finally spoke, "Red Ghost Hill. This is where a hundred Haydd prisoners of the Red Stakes Guard were marched off the edge of the cliff to their death. It has that stench of military failure which a nation finds appealing. Look. Look over there. Fathers and mothers bringing their kids. It's the good lesson on personal sacrifice for the greater good of the country. What's left for the fathers and mothers? Could you put me down over there please?"

She pointed to one of the four life-sized figurines of The Great Leader placed around the lookout. They were there for families to take photographs with. All with the magnificent backdrop of the view over Turmeric and the endless blue sea which the city was nestled beside.

Sabienn finally had the chance to let Marriell down. Rather than wait to look at the view, she was off. She quickly sort the company of her husband and Sabienn moved after her. He didn't get a chance to say goodbye.

Before Sabienn had a chance to move two steps, a hand gripped him by the arm. "There's something I want to show you," said Jasspick, taking Sabienn's



attention away from Marriell who had found Lyall and was rushing off into the crowd. More than anything he wanted to struggle free and go to be by the old people's side. But Jasspick's grip was convincing.

"All of you. Come see this," Jasspick corralled the four friends. They saw he had Sabienn by the elbow and followed as he led.

Jasspick moved them expertly through the crowd towards the edge of the cliff and they stood looking down on the vista of Turmeric in the distance. "Everyone behind the yellow line," Jasspick said with a special look to Sabienn. "Especially you." But all the time, Sabienn's eyes were darting back amongst the crowd, looking for any signs of the elderly couple.

"Look out there," said Jasspick. He was pointing towards a large transport airship docked at a loading facility at Turmeric. It was a big yellow monster held in place by tethers and gantries close to the ground so it could be served by a covered ramp to its cargo hold.

"I only found out this a few days ago," said Jasspick, moving in close to them as if to share something important. "Do you know what they're going to carry?" He was expecting an answer. When one wasn't forthcoming, he blurted out. "Turrs." He seemed to be waiting for a reaction.

"So?" Bray was confused.

"They're invited into the ship and taken to Klear," said Jasspick, still waiting for some sign of surprise in the men. "All they give up is a left ear."

"I have no idea why I'm listening to this," said Stork. "You're standing there and talking. My ears've got nowhere to hide."

"It's *free* for them," said Jasspick. "You and I'd have to pay an arm and a leg. At least 20,000 kee. They give up an ear and travel free. Half way round the world. Where's the justice? Plus they have a pool."

"A pool on a transport ship?" said Bray.

"It's what I've been told," said Jasspick, in a mild outrage. "They fly out to sea for thirty kilometres, a pool is dropped and they swim in the sea."

"And they're picked up?" said Bray.

"Of course," Jasspick seemed more upset that they weren't sharing his dismay.

"How?" Bray was in his face now.

"I don't know."

"How many people?" said Bray.

"Three hundred, I was told."

"Three hundred in the sea? How're they picked up?" said Bray.

"I don't know." Jasspick was getting annoyed.

"And the pool? Do they get that too?" Bray was relentless.

“Of course.”

“How?” said Bray.

“It’s what I was told.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” said Bray.

Jasspick suddenly became defensive, “What’re you saying? Are you saying I’m a liar?”

“No,” said Stork. “He’s saying we can see the teeth floating in the back of your mouth. You’re full of shit.”

The guide appeared to be unfazed by the abuse. “Talk as much as you want about teeth, dead man. At least I’ll eat tomorrow.”

Sabienn looked furtively around. *Where’s Lyall and Marriell?* It then occurred to Sabienn that this diversion was staged to allow his 6000 kee investment come to fruition. He pulled away from the guide’s grip.

“Wait,” shouted Jasspick. “Is there anything you want to say to me?”

“What?” Sabienn just wanted to go.

“If you tell me, it’ll be easier.” Jasspick was definite. “Others may not be so kind.”

Sabienn took this information on board. *The Secret Police were on their way.* He needed to find Lyall and Marriell. He pushed away and nearly knocked over a couple taking photos.

“Wait!” called Jasspick. “Come back.”

There was a party of coach tourists following a guide holding a yellow flag. Sabienn broke through their single file much to their annoyance. Around him there were gatherings of tourists listening intently to a person giving a history lesson. There were hawkers selling their usual crap. Caps, key rings, towels and patriotic knick-knacks. There were bread and coffee merchants set up in their allocated areas giving a long line of tourists a late breakfast.

But there was no Lyall and Marriell. *I’m too late*, he thought. *But surely someone would’ve seen it.* He kept his ears on alert too. Just in case there may be a shocked scream from a tourist witnessing their demise. Nothing.

In panic, he did a very unpatriotic gesture of climbing on the back of one of the big man’s figurines, hoisting himself up for a better look. There were shouts of disapproval from the usual people that had to be seen to be shocked.

He looked around and saw at the edge of the lookout a couple off on their own holding hands. It was possible that it was them but they were now wearing black cloaks with their hoods pulled over their faces.

They just stood there still, looking intrepidly at the cliff face yellow line before them. Sabienn pushed through the crowd towards them. They turned to watch his approach.

“Stay where you are, boy,” said Lyall. “Have respect.”

“I’m not going to do anything,” said Sabienn, holding up his hands to show he wasn’t going to interfere. “I just want to talk.”

“You think we’re wrong,” said Marriell.

“I don’t think anything,” said Sabienn. “I don’t know anything about you.”

“You *don’t* know anything about us,” said Marriell definitely. “And we know about Jasspick.”

“How he’s going to make a lot of money?” said Sabienn.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “Nothing matters.” There were tears in her eyes as Marriell turned to Sabienn, “I’m sorry, Kregg.”

“He’s not Kregg, dear.” Lyall patted his wife’s hand. Lyall and Marriell began walking towards the yellow line, still hand in hand.

“Lyall, Marriell,” Sabienn spoke with desperation. “I *need* you. *We* need you.” They paused at the edge of the yellow line looking towards the cliff’s edge. “In five minutes time, the Secret Police’ll be here,” pleaded Sabienn. “I have something they need. It’s possible, we won’t be alive tonight.” Marriell turned to look at him without emotion. “Lyall,” continued Sabienn. “We *need* you. We need you to drive a bus to Turmeric. It’s our only chance.”

The pair stepped over the yellow line and walked to the edge of the cliff. Sabienn followed and looked down at the perilous drop below. There was evidence of police tape still attached to rocks from previous incidents that occurred here.

“Please,” pleaded Sabienn. “You can do a lot of things from the bottom of a cliff. One of them is not help your Turr friends. Get to Turmeric and get fake passports. They’re in the market. Get them to Cajj Cajj. Then get them to Klear.” Sabienn saw in their eyes looking down into the chasm below that their minds were made up. “Look,” he continued. “That’s all I’ve got. I don’t know why we’re here. I’d just like to say .. Can I just say, it’s been a privilege to know you? Both of you.”

With that Sabienn turned his back and walked away, back over the yellow line to his own safety. He kept walking towards the buses and allowed a brief glance back. They were gone.

Sabienn stopped and bent forward. There was a deep ache in his guts. *I’ll never see them again. Poor Marriell. So sweet. And gentleman Lyall. I couldn’t reach them. I just couldn’t reach them.* A pang of guilt hit him as he straightened up.

Then there was a tap on his shoulder. He turned to look. When he turned before, he must have been blindsided.

“Come on,” said Marriell. She held hands with her husband and Sabienn

could sense purpose in her eyes. “We have work.”

## 29. Hell Mountain

At the back of the car park, Sabienn saw there was a toilet block fed by a rainwater tank. He guided the couple to the tank area where they could get reasonable cover from prying eyes. “Stay put,” said Sabienn. “I’ll send for you.” With that he was off.

His friends congregated around the bags and he brought them up to speed with what happened. “Where’s Jasspick?” said Sabienn.

“Filling in forms,” Stork pointed to the tourist office and snack bar.

“Get the bags,” he said to Stork and Deep. “Get the oldies,” he said to Bray. “Find a bus.” With that he left them to run to the office.

As he pushed through the door, Jasspick was at the counter talking with the attendant as he was filling in some paperwork. “Jasspick!” pleaded Sabienn, with a feigned expression of horror. “Come quick. It’s terrible.” He stopped in the pretense of being confused, looking back and looking forward. “The Jasspicks .. They jumped. I can’t believe what I saw.”

Sabienn saw the guide feign a look of horror. “No,” Jasspick said. “No!” He threw his hands up, protesting too much.

The attendant stood blankly behind the counter staring down at the books. “Not today,” he said blankly, as if to himself. “I don’t need this.” The attendant sighed and pulled out a sheet of paper; the first of many for the mountains of paperwork. “Name?”

“Jasspick,” said Sabienn. “They’re name was Jasspick.” He could see Jasspick beaming at the mention of the name, giving extra credibility to the ruse. “Come quick please.”

“Steady on,” said the attendant. “If they’ve jumped, they’re not going anywhere in a hurry. I need details.”

“They’re my grandparents,” said Jasspick grandly.

“Grandparents?” The attendant stopped writing. “How many’ve you got? Didn’t you have another claim?”

With a sigh, Jasspick looked at the ceiling. “They were my dearest ones.”

“Whatever,” said the attendant, scribbling quickly. He asked Jasspick further personal details of the deceased relatives he never had and Jasspick produced a piece of paper with details already noted. The attendant then came around to the

front of the counter.

“Where, boy?” He was inviting Sabienn to lead.

“No, no,” said Sabienn, still feigning shock. “I can’t.” But he pointed animatedly to the farthest edge of the lookout. “There. Over there. Please help.”

The attendant moved to leave the office with Jasspick in tow. “I need this like a hole in the head.” He took his clipboard and form and posted the “Be Back Soon” sign on the door.

“Wait here,” said Jasspick, nestling up to Sabienn briefly. “We still need to talk.”

When Jasspick left, Sabienn sought the company of his friends in the car park. Stork and Deep stood by the bags and had a bus in their sights. Its driver was still at the wheel reading a magazine. Deep pulled his rifle down from his shoulder.

“Steady.” Sabienn held his friend back from doing anything rash. “Where’s Bray?” He looked around but there was no sign. With haste he returned to the toilet block to find an impatient Bray pacing outside next to a calmly sitting Marriell.

Bray sensed the urgency in Sabienn’s approach and blurted out, “He’s taking a dump.”

“What?” Sabienn went inside and knocked on the only occupied door. “Lyall, are we good?”

The door slammed open and Sabienn caught a glimpse of the old man’s manhood as he hitched up his pants. “How’re your bowels, boy?”

“What?” Sabienn kept his eye-line shoulder high.

“Ever take a bus down a goat track? It’s tough,” Lyall said, washing his hands. “Let alone down Hell Mountain.” He passed Sabienn on the way out. “You’re going to wish you had a dump too, boy.”

They regathered at the car park, eyeing the bus they wanted to hijack. With a grip on Stork’s arm, Sabienn pulled his friend towards the bus door. “Start coughing,” said Sabienn. Stork gave some little throat clearances until Sabienn really slapped him on the back. “Cough!”

With that, Stork made some loud gouges of slurry from the deepest recesses of his lungs. It was a pitiful sound worthy of an acting award. They mounted the steps and faced the driver.

“Sir,” said Sabienn humbly. “He’s got terminal chudd disease. Please help.”

In vain, the driver tried to close the doors but they were already in. The hacking from Stork was relentless now.

“Get him out of here!” cried the driver. “Get away!”

“No, I’m feeling better,” shouted Stork, moving towards the driver as if to

give him a hug.

The driver pulled further away covering his face. "Get out!"

"No, I don't want to go!" Stork's acting started going in a direction Sabienn hadn't anticipated. "I don't want to go to hospital."

"Steady now, old friend." Sabienn was now fighting Stork to keep him on the bus.

"No," shouted Stork, as he hacked a dry retch from his mouth. "I'm getting better."

Sabienn had no choice but give his friend a convincing knee in the cods to keep him on message.

"Ooh!" Stork buckled a little in agony.

"Look, he's in pain," said Sabienn to the driver. He caught an unappreciative glance from Stork. If he wasn't in pain before, he was now. The driver had no choice but to vacate his chair and exit. He ran through the car park screaming for security guards.

Quickly the others boarded and Lyall took his chair. The batteries came to speed and the coach, that normally would seat fifty, took its six occupants out for what Sabienn believed was going to be a rocky ride.

As the bus pulled out of its space, Sabienn caught a glimpse of Jasspick running to catch them. He pulled alongside and caught up, but as the coach picked up some speed, Jasspick stopped and shook his fists in defeat.

At the entrance as they exited, two black vans of the Secret Police glided into the car park. Sabienn was in no doubt they were looking for them.

After a few minutes driving at speed, they worked through a good road surrounded on both sides by good tree cover. A road sign ahead indicated "Danger: Steep Descent".

It was then that Sabienn saw the escarpment. "Oh my goodness," he cried. His jaw dropped at the vertical fall of hundreds of metres just a stone's throw from the vehicle's wheels.

Bray was standing nearby offering commentary, "I'm seeing birds fly below us. There's yellow paint sprayed on parts of the surface. Wheel tracks leading to the edge and then nothing but drop. What do you know of this place?" Bray asked of Sabienn.

"I wish I didn't fall asleep in school," said Sabienn, mesmerised by the drop and the view down to Turmeric. "The landscape was formed millions of years ago by some massive, cataclysmic, geological whatever. It was some massive thrust up of a cliff or a sinking of the coast."

"That wasn't what I meant," said Bray.

"I know what you meant," said Sabienn. "I'm saying we're about to die in

some pretty impressive geography.” They passed a speed sign with a big black 40 in a red circle. Lyall was pushing his vehicle up into the sixty kilometres area. “Lyall,” commented Sabienn, “Are we good?”

“Is that a speed limit, old man,” said Stork, “or just a suggestion?”

Lyall ignored both, keeping his eyes forward. He was in the zone.

Deep shouted from the rear of the bus, “We have company.”

Winding behind them on the treacherous path were two black vans. Jasspick must have alerted the Secret Police to the boys’ flight from the lookout.

Sabienn thought, *I still have something they need. They wouldn’t be actively trying to kill us.* He then stole a glance at their bus driver, working the gears and pushing the silent running vehicle into the threshold of seventy kilometres an hour. *That’ll be Lyall’s job.*

They were now taking blind bends weaving across the road into oncoming lanes. If there was any vehicle coming the other way, no-one would stand a chance. From his seat, Sabienn could now see the remains of those vehicles down on the rocks below. Wheels up, like some crushed insects on their backs with their legs in the air.

“Wish I’d brought a change of undies,” Stork said trying to lighten the mood.

“Wish I’d brought my glasses,” said Lyall, eyes not leaving the road ahead. Stork gave a shocked look to Sabienn.

“If you were Secret Police, what would you do?” said Bray.

“I’d set up a check point on the narrow road ahead,” said Sabienn. “At a place the bus couldn’t manoeuvre. Then I’d stop it cleanly. Take everyone off to interrogation. The two following us are merely a stopper in the bottle.”

Deep wasn’t wasting time. Sabienn watched him pushing up a ventilation hatch in the rear of the bus. Seeing what he was trying to do, Sabienn and Bray hoisted the big man up so he could get a better view.

“What d’you think?” said Sabienn.

“Hopeless,” said Deep, pulling his head back in. “But I can try.”

“Give ‘em something to think about,” said Sabienn, hoisting his rifle up to him.

Sabienn and Bray held the big man as steady as the swaying vehicle would allow, giving him a better chance at a good shot.

From the window, Sabienn could see a black van come into view and a shot rang out. The bullet must have hit above the vehicle into the cliff face because shattered stones spilled on to the road.

Sabienn could vaguely catch a glimpse of the driver of the van. From where he stood holding Deep’s right leg, he could feel the Secret Policeman’s sphincter tweak. The black van fish-tailed a little on the road and came back to a steady



run.

After the shot, the trailing vehicles dropped back a bit to stay out of firing range. In Sabienn's opinion, there seemed to be no desire for heroics on their part. *They're just a stopper not the boarding party. There must be a check point ahead. And if there was a check point, there'd be no oncoming vehicles.*

He stole another glance at Lyall with his liberal manoeuvring around the bends almost taking the wheels out over the cliff. Small stones were falling down from above them and rolling on to the track. The bus slid and swayed in the gravel but kept a fierce pace.

"Darl, I've got them." Marriell had been rummaging in her pack for the last minute and retrieved her husband's spectacles. But one of the arms was busted. "You must've sat on it, dear."

"Here," said Sabienn, grabbing them from her. He staggered up to Lyall as the vehicle swayed at a bend and held the spectacles on Lyall's nose and hung on to a pole for grim death with his other hand.

"That's interesting," said Lyall. "There's a line on the road."

Lyall had a dry humour Sabienn found appealing. "Don't let it cramp you," said Sabienn. "You're doing good."

"Basic physics, son," said Lyall. "Force equals mass by acceleration."

"Oh great," chimed in Stork, lying back in his seat looking pale in the face. "A physics lesson. Mind if I hurl? I'm sick."

"You shut your mouth, boy," said Lyall turning on Stork with a little heat. "You hurl and you clean it up."

"Why d'you care, old man? It's not your bus," yelled Stork.

Lyall replied, "If you haven't been on hands and knees to clean sick of a bus seat, you wouldn't understand."

Trying to keep himself steady, Sabienn held the spectacles to the old man's nose and sensed Lyall had gone quiet. The old man kept his eyes on the road and pushed his vehicle faster as he hit a straight. "I tried to kill myself half an hour ago," Lyall said quietly and solemnly for Sabienn's ears only.

"It's not too late to finish the job," said Sabienn trying to lighten his mood. They took another outrageously narrow bend letting the wheels nearly spin without purchase in thin air. As they rounded, they saw the check point ahead.

Sabienn saw a black van parked sideways across the road ahead on the centre line. Its hazard lights were flashing and there were two officers in body armour with rifles standing close to the rear.

Further ahead there were a column of about five cars, stopped on the downside of the roadblock. As the check point saw the bus approach, one of the guards lifted his hand for it to slow down. The other lifted his rifle ready for use.

Sabienn looked at them. *They may want to take me alive. But that doesn't extend to Lyall. He'd be expendable.* He looked around and saw Marriell's backpack next to Stork. "Pass me the pack," he said gripping for dear life on to his pole.

When the pack was passed he juggled keeping Lyall's glasses in place, and fashion some kind of shield for them both with the pack. The first bullet came and busted a hole in the windscreen.

"That's it," cried Stork, almost in tears. "We're done."

The guard ahead was now moving his hand excitedly for the vehicle to slow down. Looking down at Lyall's lap, Sabienn noticed wet patches forming as if a wound was seeping through. His heart sank as he sensed his old friend had been hit.

"Lyall," Sabienn cried. He dropped his pack and tried to attend to the damp cloak front but was pushed away by the old man's solid hand. Lyall still had a job to do.

"Basic physics, son," said Lyall. "Force equals.." Lyall pushed Sabienn's hand away holding his glasses, braced his fists tightly on his wheel, crunched some gears in readiness, then planted his pedal to the ground and the bus responded by going faster and faster.

"No," screamed Stork with his head in his hands. "No, No!"

The vehicle was aimed directly at the black van and the guards watched as the hurtling metal monster bore down on them. Sabienn looked on at them as they hurled themselves to safety towards the side of the cliff wall.

At the very last second, the bus veered towards the cliff face and followed a sliver of ground between the back of the van and the perilous drop.

Part of the bus side scraped along the van tow bar in its relentless pace. They passed the van and saw the passengers of the stopped cars leaning out to look at the speeding metal pass them by. They passed one, two, three cars. Their passengers all wide mouthed with eyes like dinner plates.

Ahead the sliver of ground was becoming narrower and there was a substantially rooted bush on the edge that would severely affect their travel. Lyall brought the monster back in on to the road and they clipped the final car dragging it along with them.

Looking down on to the car, Sabienn could see a little girl in the back absolutely aghast, wide-eyed and panicking. The bus pushed through and the car disengaged and slid to a halt; dented, shaken and swaying but otherwise safe. Lyall kept his pedal down and they powered through. Sabienn was in disbelief. His adrenalin was pumping.

"She'll have something for show and tell," said Lyall, giggling

uncontrollably.

“Whooah!” shouted Sabienn.

Stork joined them at the front, “You hit that in a shower of shit. Unbelievable!”

“Are you OK?” Sabienn turned his attention to the old man.

“I’m not hit,” said Lyall. There was a bullet that got through but it hit something solid in the pack.

“Must’ve hit your cum-stained undies,” said Stork. “They’d bounce a truck.” Sabienn saw the old man balk at Stork’s boorish humour.

With the pack in hand, Sabienn rummaged through and retrieved a metal water bottle. It had a neat little hole in the side issuing forth a stream of fluid. Lyall saw the water bottle and went quiet. He just stepped on his pedal and made speed down the mountain path.

As he looked at his old friend, Sabienn retrieved the glasses and held them on the old man’s nose. “Thank you,” said Lyall.

They both turned their attention to the road ahead. Their vehicle swayed and slid around and Lyall continued to take it across the centre line on the blind bends. Sabienn knew that the probability of a head-on had increased now there was no check point to stop oncoming passage.

“Steady, old man,” said Stork, now back in his seat.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Lyall responded. There was a little heat and a little friction in his comeback.

They took a sharp bend where the bus was nearly out over the edge and pulled back just in time to come face to face with a car coming the other way. The oncoming vehicle made a quick evasive move and blasted its horn in disapproval.

“What’re you doing?” shouted Stork from his seat.

The old man stayed quiet and kept his eyes on the road. He pushed his vehicle faster as the road became straighter and the ground base became wider. Sabienn offered a celebratory acknowledgement at the sight of a simple hut on the side of the road indicating some civilization not bolted on to the side of a cliff. All around, the plains started to get thicker with trees and more huts appeared.

Ahead was a road sign indicating a Y-junction; an arrow pointed on to Turmeric and another veered off to the side in the direction of “Speers”. As the bus hurtled along the straight, Lyall pushed the vehicle into the turn to take them to Speers.

With a look of consternation, Sabienn turned to his old friend who seemed to be reading the younger man’s concern. “Trust me on this, boy.” The bus pushed

along at speed and Lyall spoke to Sabienn without lifting his eyes off the road. "I've got a friend on the ray-roll," Lyall said. His head jerked towards the spare battery at the rear of his seat proudly emblazoned with its green print label, "Speers". "He works at Speers Distribution. There's a solar plant on Hell Mountain. He unloads the green trucks. I think I can get one. We need to lose this bus."

"We've got a problem." Sabienn's thoughts were interrupted by Bray's quiet intrusion.

They both turned to look out the back window and saw the distant black van weaving in and out of traffic, trying to improve its position on them. "Only one van," said Bray. "They must have split up at the junction."

Sabienn turned to look through the damaged windscreen to the road ahead. In the distance, two green trucks with "Speers" on the side and back panels pulled out of a park area. "Oh, what a time to come out after your break and a leak," Sabienn said to Lyall. They lumbered on to the road and settled in to a seventy kilometre trundle in an eighty zone.

*That's OK,* thought Sabienn. *There were two lanes so Lyall can easily pass them.* He watched Lyall make quick work on the distance between them, but Lyall made no indication that he intended to pass them. Their vehicle finally caught up with the back of the trucks and slowed down from its one hundred and ten to match the slower seventy. The passing lane was vacant and to the four younger men on the bus just beckoning in its invitation to be used.

"What's going on?" shouted Stork. "Take the lane." One of the cars behind passed them in the lane beside and went on ahead past the trucks.

A hand appeared from the driver side window of the truck ahead, waving to let the trailing traffic pass. But Lyall still kept his bus up its rear.

"What's he doing?" Bray confided with Sabienn. He couldn't respond because he was at a loss too.

Another civilian vehicle came by them and past them moving on up in front of the trucks. Seeing the black vehicle get closer to their rear, even Deep was getting excited. "We need to move," he said.

"Talk to him," continued Bray in his undertone to Sabienn.

"Tell him yourself," whispered Sabienn. "I don't have a door into Lyall's mind." He stole a glance at Marriell. She was sitting calmly viewing the scenery go by as if she had complete trust in Lyall's driving. Sabienn was tense now. *What do I do? Express the group's concerns? Or not interfere? There has to be some logic here.*

All Sabienn could see out the front of the windscreen was the obstacle of the back green panels of a truck complete with its advertising; "Speers, Solutions for

the Modern World”. The black van was now at the rear corner of the bus and someone was leaning out the window with a rifle. A bullet smashed a window panel along the side of the bus leaving a gaping hole.

The black vehicle was holding back and Sabienn sensed what Lyall was trying to do. *OK. I get it*, he thought. *The black van comes alongside, he changes lanes then uses the muscle of its hurtling metal to push the Secret Police van into the ditch. Nice thinking, Lyall.*

But they viewed the van at the rear making progress alongside the back of the bus, emboldened by a lack of response. The Police van still seemed to be hedging its bets and not committing to pushing further yet, but it was getting worryingly closer to the front. Another bullet shattered a window.

Not knowing what Lyall was trying to do left Sabienn thinking. *What do I do? Get my hands on a rifle? Or keep faith with my friend?*

Stork took it upon himself to come up and stand beside the driver. His stance was blunt. “Will you change lanes, you old fool?”

Sabienn felt powerless to stop him because he didn’t know what was going on himself. Stork moved around at the front in his rant and let a few choice and abusive words fly for everyone to hear including Lyall. “Are you trying to kill us?” he shouted. “Shift lanes, you old idiot.”

Turning his attention back to the van, Sabienn was now looking down the barrel of a rifle. The officer was positioned on the side of the vehicle and the muzzle was pointed directly at him. *Didn’t you get the memo I’m the valuable one?* Sabienn could do nothing but watch the last nanoseconds of his life pass by.

Bang!

The shot rang out. And he was still standing. The officer was shaking a bloodied hand that Deep just put a bullet into. The officer’s rifle then went off and shattered the bus mirror next to the driver’s window. It exploded and splinters of glass flew everywhere. Everyone ducked for safety on the bus except Lyall who was transfixed on what was in front.

The bus followed the trucks around a bend in the road. The black van was very bold now and had pulled alongside and moved up to be adjacent to the driver. The officer with the bloodied hand now held a pistol in his good hand. He was readying himself for a good shot on the driver. And Lyall was allowing this.

Just one simple manoeuvre of turning in to the next lane would scrape the black van into the ditch. It was frustrating for Sabienn, the tactician, not to see this being done. But up until now he’d kept his mouth shut. He moved up to be alongside Lyall to make a plea on behalf of everyone.

But as he stood there, it was at that moment that everything changed.

The trucks in front lumbered off to the side and turned into a road sign-posted "Speers". When the rear of the front vehicle finally cleared, Lyall planted his pedal and pushed his bus back to speed.

The black van was caught unawares and had to accelerate to catch up. It was then that it had to screech its brakes to make a perilous stop. The black van hit a barricade of rubber tyres at speed and bounced back and rocked and swayed and found itself unbalanced on two wheels. It slowly toppled over on to its side into the ditch.

Sabienn looked on to catch a glimpse through the van's windscreen of the gunman falling on top of the van driver, who was slapping his steering wheel in a hissy fit like someone just broke his favourite doll. No-one had seen the lanes merging sign. Except Lyall.

*Suddenly Lyall looks like the man of the hour, thought Sabienn. He kept his nerve. And I look cool because I kept my mouth shut.*

"Thank you," Sabienn said to Lyall.

"No, thank you," said Lyall.

"Lyall," said Stork, "You're the man." He was now coming forward like the driver's best friend as if nothing happened and stood beside Lyall with all the authority and push of a limp dick.

"You have a foul mouth, boy," said Lyall, barely acknowledging his presence.

"Oh." Stork was trying to laugh it all off and sweep everything under the carpet as if nothing happened. "Live with it, old man." He sat back in his seat. "Can't you take a joke?"

The bus powered along the straight now at one hundred and twenty. It was a clear run to leave what had happened behind.

"What about the ray-roll guy?" said Sabienn.

"Change of plan," said Lyall. "Trust me."

They travelled another five minutes at break-neck speed as Lyall kept an eye on all the signs streaming by. They then slowed down to take a sharp left and then a sharp right.

The bus then pushed through into a compound of a factory. The boom gates of the guard house were up to allow their entry and they glided through. No-one was present to check them.

Sabienn sensed Lyall's mood become tense and nervous as eyes of the workers turned to watch them pass. He guided the bus to around the back and parked it against the rear fence. Once parked, the old man got out quickly without a word. The others gathered their packs and swiftly followed.

Once everyone was outside, Lyall beckoned to Deep to come to him and spoke to him in confidence. Sabienn watched on at the faces of both men in

committed and serious private discourse.

As they spoke to one another, Deep worked the action of his rifle as if to indicate he was ready for trouble. They came back to the rest of the group both looking nervous.

"We are going to take one of these vans," said Lyall, pointing to a fleet of delivery vans parked to the side. "We're in extreme danger, here. If I tell you to do something, you do it. Understood?"

They all nodded in agreement. Lyall stalked along the backs of the vans parked there and pointed to one. "Get in," he said.

He slid the side door open and the group tumbled in except for Stork. Lyall grabbed him by the upper arm, "Get in the front." The old man then retrieved something from his pack and took to the driver side, slipping in behind the wheel.

"Put this on," said Lyall, turning to Stork and offering him a cap emblazoned on the front with "Speers Medical" which the younger man placed on his head. "Take this," said Lyall, handing Stork a small wrapped square package.

"What's this?" Stork was bemused.

"A sandwich." Lyall was deadly serious in his response. "The guard will be back at his post by now," he said checking his watch. "If he doesn't get it, he'll think something's wrong."

"What?" Stork was incredulous.

"Just listen," Deep pleaded from the back of the van.

Stork quickly turned to look for reassurance. Sabienn knew that Deep could tell Stork to sing the alphabet and he'd sing it.

"Ready yourself with that weapon," Lyall said to Deep. Sabienn had never seen Lyall so nervous. "Let's go.. Oh no. No!"

At that moment, a grey uniformed guard appeared from around the corner of the factory. He looked around and noticed the people in the van. He unclipped his sidearm and started to walk towards them.

"Everyone down in the back," whispered Lyall tensely. He turned to Deep and continued, "That's the man I was telling you. For goodness sake, get a good shot. He once lined three people up. Shot against the van." Lyall then turned to Stork, "Eat it."

"What?" Stork was sniffing the package suspiciously.

"Eat it! *Eat* it! If we're caught with that, we're dead." Lyall was almost beside himself with fear.

The package was opened and Stork took a whiff, "Pworr!" He reeled in disgust, "What is this?"

"Wolf cheese," whispered Lyall. "Eat it!"

*“Eat!”* said Deep from his position in the back.

Stork started to stuff the material into his mouth. From where he was hidden, Sabienn could see Stork’s face covered in sweat and taking on a tinge of green. He was pushing the substance in with the enjoyment of eating a shoe. His cheeks were globes now filled with the material and he took gulp after gulp. He looked visibly distressed but the fate of the van lay on his shoulders.

“When I roll the window down,” Lyall continued to Deep, “Take the shot. You’ll have only one chance.”

Reaching for his weapon, Sabienn rolled on to his side to be back up but a reassuring hand came across from Deep on to his arm. He had this one under control.

The guard reached the window and Lyall kept looking forward as if the guard wasn’t there. From what Sabienn could make of him, the guard was large, elderly, thickly set and muscular and his uniform fitted him crisply and neatly. He tapped on the window lightly. Lyall ignored him again. The guard reached down and felt for his holster to make sure it was unclipped and tapped on the window again.

“Ready, boy,” Lyall whispered to Deep. “When the window’s down, you’ll have only one shot. Make it count.”

Deep rolled with his weapon in hand lying in wait in the back. The window rolled down. The guard stood well clear. Lyall kept looking forward. Not a word was spoken. The guard reached for his holster with its firearm. And a snap was heard as he clipped it back up.

“Sandwich gag again?” said the guard.

“Hook, line and sinker,” said Lyall. He turned to Stork, “OK. Go.”

With his green face and bulbous cheeks, Stork stared back with eyes as large as dinner plates. Sabienn saw he looked more like an animated pustule ready to blow.

Casually, Lyall pointed to the rear of the van, “Garden bed.” Stork didn’t need another invitation. He was out of the van and back at the rear. Sabienn could hear him retching his guts and emptying his mouth.

To Sabienn’s side, Deep was lying on his back with his eyes closed, giggling like a schoolkid. He must have been in on the gag too.

“How’re you keeping?” said the guard.

“Been better,” said Lyall.

“And Marriell?” said the guard with interest.

“I’m here, Jonn,” she piped from the back. “The same.”

“These boys,” Lyall pointed to the back, “are good boys. But the Secret Police want them.”



“Bastards,” said Jonn. “You won’t want that tracker then.” He opened the door and began to remove the tracking device from under the dashboard. As he was attending to this, Bray sat bemused at the chortling Deep.

“The Secret Police’ll be here in two minutes,” said Bray. “And you’re playing jokes? Am I the only sane one here?”

“Yeah,” said Sabienn in partial agreement. “But it’s Stork.”

Bray stopped to consider the situation and started to smile also. “Yeah. OK.”

The three men sat there and took private delight in their absent friend’s distress. “He certainly wouldn’t hold back if it were one of us,” said Bray.

The elders chatted quickly to catch up on time. “They’ll be looking for that,” Lyall said, thumbing towards the bus.

“For what?” Jonn smiled.

“That’s the spirit,” said Lyall.

“Just drop the van at the depot.” Jonn was as casual as Lyall. “Leave the keys. Junee can do some shopping.” By their familiarity, Sabienn sensed they went way back. Marriell vacated the rear of the vehicle and sat in the front to stretch her legs.

At that moment, Stork returned still spitting the remnants from his mouth and piled into the back of the van to join the rest. He sat there sore for his experience and turned to Deep, “Did you see that?”

Turning from giggling schoolkid to the solemn book of sympathy, Deep looked back at him. “Dreadful,” he said, shaking his head.

Sabienn thought, trying to keep a straight face. *All of us like Deep. But with Stork, it’s a bit of a man-crush.*

“Terrible,” chimed in Bray with feigned horror. His acting was on song too.

“How’s the mouth?” said Lyall, finally addressing his victim.

“Wolf cheese.” Stork spat the words out like the putrid material still left in his mouth. He stared daggers at the old man.

“Oh, Wolf cheese,” said Bray, sparking up. “Yes. I’ve seen that. Some rustic gentleman bent over, fondling the teats of a she-wolf. Letting milk spray into a small bucket under her back legs and then carting it off to make cheese. It’s very good for you.”

“Are you serious?” said Stork in dismay.

“No,” said Bray. “Actually I have no idea.” It brought quiet amusement to the group.

“Laugh it up, Steel,” said Stork feeling miffed.

Jonn’s two-way spluttered into life, “Code Six in the compound.”

The guard turned to Lyall, “You’re friends are here. Take the back way. Move. Go!” He slapped the side of the van as it was brought to life and they

sped in the direction away from where they'd come.

Still wanting to take the matter of his humiliation further, Stork wiped his mouth. "That was putrid, old man," he said in Lyall's direction. "You swine."

"Oh, I'm sorry," the old man turned to him with a wide-eyed child-like innocence. "Can't you take a joke?"

## 30. The Turmeric Markets

“OK, guys. Just listen up,” said Sabienn. They’d been travelling half an hour in the back of the van when he called his friends for a whispered huddle. “Turmeric. What does everyone know? I’ve only visited the place a few times. On each occasion I was glad to leave.”

“Well you start,” said Bray.

“Military city,” said Sabienn. “Haven for soldiers. Lots of bars. Lots of places to meet partners for liaisons. Both permanent and temporary. An undercurrent of danger and illegal enterprise. Lay down in bed long enough with it, you’ll catch its fleas.”

“My kind of place,” said Stork. “So pack a good repellent and we’ll enjoy ourselves.”

“Look at that,” said Bray, inviting the others to view the city from the van. The coastal community was bathed in the morning sun that rose from the sea. And as the van came over the rise of a hill, they could glimpse the headland pincers around its sheltered harbour. Within the pincers were thousands of local fishing craft.

“Turmeric,” said Bray. “A safe harbour. From a sea constantly cursed by the sores. The whirlpools and water spouts. Shipwrecks were spoken of long before the Purge. Major industry, fishing. The prized catch, the eastern black fish. The next is shardee. Caught under special licence. They cut off their poisoned glands, mash them up and can them. Good food I’m told for cats and natives. A great museum. Filled with everything dead and extinct. A red whale skeleton three buses long. Last seen living a thousand years ago. Now seen displayed with a sign. Smeared with kid’s chewing gum. Natives say its extinction is a cause of the sores.”

“What would they know?” added Sabienn. “Anything useful?”

“Airship manufacture. Mainly gossip blimps. I’m told they’re cutting edge. Communications, surveillance weather forecasts. And heaps of cargo sites. Like Jasspick’s yellow airship. That’s all.”

Sabienn looked across to Deep who responded, “I’ve got nothing.”

“Only been to Turmeric once,” said Stork. “Got a fake driver’s licence. When I’m drunk I look foreign. It was terrible. It looked just like me. The market’s the

place.”

Their discussion came to a rest as the van entered the Speer’s depot. A tiny petite woman was waiting with her shopping bag and Lyall and Marriell hugged her as keys were passed across.

Rallying everyone together, Sabienn pointed at the road, “To the markets.” Sabienn, his friends and the two elders left the depot with their cloak hoods up and walked in the direction of the famed markets of Turmeric which were half a kilometre away.

With whimsy, Sabienn thought about the chance of bumping into that old watermelon man who had his car hijacked by the drug dealers. *I finally kept my promise and made it here. But he’s gone.*

Now that he was liberated from the back of the vehicle, Sabienn could get a good look around. The streets that he remembered as being dirty with garbage bags busted on every corner was looking a lot more cheerful and cleaner. And even the buildings in these back areas where no-one visited seemed to have been given a fresh lick of paint.

“Oh, no wonder,” said Sabienn spying a poster on the wall which loomed large as they passed. It was The Great Leader in the celebrated painting, “The Great Leader Gazes Upon Prism Gorge And Contemplates His Return”. In Sabienn’s mind, it was the most majestic of all presentations of the great man.

The poster called for attention. “Your Presence Is Required,” it said, “For Turmeric Stadium To pay homage to the heroes of the revolution and the martyrs of the Bol War.” The time was for tomorrow afternoon prior to the setting of the sun.

“That’s where we foil the attempt on the great man’s life,” said Sabienn to Bray, Deep and Stork. They stopped to admire the poster. Bray in particular made careful analysis.

“Look at this tree,” Bray pointed. “Amateur. You can tell I didn’t do this. And his eyebrows. Mine had more life, more compassion. This just doesn’t seem real.”

Deep’s eyes weren’t on the poster. They just darted furtively around searching for threats. He was more comfortable when they decided to move again.

As the others passed, Sabienn stayed with the poster and with no-one looking, he kissed his fingers and placed them on the forehead of the man in the frame. *Oh, dear Leader. Please come through and make everything right.*

“Car,” said Bray. No-one else saw it, but they instinctively moved to a side lane for cover. From their viewpoint, they then saw the black vehicle turn at the intersection and continue on its way out of sight. They kept moving quickly,

seeking out the cover of doorways and watching for any eyes or cameras moving in their direction. Marriell and Lyall bravely kept up although encumbered with frailty.

As Sabienn and his group made their way closer to the market, everyone they ran into seemed to be dressed and acting like them. All were cloaked and hooded and moving quietly and quickly. Their own packs were nondescript and blended in with many others and all their rifles, including Deep's precious Blue Hunter, were suitably wrapped.

"Watch your backs," whispered Sabienn. "Watch your wallets. Watch the pack, Stork."

They entered the open street mall and the stalls were festooned with colour and bunting, cleaned up for the arrival of the big guest to the town.

For Sabienn there was an assault on his eyes, ears and nose. There were stalls for all sorts of food. Cut meat and live fish were on display. Chickens and ducks were in their cages ready to be blooded and plucked. Green, orange, red and yellow vegetables were arrayed to tempt the eyes and nose. There were all the smells and sounds of commerce held in passing kee notes and pleasant barter.

Right in front of Sabienn walked a young man about half his age who was well-dressed in a stylish hooded cloak. He caught glimpses of his face as he turned his head left and right and had that darting look of a pigeon. Then right in front of him a commotion of arguing occurred to the side and Sabienn watched the young man's hand slip into the folds of an elder man's cloak and retrieve his wallet. Quick as a flash, Sabienn grabbed him and placed his hand in a wrist hold that stopped the boy's travel. "Thief!" called Sabienn.

"OK, what is it that you want?" the thief said. He spoke as if he were in control of the situation.

"What is it that *I* want?" Sabienn was dumbfounded at the cheek.

With the thief in one hand, he tapped the old man who had lost his wallet on the shoulder. "Sir," Sabienn pulled the wallet from the boy's grip. "I believe this is.."

"Don't talk to me." The old guy snatched the wallet from Sabienn's hand and disappeared into the crowd. *Well that's gratitude*, Sabienn thought.

"You see what you've done?" said the thief. "That man's going now to score some soso. He may not live the night. All because of you." *The front of this kid*, thought Sabienn. *He is reprimanding me*. "Did you ever think I may be doing these people a service?" the thief continued.

"Cheeky little shit," said Lyall.

"What're you here for, grandpa?" said the thief. "Free advice from The Stove, old man. See your wallet in the back." He pointed to the bulge in Lyall's behind.

“Wallets are hen-houses. You keep them close to your cock.”

“Monkey,” said Marriell.

“Yeah, Y’ should see my handler,” said The Stove. “He’s uglier than you. No, I’ll take that back. You’ve got a nice face, grandma.” The Stove continued, still believing he was in control, “You’re not going to hand me over. I know this. So what is it that you want?”

Sabienn looked to the others who were as equally lost for words as him. “Passports,” he said.

With his free hand, The Stove pointed up the street. “There’s a stall called Golden Frowns. They’re the best. Tell them The Stove sent you. Just don’t come right out and say what you want. Ask for a fish.”

“What?” said Sabienn.

“That’s right. A pineapple. Just don’t ask for a key,” said The Stove. “Are we done?”

Sabienn still held his grip on him. “Look it’s been a pleasure,” said The Stove. “And welcome to Turmeric.” With the greeting, he handed back to Sabienn the wallet he’d just removed from his cloak. His foot then moved down Sabienn’s shin relieving his grip. And he was gone, weaving in and out of the crowd.

For a thief, he left a favourable impression. *That boy has a big future*, thought Sabienn. *In the Turmeric tourism board.*

They made their way up the street and stood in front of the Golden Fronds, a stall that appeared to sell nick-nacks and trophies and patriotic paraphernalia attendant with the great man’s visit.

As they entered, they were faced with a shelf of bobbing plastic heads of The Great Leader for the car dashboard. There was also his face on hand towels, bath mats, fridge magnets and the like. At the end of the aisle up high was the compulsory painting of the big man, resplendent in his uniform and the single Blue Star on his pocket.

The old man behind the counter read a magazine and seemed disinterested in getting to know six new customers venturing through the door.

“This would be your kind of place, Bray,” said Stork. “He’s like you. A little aloof and artistic. And not wanting to indulge in anything as ordinary as commerce.”

“You’ll keep,” said Bray.

“Hello,” ventured Sabienn towards the attendant who responded with a body movement to show at least he was alive.

“Yes?” the attendant said blankly.

“We were talking with The Stove,” said Sabienn.

Suddenly a thick and menacing plank of wood dropped on to the counter, retrieved from a place below. "Well you can shove off now!" said the man. "I've got cameras all around. So get out!" He pointed to a board with shots of close circuit television photos pasted. Most of them were of The Stove in various poses of theft.

"He stole from us too," Sabienn was doing his best to back-track. "He's no friend."

"Out!" said the man, lifting the plank ready for use.

"Please," continued Sabienn. "We were told to ask for a fish."

"Do I look like I have fish?" said the attendant.

It was at that moment, Sabienn noticed that the man had a real whiff of off fish about him. *What do I say here? I might be smelling this all wrong.*

"Do I smell like I have fish?" continued the attendant.

*I need to be nice here, thought Sabienn. Lyall and Marriell are counting on me. I don't know what I'm smelling.* "No," he replied politely.

"Bullshit!" countered Stork. "You smell like you crawled up a fish's arse and died! You smell putrid!"

"Too right I do!" shouted the attendant, feeling an immediate bond with Stork. "You get that shovelling dead fish into a hole. All because your brother can't pay the power."

"I had that at Academy," sang Stork. "Cold room went dead and we had boxes of pike. Man, you can't get that out. You have to burn them. All your clothes. It's hopeless."

"It's ridiculous," the attendant was finally alive now he had someone to off-load his grief to. "You were at Coriander?"

"No. Salt."

"Me too," said the attendant.

"No way." Stork was alive now.

"I got off-loaded to catering," said the attendant.

"That's me!" shouted Stork with excitement. "That's where I was going! Hey guys," Stork turned to his friends and spoke for everyone to hear. "It's like I'm looking in a mirror. Only he's uglier." He turned back, "What's y' name?"

"Call me In General," said the attendant.

"The .."

"No no. In General," repeated the attendant.

"Stork." They shook hands.

"What is it with this place?" Sabienn confided to Bray. "Everyone's got a weird moniker. The Stove. In General. It's like everyone has to look knockabout and random. The next person with a nickname, I swear, I'm gonna puke."

“What d’ you want?” In General put his plank down behind the counter.

“We don’t know what we want,” said a frustrated Stork. “We were told a fish. We were told a pineapple. All we *really* want is ..”

“Shh shh shh!” In General shut him up and pointed to the camera at the end of the aisle. “This way.”

Sabienn and the others followed Stork being led down a dirty aisle cramped with boxes to the back office. They all jammed in. In General sat behind his desk with heaps of room and the others packed in front, like they were stuffed in to a crowded elevator.

“You just don’t come right out and say it,” whispered In General. “What d’ you want?”

“Passports,” said Sabienn.

The attendant reached into a draw and retrieved about ten deep-blue jacketed Haydd passports wrapped in a rubber band. *If that’s all the Haydd passports, I don’t like our chances for what we really want*, thought Sabienn. “No,” he added. “Turrland passports.”

“Turr?” In General said dumbfounded. “You want Turr? Why?”

Looking back at his elder friends, Sabienn felt his hope fading. “D’ you have one or two?”

“No,” said In General.

Sabienn’s heart sank. He looked sadly back to Marriell and Lyall. He promised them two passports for their friends in Cajj Cajj. It was his contract with the old couple to stop them jumping.

Then thud, thud, thud, thud. Four boxes magically appeared and were dropped on to the top of the desk top from their holding place down below. “I have eight hundred and fifty seven,” said In General.

Surveying the neatly packed deep-green documents, all rubber-banded with paper notes attached, Sabienn couldn’t believe his eyes. In General pulled one from the pack and handed it over for closer perusal.

“These aren’t fake. These are genuine. How do you get these?” said Sabienn. “All the correct watermarks are here.” He opened to the inner pages and let out a gasp of disbelief and showed the elders. “There’s an open-ended visa to Klear,” added Sabienn. “To travel in and out. Your friends can use that. Why’s that here?”

“Klear’s a province of Deerland,” said Bray. “Deer and Haydd immigration work hand in glove.”

What Sabienn had in his hand was beyond comprehension. He looked again at the boxes and turned to In General, “Why are these here? Why so many? This doesn’t make sense.”



“Look,” said In General, losing patience. “Keep asking questions, you can leave.”

Sabienn relented and stood aside. Coming forward wide-eyed, Lyall and Marriell picked through the documents that were separated into age, sex and appearance categories. They took their time and after ten minutes handed over to Sabienn two documents they felt best suited their friends’ needs.

“These two,” said Marriell, taking Sabienn aside. “They’re just like our friends.”

Opening one of them, Sabienn looked down at the photo of the woman staring back. And like with every document photo, it had to be played straight and serious down the barrel of the camera. But with this woman, there was clearly movement captured at the edge of the mouth. Like she was suppressing an explosive laugh. It was almost like someone was standing behind the photographer pulling a funny face that she was desperately trying hard not to react to.

“I’m not a big fan of the Turrs,” Sabienn confided with Marriell. “But this face I can like. Get past the ears, she has a cheerful aunt’s face.”

“You’ve got a long journey, sir,” said Marriell. “And not just with your feet.”

Sabienn picked up the other document. It held the photo of a grey man with a long nose. He clearly wasn’t ready for his shot. It was almost as if the photographer went “Ready, one, two .. click .. three.” There was an air of surprise indelibly etched on his face. *It’s a nice face*, he thought. *Shame about the ears.*

Sabienn proffered the documents across to In General. “How much for these?”

“For you?” said In General, taking business seriously. “Two thousand. Do you have photos?” Pulling them from his pocket, Sabienn had come prepared. “For four thousand two hundred,” In General continued, “we’ll take the passports and deliver to “We Are All Family”. They’re the best. Should be back in two hours.”

Coming in close to Sabienn’s ear, Bray whispered, “STL will have eyes on that shop. There’s nothing in the documents to identify Lyall and Marriell. It solves a problem.” The others looked on at Sabienn as if urging him to make a decision.

“I’ll give you an even five,” said Sabienn. “Just forget we were here. And get tickets for an airship for these people.” He indicated the elders. “To Cajj Cajj.”

“Private travel?” said In General.

“Please.”

“I have a brother in exports. They can ride up front. For an even..” In General

mulled over figures in his mind.

“Six?” Sabienn jumped in.

“Seven.”

Six and a half,” said Sabienn definitely. He and In General then shook hands. “Our treasurer will see you,” said Sabienn as Stork stepped forward. But he had a niggling question he wanted to scratch. “Sir, if we were to ask for “a key”, what would that mean?”

“It’d mean you’re very brave,” said In General.

He moved around and reached to a bucket just outside the door from which he pulled out a key. It was attached to a wooden shoe horn and both were dripping in bleach.

“Market toilets,” In General said. “Ten metres up on the left.”

“I think I’ll hold,” said Sabienn, moving away to let the transaction take place. He took the elders out into the store area. “We’ll leave you here. You should be OK.”

“We could easily get those passports. We know the place,” said Marriell.

“No no, stay here,” said Sabienn.

“We don’t want to be a problem,” she continued. “Lyall, let’s go.”

“Stay,” Sabienn was more definite. “You’ll be safe here.” Sabienn hugged Marriell and added. “I’ve only known you a day. But you’re more than friends. You’re like mother and father to me. More mother and father than any story I’ve been told. I’ll miss Lyall’s guidance and approval. And I’ll miss your softness.”

“Don’t worry about us,” she said. “You stay safe.” She kissed him on the cheek.

“Thank you,” said Lyall coming towards Sabienn. They hugged in a deep embrace, like father and son.

“I’ll miss you, Lyall,” said Sabienn. “I’ll even miss your bad breath. Your human touch and every frailty. I crave it. It marks you as a man. I’ll remember this.” He gave a manly peck on Lyall’s cheek. “And eat wolf cheese to celebrate.”

The others said their fond farewells and they left the elders standing near the patriotic bobble-heads. The four young men left and walked the market street in silence; reflecting with heavy hearts.

“Old Lyall,” said Stork.

“Give him respect,” said Bray. “The old man sliced right through your tripwires of sarcasm and planted a joke right on your forehead.”

“Not many able bodied jokers could do that,” acknowledged Stork. “I’ll miss the old guy.”

“We need to get to Turmeric Stadium,” said Sabienn finally. “We need to case

the place.”

They rushed quickly through the area where people haggled over vegetables. Sabienn’s mind was preoccupied with the matter at hand. On the right of them they passed a pallet of watermelons and he thought back again to the old man he had to sing for in order that the fruit would grow.

“Patrol,” said Bray.

They veered into an alley and saw the black cloaks far ahead. The Secret Police were talking with stall holders obviously trying to get any on the ground intelligence they could use. Upon their leaving one could sense the level of cooperation they received as the stall holder gave them a single finger salute for their departure. Sabienn thought, *That’s one thing STL never mastered. The art of humility. The more stall holders they rub the wrong way, the safer we’ll be.*

Then there was a moment. Sabienn stopped dead still and cold. *I don’t believe it!* Near a stall of large watermelons, a man stood. It was as if the man had spotted the patrol ahead too and his hood came back briefly to reveal his features. He was looking up the street where the boys had been looking and hadn’t clocked on that Sabienn had spotted him.

It was the old watermelon man. His distinctive white facial hair was exactly the same as before. Quickly Sabienn whispered to his friends about the find and briefly the background of their history.

“That’s lucky,” said Bray.

“We could use help,” said Stork.

Only Deep stood his ground. “I don’t like this. I’ve got a feeling.”

“We’re good,” said Sabienn, not understanding the big man’s view but giving him a reassuring slap on the shoulder. “We’re cool here.”

Clearly the big man was voted down. Sabienn made quick tracks to the side of the man he believed had been killed. “Sir?” He tapped the old man on the arm.

The melon man swung around. His cheerful avuncular face was still the same as ever. “As I live and breathe,” the old man said. “These sir, are your water melons. See how big they’ve become.”

“That’s what Alessis Seel did,” said Sabienn, mentioning the singer.

“You’re too modest,” said the old man. He still had no moustache but stubble was present where one was trying to grow.

“It’s unbelievable,” said Sabienn. “I was just thinking of you. And there you are.”

“I know,” said the old man. “It’s like the times when you’d be humming a tune and then suddenly the song comes on. Blaring from the radio. Life’s like that.”

“I was so worried about you,” said Sabienn. “Bad men stole your car.”

“But I wasn’t there,” said the old man. “Fate smiles on the humble. You boys want to help? Just a few more to get from the back.”

Sabienn and the others walked towards another alley way following the old man.

“You got another car?” said Bray.

“I miss the old one,” said the old man. “She was faithful. And the fishing? Did you catch the paint fish?”

“No,” said Sabienn, still starry-eyed in the presence of the man he thought gone.

“You didn’t use muscle worms,” the old man laughed. “Should have used muscle worms.”

They rounded the corner. “Gentlemen,” said the old man. They faced a black vehicle.

“Oh shit,” said Bray. Sabienn also recognized it. It was the vehicle they did manoeuvres with yesterday with the dealers.

Four men stood around the vehicle. They’d raised their rifles and had them pointing at the boys.

Deep, who had had his suspicions confirmed, was the only man prepared. He held his Blue Hunter unwrapped and ready for use and pointed it directly at the melon man.

From the back of the vehicle, a door was opened and a man with his wrists and feet bound was helped out by one of the riflemen. It was the drug dealer Sabienn knew as the gun man. The man whose life he had foolishly spared.

“Korlay,” said the old man. “Are these the men?”

“Yes, Master,” said Korlay, who then looked directly at Sabienn. “They saved my life.”

“Not for long,” said The Master. The rifleman roughly pushed the bound man back inside. “No false heroics, sir,” The Master said to Deep. “Or your friends die.” Deep still held his nerve on his weapon.

The Master pointed to the open door of the black van. “Get in, please,” he said. “And I’ll take back what’s mine.” He faced them. “Where’s my money?”

## 31. The Master

*Rule number one, Sabienn remembered from the Academy in kidnap situations, Never get into the car. You're dead anyway, so go down kicking and screaming and leaving claw marks on the tyres, but never get in.*

Quickly Sabienn looked around at his environs. Above them to the left was a camera pointed in their direction but he could see the cable feeding the equipment had been neatly snapped.

"Sir, we don't have your money," said Sabienn, keeping The Master engaged.

"Korlay," said the Master, addressing the bound man sitting in the car. "Tell me what you know, please."

As he spoke, Sabienn walked carefully toward the vehicle so that he could see the man inside. Sabienn's hands stayed up in the air and he made sure there were no sudden movements. All the time he was looking around at the streetscape.

"Sir, we were there to make the deal," Korlay offered, with genuine fear in his voice. "But then we got ambushed." Sabienn noted the freshly bandaged hand that Deep had put a bullet into. "They took the car and the money," he continued. "And like I said, Marrwick ran to make the deal. To the shooting pits. He's the fast runner and took the product. I ran behind. When I turned the corner at the pits, he was already lined up against a tree. The Secret Police filled him with bullets. They were waiting for us. I just ran into the woods."

Sabienn remembered sitting in the trees at Second Best Hill listening to the hail of gunfire coming from the shooting pits. He also remembered their dealings with the man Marrwick, whom he knew as the can eater. Still he held a vivid view in his mind of the contents of the Marrwick's wallet; the personal photo of a small girl, the bill for drinks at a strip club and the business card for Doctor Redd Benn at the Chard Provincial Children's Hospital.

"Yes," acknowledged The Master. "It's exactly as you told it before. But what I don't understand is why would they spare you? There's a price on your head. Which we'll now collect. You're not telling us the whole story."

"I swear," pleaded Korlay.

"We don't have your money," repeated Sabienn.

"They have over fifty thousand," said Korlay.

“Why do you need your money?” said Sabienn to The Master, continuing to look around. “A deal nets you a million kee. This is small change.”

From where Sabienn stood, he looked across the road at a shop front for the Chard Fleece; as their name suggested, freedom, love and peace. It was a drop-in centre run by Blue Moon monks for people to relax and sip herbal tea. He gazed at the sign on the awning. The white lamb caricature staring back that he had once seen before on the back of Korlay’s vehicle. *They’d be no help whatsoever.*

“It’s the principle,” said The Master. He now turned his attention to Deep. “And that Blue Hunter is mine. I’ll take that too please.” The way Deep was holding his weapon, he wasn’t going to give it up without a fight.

The other riflemen had their guns trained on him. *Deep doesn’t have long to live.* All this time there were people moving around the busy corner. They saw the rifles and moved to the other side of the road. No-one wanted to get involved or raise an alarm.

Sabienn kept looking around and saw from the corner where they stood a shop front on the main market street. It had a sign with the familiar black C and the lightning bolt of the Chard Grey Shirts. The sign hung above a book stall and drop-in centre of a different kind. *If only, thought Sabienn. The meeting place for angry young men. Where they get the screws tightened on the chips on their shoulders. Perfect. If I could get a bullet into that sign, it’d be like a rock hitting a bee-hive. But I’ve got two guards blocking the way. And I don’t have a rifle.*

Deep still held the Blue Hunter with The Master firmly in his sights.

“I’ll count to three,” said The Master. “One ..”

*But wait a minute, thought Sabienn. Tomorrow The Great Leader will be here. More than anything those Grey Shirts would want to be there.*

“Two ..”

Sabienn ran with his gut. “Hey, Stop,” said Sabienn. “Stop. Stop.” With his hands still high, Sabienn moved towards Deep who was still clasping his weapon tightly. “There’s no problem here,” Sabienn said. “Deep, stand down please. Give me the gun.” Looking into Deep’s eyes, Sabienn tried to convey that there was some plan involved here. “Please,” Sabienn offered a wink only his friend could see.

Deep slowly and reluctantly relinquished his grip of the rifle and handed it to Sabienn but it was done like prying a child from his arms.

“We’re all good here,” said Sabienn. “We’re all..”

Sabienn suddenly lifted the weapon and took aim across the street and let loose a round at the sign above the Chard Fleece. Bang! The bullet hit the wood and must have dislodged nails as the board swung down like a rotary axe-blade, almost decapitating two patrons calmly enjoying their drinks on the footpath

tables. The weapon did feel very light and nimble and Sabienn was even impressed at the accuracy he received.

It all occurred in a split second. The others around him were stunned. As soon as it had happened, Sabienn quickly placed the rifle innocuously at his feet. He then sprung back to put his hands behind his head. "Sorry sorry," he pleaded. "I'm done. I'm done."

The Master came close to him and kicked the rifle away from him. All the boys' other weapons were also seized off them.

They all looked at the patrons and Blue Moon monks running back inside their shop in fear. The doors closed tight behind them.

"Ha! I don't know what you're thinking, boy. But I approve," The Master said. "I am feeling a bit scared now. I'm worried some monk'll come out and beat the shit out of us with prayer beads." The comment raised a giggle from the man's entourage. "In the car please," The Master said calmly.

"But wait," said Sabienn. "We don't have all your money."

"What?"

"We only have forty thousand," said Sabienn.

"Where's the rest?" The Master said.

"Oh, you know."

"No, I don't. Where's my ten thousand?" The Master was more insistent.

There was a brief pause.

"We spent it," said Sabienn casually.

"On?" the Master stated darkly.

"This and that."

"You see this man?" The Master pointed out Bray. "How much do you value his life?" Bray looked back as if he was about to accept his fate. There was no anger just a resigned calm. The Master continued, "We are going to kill this man now and then we are all going for a ride in my car." He looked at Sabienn. "No-one plays me for a fool."

"Kill him and you'll never know," said Sabienn.

"I'll count to three," said The Master. "One .."

Two of the entourage raised their weapons. Sabienn looked on helplessly at Bray who had bowed his head waiting for the end.

"This is a mistake," Sabienn said. He was floundering now. He had nothing.

"Two .."

"Wait wait .." One of the guards alerted the arrival of a police car. It wasn't STL, it was the ordinary law and order foot soldiers. The car slid up the laneway and stopped outside the Chard Fleece. Behind them another had parked near the Grey Shirts drop-in.

Looking on at The Master, Sabienn noted the concerned look on his face. He was watching the officers alight from their vehicles. *Interesting*, thought Sabienn. *In his line of work, this man must have some police in his pocket. Helping him out for kick-backs. But the way he's looking at these uniforms, he doesn't seemed to have an influence here.*

"Stand down, stand down," The Master whispered to his guards. They all retired to the general concealment of behind the black van bringing the boys with them.

"Anyone shouts, they die," said The Master to his entourage. "Get in the car."

It was at that moment, the policeman who had attended the Grey Shirts shop came marching out and crossed the market street towards the Fleece store. Behind him was an angry Grey Shirt shouting at the top of his head trying to catch up with the policeman. The shouting was unintelligible at first but as they got closer he could make out what was being said.

Following the Grey Shirt, who must have been a man in charge, a whole posse of Grey Shirts, about twenty in all spilled out on to the street behind him. They wanted to get a better look at the action and offer their support for the man in front.

Some of these guys now crowded around the walls adjacent to the black van. They had no interest whatsoever in The Master, the guards or the boys, but half of the attendant crowd had rifles.

Sabienn noticed that in a split second, the whole dynamic of their situation had just changed. The Master had become more subdued and wary of the intruders into his space.

"I am *sick* of this!" shouted the Grey Shirt leader, a neatly dressed small man. He finally caught up with the police officer near the front of the Fleece. The full street theatre was laid out before Sabienn. "Anything happens, it's always us. We didn't *do* anything!"

"You, Mr Botch," said the police officer, turning to the man following and digging his fingers into his chest. "*You*, have been warned."

"We didn't *do* anything," cried Botch. He was looking around him for support and there were murmurs of dissent from the young men nearby.

"I've got two monks hiding under a table in there," said the officer pointing at the Fleece.

"It wasn't us!" cried Botch.

"A month ago," said the policeman, "a rock went through the window. That's a violation. Two weeks on, a table overturned. That's a violation. And now," he pointed to the sign hanging limply on its last nail. "That's a violation."

"We didn't do it!" cried Botch. "You keep it up, officer. I've got cousins in



the police. They'll fix you."

"I've got cousins in the police too," said the officer "Just try. Hey hey, that sounded like a threat."

"That wasn't a threat." Botch was trying to backtrack severely now. Holding his hands up to try and eat back the words he'd just said.

"That *was* a threat," said the officer. "So now, your permit.."

"No no.." Botch shook his head.

"Your permit for tomorrow.." continued the officer.

"Don't say it. *Don't* say it!"

".. is *revoked*." The officer stated calmly.

Botch's reaction was extremely unmanly. He spat air through his pursed lips and stamped his feet on the laneway like a little school child. "We didn't *do* this!" he shouted. "We're the victims here. *We* are. You can't do this!" The police officer was unmoved, making notes in a pad he flipped from his pocket. "You're not listening, are you?" Botch obviously didn't know when to stop. "You sit on y' fat arse in your office and then come down and victimize us. You're enjoying this, aren't you?" There was no response. "It's people like me that makes this country," shouted Botch, trying to include his audience in to the outrage. "I pay taxes. You work for me. That's what I *should* say. This is ridiculous."

Looking around him, Sabienn gauged the situation. His heart was pumping because the next thing he was about to say may be the last thing he would ever utter. "Hey, dickhead!" Sabienn shouted towards Botch. "Keep it down, will you?"

Sabienn turned and looked down the barrel of a gun being held by one of the guards. But looking into the eyes of the guard, there was no stomach to pull the trigger. Not with about ten Grey Shirt rifles behind him. Sabienn stared him down. The guard was all bluff.

Meanwhile Botch reacted with a child-like spit, "Who said that?"

Sabienn caught Stork's eyes. He could see Stork had been affected by the near death of Bray. *Say what you like about Stork, he thought, his heart's in the right place. He might call Bray a "bitch" but ultimately we're all freaks. We're in it together.*

With a look, Sabienn communicated to Stork that he needed help. Stork picked up the cue beautifully. "Hey, dickwit!" Stork shouted to Botch. "Leave the copper alone. He's got a big day tomorrow. Lookin' after the *big* man! Whyn't you go back home? Play with y' action man doll, *boy*."

"Are you lookin' at me?" Botch was incredulous as he stared at Stork. Sabienn stared at a man who seemed more incensed that the whole Grey Shirt brand was built around intimidation and someone in the audience didn't get that

memo.

“Yeah! Action man!” said Stork, lasciviously stroking his crotch. “Nice plastic mound! Oooh, yeaaaah!”

Sabienn looked on at Stork’s display. *It’s over the top. It’s just perfect.* A quick glance at The Master’s face gave him the impression that the carpet was shifting under his feet.

“Come here ‘n say that,” said Botch.

“Hey, wank-stain, come here! I’ll wipe you off y’ ceiling!” said Stork. “Come here, I’ll bust y’ face!”

“You want a piece o’ me?” said Botch moving in quickly on Stork.

“You want a piece o’ *me*?” Stork stood his ground.

Looking at Botch, Sabienn knew Stork was woefully mismatched.

“You lookin’ at me?” Botch was right in his face now.

“No, you lookin’ at *me*?” Stork wasn’t backing down.

“No no, you .. are *you* lookin’ at me?”

“You.” Stork dug his fingers into Botch’s chest. “Get a brain. Get a life. And get manners.”

“Oh yeah!”

“Yeah!”

The policeman broke through the thronging crowd. “Break it up you two!”

“Hey dick, if your mother didn’t teach you manners, who’d she teach them to?” said Stork to Botch in his face. Everyone has their breaking point. And for Botch this was it.

He pushed Stork back on to the ground and climbed on top of him swinging his knuckles into the prone man’s face. The first to arrive was Deep, who pulled the small Grey Shirt off like a rag doll and spread him on the laneway.

Three of Botch’s friends came in to try and grab hold of Deep. But when the big man shaped up to take them on, they balked. Still another Grey Shirt came in and wrapped himself around the big man’s legs causing him to almost topple.

Still on the ground, Stork was trying to get up and Bray was there to assist. Two Grey Shirts came in to pull Bray back and there was a struggle.

All this time three cops were trying to keep it calm and get the crowd to settle.

“Back off,” cried the policeman who had been doing the talking. “Settle down!”

“Officer,” said The Master calmly. “We can deal with this. These boys are with me.” He indicated Sabienn’s friends who had been fighting.

“We are *not* with him,” said Sabienn emphatically. “This man is a drug dealer.”

“He’s delusional.” The Master followed his comment by producing a document. Sabienn saw it as fake but credible documentation that The Master was involved with street health and pastoral care. “Sergeant Forne will vouch for us.”

“Forne,” spat the policeman. By his reaction, Sabienn could see it was a superior the officer had no time for. The policeman then turned to his fellow officers, “I don’t like this.”

The Master continued, “If you could please help us get these boys in the car. They need assistance.”

“We are not getting in the car,” said Sabienn.

“Sort it out,” the policeman said to The Master, as if it were low priority.

“But just one officer to help,” said The Master significantly, “would save a report to your superiors.”

The policeman was trying to get a grip on Botch as he turned to The Master. “Sort it out, I said!” Sabienn could see the policeman had no time for getting played.

The Master offered condescendingly, “And your name is ..?”

It was at that moment, a crackling message came through the speakers of the black van. The message was stifled but intelligible. “Surveillance three to HQ. I have two old people at the point of contact. Sending vision for confirmation.” It was a Secret Police transmission. And it caused Sabienn great annoyance. *Why don’t people listen to me? I told Lyall and Marriell to stay put. But no. They have to go visit “We Are All Family”.* He stamped his foot in frustration.

The policeman’s face however lit up as if his birthday came early. “Hey, you’re on an STL bandwidth. There’s a violation, right there. Who are you, old man?” he smiled. “Hands on the car please.”

The Master glanced at one of his goons who totally didn’t get the message. The idiot lifted his weapon and fired a shot into the foot of the policeman. Bang.

“Fool!” shouted The Master.

The officer jumped away but his colleagues were on to their hand devices. “Officer down! Officer down!” Sabienn knew that soon this area would be crawling with police.

“Help me!” From the side Sabienn heard a voice. It was Korlay just asking to be pulled from the car.

On the ground, Sabienn saw Stork still sitting there seeing stars. He needed help too. They all had to get out of there.

Bray and Deep had their backs to him dealing with their assailants. The shot fired scattered some of the Grey Shirts but there was still a small persistent group that wanted to make their point.

As Sabienn looked at the bound man, he noticed a knife on the car floor. “I can help you,” said Korlay. “Please.”

*I know I’m going to regret this*, thought Sabienn. He leaned down and grabbed the knife and with a quick movement sliced the plastic ties binding his hands and feet. Korlay didn’t waste time. He found his new found freedom with both hands and jumped out of the van virtually pushing his rescuer to the side. In his escape, he did the obvious thing that Sabienn should have done. He picked up the Blue Hunter where the old man had kicked it to.

Then The Master called to his troops to get out. He pointed to the prone Stork. Two goons picked up the dishevelled figure and threw him in the back of the van.

In the scuffle, Stork had the presence of mind to lose his back pack, which was hiding what the thugs were looking for. It was left in the dirt behind.

The car doors slammed, the van came to life and the vehicle ploughed its way through the footpath ahead. It knocked the wounded officer and stray pedestrians to the side, picked up speed and was gone.

Coming to the assistance of Deep and Bray, Korlay used the butt of the rifle to beat off their assailants. He then pointed the barrel at the Grey Shirts to make them back off further. With the Grey Shirts in retreat and the police falling back waiting for back-up, Deep looked around.

“Where’s Stork?” said Deep.

“He’s gone,” said Sabienn feeling stunned by the events.

“What d’ you mean?” Deep was incredulous.

“In the back of the van,” said Sabienn. “They took him.”

Deep and Bray looked at each other then saw Korlay free.

“What’s *he* doing here?” said Deep.

Sabienn’s pause made it obvious that he had helped him. Deep was furious and came forward to pull up Sabienn roughly by the cloak. “Are you holding out on us? What is it with you and him?” shouted Deep. “You couldn’t help Stork?”

Feeling incensed by the suggestion, Sabienn pushed back with force into the big man’s chest. “I made a bad decision,” Sabienn shouted. “I’ve just lost my *friend*.” The big man backed down seeing the raw emotion in the eyes.

“What now?” said Bray.

Korlay turned now with the rifle over his shoulder. “This way,” he gestured and started running up the street. He turned to see the others still standing still. “Come on! This way!”

So many thoughts crowded his mind but Sabienn had no choice. He picked up Stork’s backpack and ran to follow the criminal. With that his friends followed.

The four men ran up the side street trying to get as far away from the scene as possible.

“Stop!” A voice called from behind. It was the policeman in hot pursuit, running as fast as his injured foot would allow.

Sabienn had no idea they’d done anything wrong. “What’s going on?”

Turning between sprints, Korlay looked back. “His name is Cheel,” he said. “I’m known.” *That’s just great*, thought Sabienn. *How am I going to redeem myself to The Great Leader if all the people I help are bad?*

“Car ahead.” Bray notified them of the police vehicle way at the end of the street trying to make its way through. Korlay pulled them into a cheap second-hand clothing stall there for charity. At the rear they pulled on nondescript brown cloaks and hooded up. To his credit, the criminal passed the attendant and dropped a significant kee note on the counter. It offered more than a reasonable tip. They crossed the street and found an alley way which they ran to the end.

“Hey!” It was Cheel. He must have noticed the brown cloak barely covering Deep’s tall frame and the black cloak hem swimming around his ankles.

The three friends kept pushing through the back stalls in deft pursuit of a very worried Korlay. “This is hopeless,” said Sabienn to his friends, looking back at stall holders. “These people are helping Cheel. STL get nothing. But the normal police are getting assistance. That woman back there pointed us out. Our whole change of direction.”

“Car,” said Bray. Another vehicle at the end of another street.

“There’s no way out,” said Sabienn. “We’re running in circular squares.”

“This way,” Korlay offered a definite direction. Way up into the street, he then pulled the friends all off the footpath, went down some stairs and faced a basement door. Korlay was quick and rapid. Tap tap tap tap.

A peep hole opened. An eyeball appeared. A millisecond longer and the door opened. They all pushed in and the door closed. It was pitch black. The room smelt of rat’s urine.

There were angry whispers at the side and one of them was Korlay. They were led in complete darkness, banging their feet on tables and chairs into another room where the light came on.

Here they were faced with Korlay’s desperate features and two men in full face black masks. On the wall was a small banner with a black background and three large red letters. CLA. It identified the Chard Liberation Army.

Sabienn looked at his friends’ faces sink and his own jaw dropped. *You must be kidding*, thought Sabienn. *CLA. This is not some annoying clown squad like the Grey Shirts. We’re really mixing now with dangerous people.* They kept quiet while the commotion on the street moved through like a wave leaving them in

silence.

“Please,” Korlay whispered. “Relax. You’re safe. This is Mr Seal and Sale.” He indicated the masked men who reacted in a way that they’d prefer not to be known at all.

Sabienn felt a rise of acid in his stomach as he spoke. “I normally keep my opinions. But you people sicken me. I am a servant of The Great Leader. On a sacred mission. And you people are actively fighting him.”

“You people are scum,” said Deep.

“Please,” said Korlay. “Here.” He brought the Blue Hunter off his shoulder and proffered it to Deep. “I believe this is yours.”

Sabienn could feel Seal and Sale’s sphincters tweak as the weapon passed across. It was fully loaded and there was nothing to stop Deep unleashing a quick three rounds to end this gathering of the CLA. Deep kept eye contact with Korlay and they were all intrigued by the act.

“How’s the hand?” said Deep, looking with indifferent interest at Korlay’s bandaged wound that he caused.

“I’ve got another.” It was a casual response from Korlay without malice. “You.. You men have wings. I can tell by your backs. Do you believe in fate?” The boys looked at each other not wanting to engage this man. Korlay continued, “I know. You don’t want to get into a philosophical argument with a criminal. I’m sensing this. I just believe you’ve been sent here.”

“Well we have,” said Sabienn. “We’ve been sent by The Great Leader. The man you CLA want to kill.”

“Which one?” Korlay said calmly.

“There’s only one.” Sabienn felt annoyed at the suggestion.

“No, which CLA?” said Korlay. “The soft, the medium or the hard one? I’m saying you’ve been sent here. By fate. It must be your native blood. Would you like coffee?”

“We’re *not* native!” said Sabienn. “I know who I am.”

“Mr Korlay,” said Bray, bringing them all back on message. “We’re not buying it. You’re a hardened low-life. Before our eyes, you slit a man’s throat and tossed him on to an ant heap. All this dabbling in philosophy makes you look stupid.” Bray looked around. “Where are we?”

“This is a safe house,” said Korlay. “We’re in the Snake House.”

The boys hadn’t noticed but one of the Seal or Sale had left them and now had returned with a plate of bread, meat and cheese on a tray laden with hot coffee. They waited for Korlay to attack it before they threw caution to the wind to dig in as well.

In the corner of the room, Sabienn noticed the glass tank that must have given

the place its name. Korlay tossed some small meat pieces in.

“You keep a viper box,” said Sabienn to Korlay. Sabienn moved to look into the tank and saw the five snakes contained within.

“What is this?” said Deep moving in closer for a guarded glance.

“A possession of idiots,” said Bray looking at the tank. “It contains four head-ring vipers and one tail-ring viper. They’re brother snakes only the head-ring is harmless and the tail-ring is aggressive and venomous. Identical except the head-ring has, you can see there, a noticeable red ring round its head and the tail-ring a red ring on the tail. See the flicking tongue now. Remember the old rhyme for bushwalkers? How’s it go? Red on the tail, You die on the trail, Red on the head, Go home instead. And look at the sign here.”

“My old boss had one,” said Sabienn. “He had a sign on the side. “The money’s in the bottom, thief. Put your hand in.” There was a message attached to this tank as well. It read “Beware of Absolute Certainty.” “Can’t work you people out,” said Sabienn. “How are you going to get our friend back?”

Korlay stood silent a moment staring into the steam from his cup. “I don’t know.”

“Well I do,” said Sabienn. “You’re going to make a call.” On the wall near the banner was a map of the city. “Where are we?”

It was Bray who took the initiative and pin-pointed their location courtesy of his photographic memory. “We’re here,” he pointed. It stunned the CLA boys.

“They don’t want you,” said Korlay. “They want me.”

“I know,” said Sabienn blankly. “Make the call.” Sabienn kept his distance and kept his wits. Korlay had a knife concealed and he’d seen him use it.

“I’m not going back,” said Korlay.

“I know. Make the call.” Sabienn looked into Korlay’s eyes. Korlay moved to pull something from his pocket and Sabienn sensed Deep grab his rifle. From his pocket, Korlay pulled a device and dialled a number. As it rang he placed it into Sabienn’s hand and he placed the dialling on speaker.

The speaker came alive with The Master’s voice. “Took you long enough.”

“Put our friend on,” said Sabienn.

“You’re in no position to bargain,” said The Master. “These are the terms. Bring my money and bring Korlay to Korke Park. Twelve noon. Fail to comply and your friend dies.”

Looking at the map, Sabienn saw the park but his eyes widened to a location nearby. Once again he had a gut feeling on the best way to act. “Make it the foyer of the Children’s Hospital,” said Sabienn. “You’d be surrounded by hundreds of strangers. There are three exits from the car-park and they all lead to main roads.”

The line went silent for a time as The Master quietly conferred with his team.

Sabienn continued, "You'd have to check your rifles but you could conceal a knife. And there's a bin at the back to dispose bodies." He didn't know this of course. He just assumed it being a hospital. His friends looked at him strangely and he'd realized what he'd just said.

"Hey, whose side are *you* on?" Stork's voice came through the speaker. At least he was alive.

The Master came on and replied quietly, "No-one plays me for a fool, understand? Children's Hospital. Twelve noon." The phone went dead.

None of them expected Korlay's reaction. He spat badly and he spat viciously. "Why the Children's Hospital?" He slammed the table top with his hand. Deep took a precautionary grip of his weapon in case it escalated.

"Is there a problem?" said Sabienn.

The criminal wouldn't have known he'd seen the contents of Marrwick's wallet with the photo of the girl and the doctor's card. Judging by Korlay's reaction, Sabienn knew his gut was right. *Now there's an emotional involvement. Chances of Korlay appearing have gone from zero to fifty-fifty.* "What's the best way of getting in?" Sabienn looked at the map.

"We have a car," said Korlay. "You boys go. I'll see you there. I need back-up."

"No back-up," said Sabienn. "We don't want a shit-fight."

"I call the shots," Korlay spat. "Why the Children's Hospital?"

"What's the best entrance?" continued Sabienn not caring of the other's protests. "You've obviously been there."

"The road behind has a gun shop," said Korlay. "With a walkway from the front to the back car-park. Behind the hospital. No cameras. These men will assist you," Korlay referred to the other operatives. "Don't take them for fools. They use knives better than me."

"They haven't stopped talking since we got here," said Bray lightly.

"They're not ones for loose lips," Korlay produced a pocket note-pad. "They'll write their answers. Go!"

The clock on the wall read eleven-thirty. The three friends followed the silent operatives out a back door.

Sabienn took a parting glance at Korlay making some calls on his device. *Sure, Sabienn thought. We could abduct the criminal at gunpoint. Take him as a valued bargaining chip. But that'd be messy. No, if Stork was to be saved it would be through Bray's awareness, Deep's accuracy and my own gut. That's all we need. This Korlay's not an option. He's not going to show. Quite frankly I'm glad to see the back of him. Filthy criminal.*



Through the back laneway they accessed the rear door of a shop two doors up. It was an auto-repair premise and two men were working on a car about to take a tyre off.

When they saw the two masked men, one reacted with apprehension, wiped his hands with a filthy cloth and came to speak with deference to them. After a short conversation, the mechanic signalled to his partner to pull out the jack and tighten the nuts. Keys were passed across.

One of the masked men walked to Sabienn and quietly tossed him the keys with all the meticulous care, love and detail of “Do what you want. It’s not mine.”

Deep took the wheel and brought the battery to speed. With the three men on board, he backed it out into the laneway, passing the two masked men standing in the shop with indifference.

At speed they drove up the laneway and into the road turning in the direction of the hospital.

## 32. The Receipt

At quarter to twelve, Deep did a slow run in the car around the hospital perimeter trying hard not to be clocked by any planted eyes. They were wanted by forces on the right and the wrong side of the law and order ledger now so they needed to stay low.

The hospital entrance was bright and cheerful. It had large glass windows and large red, green, blue and yellow pillars. There were coffee carts and flower sellers serving an endless parade of patrons. Doctors and nurses went about their ways in neat blue scrubs. *Reminds me of Joallee*, thought Sabienn. *Going about her good purpose. Such a long time ago. Last week.*

There were visitors going about their lawful business. Carrying large cuddly bears and wolves with red ribbons, tethered floating balloons and colourful flowers. There was a sense of happiness and sadness in their activity and hope and dignity and resignation in their faces. *It's troubling to be around these fine people*, Sabienn thought. *I'm here to kill someone who took my friend.*

Deep parked near the gun shop at the back of the hospital and Sabienn checked his pockets to see he still had a knife. "OK," Sabienn said, steeling himself to leave the vehicle. "This is the plan." He spoke seriously and nervously. "I have no plan. I'm just going to make everything up as I go along." He turned to Deep. "I want you to find a spot and be ready with the rifle. But I don't want you to use it. Too many people."

"We could think happy thoughts for you," said Bray lightly.

"Happy thoughts would be good. Thank you," said Sabienn.

"Anything else?" said Deep.

"Just use your gut, man," said Sabienn, retrieving the large packet of money from the back-pack and concealing it within the folds of his cloak.

"Best order I had all day," said Deep. "Good luck."

"Thanks." Sabienn slammed the door and crossed the road.

Standing at the glass front of Sloco's Fine Weaponry, Sabienn surveyed the entrance and marvelled at some of the wares in the front display. He was stunned at the array of hand-grenades on display. *Hand-grenades! It's not something you'd see near a hospital in Salt City. But, as they say, anything goes in Chard.*

They had neat brown boxes of cheap Jak Jak grenades. *With the similar*

*reputation for safety as the rifle it produced. A fifty-fifty chance of losing your hand.* There were also smoke grenades and all sorts of sinister fragmentation crap.

He walked in the door and found a neat display of flower bouquets and cheerful “Get Well Soon” balloons floating and bobbing around. It was taking away business from the legitimate flower sellers but Sabienn assumed they wouldn’t argue.

Before him was the well-worn path that led to the back of the shop that Korlay had spoken about. Sabienn imagined thousands of criminals just like Korlay treading this path in order to stealthily visit their sick kids. He looked at the surveillance camera with the cable neatly snapped. It may have presented security issues but Sabienn had the feeling Sloco knew his clientele and handled shop-lifters with a soft pummelling he could always deny.

He passed by the counter and there was a cheerful woman run off her feet with customers but still had a quick smile for the new arrival. “I see you’re in the market for a fine grenade,” she said sweetly.

“You saw me?” said Sabienn picking up on her friendly vibe. “I wish all shop keepers were that attentive.”

“Are we looking at stunning, maiming or just blowing that sucker away?” she said.

“I haven’t completely decided,” said Sabienn politely. “What would you suggest?”

She placed three identical brown boxes on the counter and said, “Here we have A, B and C.” She discussed the merits and downfalls of each and quoted the prices which ranged from 15,000 to 25,000 kee.

“That’s within my budget,” said Sabienn. “You’ve been very helpful, ma’am. I’ll keep this in mind.”

“You’re very welcome, sir,” she said, placing the boxes back down below the counter. “Have an amazing day.”

He left the store through the back access way and walked through the car-park to the hospital. At the halfway point between the rear of the gun dealer and the rear access to the hospital, he stopped. A clock above the hospital access read 11:57.

Sabienn stood still and thought. He looked back at the dealer’s door and looked forward towards the hospital door. “Yes”, he said aloud. “That might work.”

Sabienn was so nervous, he was operating on tunnel vision. He ran as fast as he could and pushed in a door. He then raced to a counter and gave to the woman behind a packet of money. A receipt was made and was left on the counter. A

brown box appeared and was placed before him. He grabbed it and left.

“Sir,” the woman cried. “Sir, your receipt.” He’d left the paperwork behind in his haste. Being a dutiful servant, she picked it up and chased him with it in her hand. “Sir, you’ll need this for taxes. Sir!”

He raced through the corridor of the hospital working his way through the gurneys and wheel-chairs making his way to the front foyer.

As he ran he took from his pocket his knife and split open the top of the box he was carrying. He put the blade back carefully holding the package being very wary of its contents.

All this time the woman was still in hot pursuit.

“Sir,” she waved the receipt as she followed him. He swung around into the foyer and found a pillar to hide behind to assess the floor.

The woman passed by running through into another corridor still calling out with his paperwork in her hand. “Sir!”

Sabienn surveyed the area. He spotted The Master and two of his entourage in the far corner sitting on couches around a low table. Sitting between the heavies was Stork who shielded by a cushion obviously had a knife against his ribs. All of them were hooded to evade detection from the cameras sweeping the general populace in the room.

There were hundreds of people and many other full couches and tables enjoying laughter and goodwill and love and silence. But to look at Stork and The Master, Sabienn saw their table as an oasis of menace in an expanse of palliative industry.

He also noted in an interesting contrast, their table was next to the hospital’s “hope tree”. A little staked hope tree vine with its lovely white flower surrounded by canned food, watermelons, carrots, toys, toilet paper and other necessary items destined for the poor people of the city. He walked the short distance to their table and they stood to greet him.

“You’re on time,” said The Master. “I like that.”

“Thank you,” said Sabienn. “I think promptness is number one. In good manners.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” said The Master. “I do hope you have what we asked for. Your man is boorish and lacks social grace.”

“Maybe you’re just not interesting?” said Sabienn.

The Master was in close and whispering now. “Maybe. But when you win as much as I do, interesting is so overrated. Your man has a knife against his ribs. Upon my order, in a split second, it will go through his heart. He will then be carried out, in that wheel-chair to the dumpster.” He pointed to a piece of equipment in the foyer. “Do we understand?”

"I'm sure the police would have something to say," said Sabienn. "At this moment, they have us surrounded."

The Master almost guffawed. "You're very amusing. There'll be no police," he said. "It's marvellous what a few phone calls can do. We're all business as usual. Now where's Korlay?"

"He'll be here," said Sabienn

"And my money?"

"It'll be here," said Sabienn.

"Fifty thousand?" said The Master.

"You'll see. Soon."

"Do I need to count?" said The Master. "Will it be here in five?"

"If you wish," said Sabienn. "But please, be a sport, give me ten."

"None of the people I've killed have been that lucky," said The Master. "Make it five."

"What about nine?"

"Seven," said The Master.

"Make it eight." There was a pause after Sabienn's bid.

"OK," said The Master. "I like you... One."

"I like you too," said Sabienn. "It'll be a shame to see you go to prison."

The Master suppressed hearty laughter once again. "You're deluded," he said. "I'll go to prison? How will that happen? .. Two."

"You're right," said Sabienn. "They'll just take you out and shoot you."

"Three," said The Master trying hard not to show his annoyance. "Where's Korlay? Where's my money? What's in the box? Is my money in the box?"

"No."

"What's in the box?" The old man was starting to lose his cool.

There was a pause as Sabienn kept eye contact with The Master. "Four," said Sabienn.

Stork was listening to all this and appeared stunned. Sabienn caught a glimpse of his face and it seemed to be saying, "Don't go all Captain Deathwish with my life, dickhead!"

"You cheeky bastard," said The Master. "You think I'm playing games here."

They were then shocked by a new arrival at the table. It took Sabienn completely by surprise.

"Well, saved by the bell," said The Master. "Welcome, Mr Korlay!"

The fully hooded figure stood next to Sabienn. They briefly made eye contact. *This was not in the plan*, Sabienn thought.

"Let the prisoner go," said Korlay. "It's over. There are CLA operatives here."

“Where?” said The Master without surprise.

“Outside,” said Korlay.

“No, they’re not,” said The Master. “D’ you want to know how I know this?” Korlay was silent. “Who funds the CLA?” continued the old man.

“The people.” Korlay’s response was feeble.

“Try again. Why d’ you think you were sent to work for us?” The Master was in control.

Sabienn allowed himself a quick glance at the criminal and thought. *I’ve seen that expression before. That look of utter despair. Someone discarded like a piece of meat to the wolves.*

“Who did you speak to?” said The Master. “And who else do you think will get a cut of the 500,000 on your head? Dead, of course.” One of The Master’s goons moved in quickly behind Korlay. Sabienn viewed the criminal’s face and there was a look of abject resignation and of a spirit crumpled and completely without fight. “That just leaves my money,” continued The Master, turning his attention back to Sabienn. “Where were we? .. Five?”

It was at that moment there was great commotion and raised excited voices of doctors and nurses breaking through into the foyer as a group.

“There he is,” said the woman that had been chasing him, still waving the receipt in her hand. “Sir, please. Your receipt.”

There was a group of about twenty medical people moving as one towards Sabienn in high spirits. With them were about ten children in pyjamas of every colour and every floral and animal design.

“What’s going on?” said The Master. “Have you called anyone?”

“No-one,” said Sabienn.

“Ouch!” The knife must have drawn blood on Stork’s ribs.

“Hold the line,” said The Master to his henchmen. “Kill these two on my order.”

The lady finally arrived in front of Sabienn breathless with running but beaming with joy and turned to a medical man behind her. “Doctor Benn,” she said, “This is the man. The man who came to the hospital cashier.”

“No, please,” said Sabienn to the lady. “I was sworn to secrecy. But it can’t be hidden. Not any longer.” He stepped back and bowed before The Master indicating to all and sundry. *“This is the man.”*

All medical personnel before them singled out The Master before them and burst into rapturous applause. Some let off high pitched whistles and clapped and shouted “Bravo!”

Sabienn took the brown box in his hands and tipped it over spilling its contents of complimentary wrapped chocolates all with the hospital logo on

them. It filled the floor at their feet and spilled into the gaps between everyone present.

The children came forward like excited puppies and moved among the thugs picking up sweets and indulging in innocent play. Korlay and Stork both took the chance to put some distance between them and their captors. Some playful girls pulled down the hood of The Master and Sabienn seized the chance.

“Look up this way, sir,” Sabienn said and as if by reflex action, The Master gazed up into the loving gaze of a security camera. A short amiable man in a neat suit and lab-coat came forward to shake the hand of The Master.

“My name is Doctor Benn, sir. We are so grateful for your donation. Please, Mrs Korne.”

Mrs Korne came forward and proffered the receipt to The Master with a hushed and reverent bow.

“Uncle!” shouted a little girl. The young girl of maybe six years wrapped herself around Korlay’s leg. Sabienn immediately recognized her as Marrwick’s daughter from the photo he once had. She had a wrist band with her name, Seen Marrwick, with little painted-on flowers.

Sabienn watched the criminal’s face and saw he was completely out of his emotional depth. He tried to touch Seen’s hair but it looked more like he was trying to engage with a flesh-eating bacteria. *The criminal’s the only family she’s ever known.* She wrapped herself tightly and without any inhibitions around Korlay’s large and trembling leg.

The Master having received his receipt took Sabienn aside. “Apparently I’ve given 40,000 kee to this hospital. As an anonymous donor. You realize you’ve just sentenced some hospital accountant to their death. I *will* get my money.”

“You may wish to check that receipt,” said Sabienn pointing to the paperwork.

The Master read further and his face sank.

Sabienn was finally enjoying the upper hand. *Sheer genius*, he thought. *Standing in the car-park and hearing those words Joallee said a long time ago. “Gun dealers never had to have a cake stall but hospitals always did.” This hospital would have got bug eyes over forty thousand kee.*

Clearing his throat, The Master asked, “This donation. Why does it say from An Anonymous Donor? Paid on Behalf of the Loving Heart of the Grand Inquisitor Profound, Murrlock Hyde? Why is this from the head of Secret Police?”

Casually Sabienn replied, “Because you’re a man who lives your life like a black-wing cockroach. In the dark shielded by the protective boxes of anonymity and all those small town officials you’ve paid off.”

“Oh, I’m scared,” said The Master.

“You should be,” continued Sabienn. “Now you’re about to have the light shone on you. By the uncaring and brutal machine of the Secret Police. Crunching data with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer. To be a drug dealer and a murderer maybe one thing. But indulge in aimless charity and you’ll have to answer questions. So this receipt will be noted, your photo pulled and you’ll be hunted down.”

He noted The Master’s face had gone pale and beads of nervous sweat formed on his brow. And all this time the crowd were cheering and singing the praises of this old man, unaware his comfortable existence was being sucked down a hole.

“Do you know..” said The Master, gasping for breath. “Do *you* know.. no-one .. *no-one* plays me for a fool.”

“No,” said Sabienn. “But ..uh..” He saw the hope tree near the table and picked up a small watermelon in need of growth. With force Sabienn pushed it into the old man’s hands and he watched him stumble as it hit his guts. “If you hum a few bars, maybe I can pick it up.”

Sabienn grabbed Stork by the collar and they ran for the door.



### 33. The Yellow Beast

The car was waiting for Sabienn and Stork as they ran down the front stairs of the hospital. Stork fell into the back and was greeted by his friends.

“Thought we’d lost you,” said Deep looking relieved.

“Even I missed you,” said Bray.

“That’s big of you, Steel,” said Stork. “Sorry I got caught.”

Sabienn was just about to join them when a voice came from behind. “Wait!” It was Korlay rushing to catch up.

At that moment Seen appeared on the top of the steps looking frantically around her. “Uncle!” she cried. Not being able to sight Korlay, she started running full pelt into the traffic at the front of the hospital.

“No no!” Korlay saw her and ran to intercept. At the last moment before the moment of impending tragedy, she saw him and stopped. Korlay scooped her into his arms and held her tightly.

Sabienn looked on at the pair. She clung like a small mountain climber who’d lost her rope, gripping on to the only rock of safety she could see in the world. With him there was no more emotional distance. The criminal and the innocent were all one.

With her in his arms he walked over to the boys in their car. Tears were streaming down his face as he faced Sabienn. “You’ve given me a second chance,” Korlay said choking on his tears. He hugged Seen harder. “I won’t let you down, I promise.”

“OK,” said Sabienn blankly. “That’s nice.” He looked at the clock on the hospital and he needed to get going.

With his free hand, Korlay extended it to Sabienn and he received it gingerly. “Thank you,” said Korlay pumping his hand with real passion. He was now bawling his eyes out. “I’ll be there for you.”

“Thanks,” said Sabienn finally retrieving his hand. He jumped into the vehicle and they all watched Korlay and Seen recede into the distance waving from the footpath. The car picked up speed.

“I thought you were going to introduce your boyfriend to your friends,” said Stork.

“How bad was that?” said Sabienn. “I was scared he was going to hump my

leg.”

“Where to?” said Deep pulling in next to Korke Park for a brief stop.

The park was filled with kids at play. Some kicked a ball and others had kites. Others wrestled and ate dirt. Sabienn noticed an elderly couple on a park bench sitting at opposite ends feeding birds on the ground.

“I’m worried about Lyall and Marriell,” Sabienn said. He told them of the Secret Police broadcast from the van.

“What?” Stork was incredulous. “You must be kidding! We’re not going back.”

“What if it *was* them?” said Sabienn.

“What if it’s not?” said Stork. “Besides they can look after themselves. They’re big enough.”

“I owe them,” Sabienn was definite.

“You want to blast in to “We Are All Family” guns blazing,” said Stork. “Then find it’s not them. What is *wrong* with you?”

“Well you don’t have to be there?” said Sabienn with heat. “Did I ask you to come?”

Stork fell back defeated in his seat. “Pffh!! Captain Deathwish!” he spat, his spit laced with sarcasm. “Off to save the world.. *again*.”

“Look,” said Bray, sitting back casually. “Their passports were to take two hours. If they haven’t moved from Golden Fronds, they’d still be there. Go back to the shop, have a quick look in. If they’re there, they’re there. If not, let’s talk about it then.”

His comments shut everyone up because they actually made sense. Deep brought the vehicle to life and they worked their way through the streets back to the markets. They parked near the place where they’d originally entered the market street earlier that day.

“Just go round the block. I’ll be here,” said Sabienn, hooding up. “If anything goes wrong, we meet in the forest.”

“It’s not going to go wrong,” Bray offered. “We’ll be here.”

The vehicle moved off leaving Sabienn there looking out over the market. *Check your wallet. Put it in the front of your pants. There’s going to be no surprises. OK? No Stove. No nobody. Be on the lookout.*

Finding the cover of shop fronts Sabienn moved up the street. *Wish I’d brought Bray. Everything to me’s just hoods, hoods and hoods. Cars all look the same.*

Sabienn moved quickly and saw the shop front ahead of Golden Fronds. He moved to a grape seller on the opposite side of the road to the shop’s front door pretending to be interested in its wares but looking furtively across the street.

Marriell and Lyall were still there. Breathing a sigh of relief, Sabienn's brief glance revealed that In General had found the elderly pair some collapsible chairs and they sat holding hands next to the array of plastic bobbing heads of The Great Leader. Sabienn felt much better and more settled now and started his move back.

A ruckus was brewing ahead of him on the street and uncontrollably moving his way. He moved to the concealed shelter of a shop front and kept his face covered. Sabienn saw a police officer had a small hooded person by the arm and they were exchanging words. Seeing the officer, his heart raced. It was Cheel. And the hood dropped on the detainee to reveal a very peeved The Stove.

Sabienn's curiosity let him stare at the pair tussling for a few seconds more than discretion needed. And he was clocked. The Stove looking around found himself staring into Sabienn's eyes who then tried hard to take back the lost concealment.

"That man," shouted The Stove. "He'll vouch for me. I'm honest, I am."

Cheel turned and saw Sabienn's face. "Hey! You!"

His heart was pumping now as he ran into the seclusion of a rug seller's stall. The owner saw him running and had the citizen's nous to shut the back exit. Luckily there was a side access which led to a cloak seller and he moved through and to the back of the stall.

The back lane was running with water and he splashed through the gutters in his haste along the access. The water smelt of scaled fish and chicken blood and there were boxes everywhere impeding his pace.

*You idiot, Sabienn thought. You absolute dickhead. The boys will be waiting at the designated pick-up area and I'll be bringing a horde of police on top of them. I wish I had Bray. I don't know my north and my east. I'm lost and running. And I can't go back.*

Behind him he could hear the splashing of boots in pursuit. "Did you see a man?" Sabienn vaguely heard shouted, asked of a merchant.

By luck he chanced upon a delivery truck at the rear of a market restaurant. He was watching the driver close up the back doors to the rear box compartment and his cabin door was wide open. The driver then quickly darted back inside the premises so Sabienn saw he only had a few seconds to act.

He reached the back of the truck, opened the doors, quickly climbed in and then pulled the door to. With his fingers he held the door closed and peered out the crack. There wasn't much cover inside the compartment. It was delivering catering supplies like paper napkins, paper towels, paper cups and plates.

Through the crack, Sabienn saw a uniform come into view. He could see it was Cheel looking a little dazed and confused. Then some perennial do-gooder

poked her nose out the back of a shop and pointed to the back of the truck compartment. *Damn it, he thought. Wrong option. Why didn't I just steal the truck?*

It was at that moment the truck headed off at speed, almost spilling Sabienn out on to the back street. He gripped on to his door making sure it wouldn't fly open. *My luck's in. Just jump out at the next stop. Get to the pick-up point.* But a minute went by and the vehicle kept moving.

The driver was having an annoying run of good fortune, catching every light and not having to give way. Sabienn was hopelessly lost now and was being jostled around while gripping on to a door that inertia was trying to throw him out of.

It must have been about ten minutes travel before the vehicle pulled into the side and parked. He jumped for dear life out the back and slapped the side of the vehicle. The driver's head appeared out the window.

"Hey!" cried Sabienn, pointing to the back. "Your door flung out and nearly hit me. Do something, will you?"

"Ooh, sorry!" The driver replied, opening his cabin to secure his loose door.

Sabienn was in the back lane of some other eating and entertainment precinct. *There's a better class of rubbish here. Must be more up-market.* He took shade next to a dumpster open at the end of the lane. Red-wing ibis and spear-billed seagulls picked at bags and squabbled with each other. He retrieved his maps from his pocket.

Looking up, above the roof of the shops at the rear, he found his landmark. Above the tops of the exhaust cowls of the places at the back was the amazing sight of the top half of an airship tethered close to the ground. As chance would have it, it was the yellow monster that he'd looked at earlier with Jasspick.

The ship was an unusual yellow. He'd never encountered such a yellow vessel before. *What did Jasspick say? Human transport, thought Sabienn. Not military. Therefore lower risk. Minimal security. And a hub of public transport. That's the place.*

In the dim distance, he could vaguely make out the cliffs where they initially sighted the yellow craft and the roadway they nearly died on this morning. He looked at his feet and then looked back again. There was a lot of distance between where he was then and where he was now.

His map was not as crucial now as his own personal bearings kicked in. Sabienn could see the cliffs, he could see the ship and on the other side of these shops he was hiding behind would be the sea. He knew where north and east was now and had a vague direction of getting back.

The early afternoon sun was warm but a cool breeze kept him gathering his

cloak around him as he made his way up the street. A black van slowly moved up the street towards him. *If Bray were here, he would have spotted that eight seconds earlier.*

Sabienn pretended to pay an interest in items within a shop front which happened to be wedding dresses. The hood was fully over his head and he noted in the reflection the vehicle slow down to look then quickly speed off. *That doesn't feel right. I need to get out of here.*

With a rush he crossed the road and sought the concealment of another laneway. With the massive airship a few streets away from him, he ran full pelt in the direction of the transport station. He had a block further to run and had the transport hub in sight when he saw two black vans parked at the front.

Quickly Sabienn took evasive action and found the shelter of a shop front. He watched the STL black-shirts moving around talking to people and officials on the footpath of the station. His heart sank as he watched them.

At that moment a black van passed by and stopped dead in the middle of the road. He'd been clocked. Pushing through the door in front of him, Sabienn rushed through a passageway of furniture for sale to the sales counter. "Please. Do you have toilets? I'm busting."

He was shown the way to the back lane and when he found the access he bolted in the direction of the airship. Sabienn just ran and ran up the street towards the gates of the airship terminal. There were buses parked at the front. Five or six. It was hard to tell from the angle he was running. As the side street came up he turned and as if by luck found a gate that had its barrel bolt in place but its padlock left open.

Sabienn accessed the gate and found concealment behind a nearby compressor unit in time for another black van to pass on the street outside and keep moving at speed.

There were guards coming. By the sounds of their voices there were two. They were patrolling inside the complex and he could hear their soft laughter. They arrived and waited by the gate he'd just entered. A third guard was outside the fence coming towards them carrying a six-pack of beer. The other two looked around them. "Use a brown paper bag next time, idiot. You want to get us sacked," one chastised the new arrival. The items were concealed in a green army shirt and whisked away. The barrel bolt was shoved into place and the padlock was clipped shut. They all departed.

Sabienn looked on in despair. There was no going back. Instinctively Sabienn moved among the gantries and the massive supports that kept this yellow beast at rest and in place. He moved up toward the tethered machine and heard more voices. He couldn't pinpoint where they were coming from but there was the

sound of laughter and cheering. *Someone's having a party.*

Up ahead of him he could hear more laughter. A different laughter. Laughter like a joke's been pulled on someone. *More guards.* These voices were coming forward toward him and he looked around. There was what seemed like a fire escape nearby that led upwards and he rushed to it. With stealth he began running up its steps. Three flights in all, till he came to a doorway.

Holding his back to the door, Sabienn stopped as the guards passed by below. Looking down on them, he could see they were different to the ones with the beer but they looked like they were just as disciplined. The shoulder straps of their rifles were in their hands and they carried them like hand bags. Sabienn thought, *What was going on here? Whatever they're carrying here, there's no urgency to defend it if it gets stolen.*

He turned to face the door. It appeared to lead into the loading ramp which led up into the belly of the beast. But it would also lead downward somewhere into a loading dock. Carefully he looked at the door handle. It could be alarmed for illegal entry. He held it and gripped it. He turned it and it pulled outwards. No alarm. It was a relief.

Quickly Sabienn entered and closed the door. It was pitch black. He just let his eyes relax and acclimatize to the dark. There was a little light coming from down the bottom of the ramp so he moved down and down towards it. He then hit a wall. There were cracks of light and happy laughter escaping from a large room on the other side.

He must have been waiting for ten minutes maybe longer in this darkness. Then bang! The lights came on. Bright white. It lit up in sequence up the ramp tunnel like the concealed room was a stomach throwing up light and the oesophagus lit up in segments up to the mouth. *Whatever it is that's about to be thrown up is definitely on its way.*

Sabienn's eyes were hurting as they got used to the brilliance and he covered his face till the pupils adjusted. There was an excitement building to fever pitch on the other side of the wall. He could now see the wall was a retractable concertina partition of thick panels.

At the other end, up at the mouth, he could see the doors open up there. The big cargo doors to the airship opened in expectation of what was to come whatever that might be. *What the hell's going on?*

He didn't have too long to wait. An excited countdown of hundreds of voices started on the other side, as if they were counting down to a new year.

"Ten .. Nine .. Eight." Sabienn braced himself against the side wall. "Seven .. Six .. Five." He had to watch those partitions wouldn't fold to crush him. "Four .. Three." He cloaked around and hooded up in readiness. "Two .. One! Yaayyy!"

The joyous scream on the other side was deafening. There was a loud bang as the lock unfastened. Then the walls began to roll back.

## 34. The Trip of a Lifetime

The shouting was deafening now as the crack widened on the opening wall. Like the wall of a dam bursting there was a spray at the first crack of two or three people sprinting, laughing and yelling and shooting their way up the ramp.

Then the masses followed. There were men, women and children in high spirits walking quickly up the ramp. Some of the children had inflatable white beach balls with “Obey Me” written in red on them and a picture of The Great Leader grinning with reassurance. They tossed the balls in the air and batted them joyously amongst themselves.

*My goodness, thought Sabienn. They’re all Turrs.* Their heads were exposed and their ears were prominent. And as they spun around in their good humour, he noticed they were missing their left earlobes. They’d been processed. *Why? Only counted corpses are processed.*

He stood at his vantage point on the side watching in disbelief. A woman who was laughing suddenly caught the look in Sabienn’s eyes and rushed over to him. Sabienn made sure his ears were thoroughly concealed by his hood.

“Why are you so sad, brother?” she said in eloquent Turr. Sabienn wasn’t a complete expert in the language but he could understand every word she said. “We’re free. We’re going on the trip of a lifetime. Smile. We’re going to Klear.”

“Yes,” he nodded. Sabienn didn’t want to arouse suspicion. He had to make it look like he belonged there with them.

She reached out her hand and took his sweating paw. *That’s the first time I’ve touched a Turr woman’s hand,* he thought. *No, wait. It’s the first time I’ve touched any Turr’s hand.* It felt soft and silky and beautiful on his skin.

With the others, she led him into the stampede and he became one of its more receptive cattle. He ran with her for a time until she found friends and she left him and hugged and kissed them.

But Sabienn kept moving onwards up the ramp being the odd one out in a group of deliriously happy people. *What’s happening here?* He looked around to try to get an estimate of the number of people here. There must have been about three hundred on the ramp with him.

Sabienn thought, *What was it Jasspick said? Three hundred on a ship. Taken to Klear. All they had to do was give up an ear. I thought he was joking. I’ve*



*never seen anything like this advertised. Unbelievable.*

He was largely pushed up in the rush and joined the growing group in the cargo bay of the big yellow vessel. About half of the people then dropped to their knees to offer thanks to their Green Moon deity. *They must be some religious community. The way they work and interact. Fascinating. But I need to get out. Going to Klear is not part of my immediate plans.*

He viewed the ramp now and walked towards it. As quickly as he approached it, the big hatch doors slid closed to the massive cheers of the holding bay's occupants. Bang! The door slammed shut.

Sabienn was trapped. He surveyed the room full of excited people and his eyes started picking out things as he'd been trained to in field strategy. *Wait a minute. This is weird, he thought. This's really strange.*

No sooner had the doors closed, the steadying gantries and supports disengaged. The big airship then lifted up vertically, once again to ecstatic laughter. Sabienn's ears popped in pain with the altitude.

Sabienn thought once again about what Jasspick had said and looked around. *There's no swimming pool.* He looked further. There were no chairs or tables. The occupants were totally oblivious to this and were happy to lie or sit on the floor and chat happily.

But Sabienn could see the holding bay was similar to the ones they used for fighting forest fires. They would fill this whole area up with water. He noticed the sealed crack within the floor running fore to aft down the centre. The floor would open like a bomb hatch and the water would drop on to the forest. *I have to be wrong about this.*

In the centre of the bay was a neatly wrapped parcel. It was a large cylindrical box covered in the official blue paper of the government. It had a note attached, "To Be Opened Upon Arrival. A Small Gift for the Children. Courtesy of The Great Leader."

There were children eagerly poring over it being held back dutifully by compliant parents. Sabienn could pick up the Turr comment. "Now now, young lady. The Great Leader has given us this trip. His instructions are to be obeyed. Until we get to Klear."

As Sabienn came close to it, he could smell it. *These people are believing what they want to believe. They can't pick up the odour. There's no mistake.* It was bait fish. The kind of burley the licensed shardee trawlers used to get their quarry into a frenzy before scooping them up with their nets.

*The dots are joining here. I don't like this picture. I don't like it one bit.* He looked again at the note on the box. *There's no way that The Great Leader would ever approve of this. Not The Great Leader I know and love. I need to bring this*

to his attention.

He was now walking along against the wall which displayed pictures of the beautiful scenery of Klear. There were shots of the mountains, the beaches and the forests. The idyllic heaven in the minds of these people that they were moving towards.

A group of women stood in front of the picture of the mountains and almost in a swaying trance sang the lilting tune of "The Mountains of Klear". It was a widely known tune many sung in Turr dialect that spoke of the hope of a better life for them.

The pictures were photos transposed on to a pliant plastic board. They were beautiful photographs and filled the walls of the bay but when he got closer to one, he couldn't believe his eyes.

*The bastards, Sabienn thought. I know what I'm seeing here. Scratch marks. Finger-nails trying to grab on to something. To gain purchase in a fall. And they couldn't care less if people worked it out. Please let me be wrong about this.*

He looked around the room at these people. Men and women chatting blithely together. Mothers and fathers stroking the brows of loved ones. And *children*. Punching a beach ball around being kids. *I'm no fan of the Turrs. But what've they done? This's wrong. This's very wrong.*

Sabienn moved to the edge of the room standing over the crack in the floor. He surmised that if anything were to happen he would need to be here. A man and a woman stood by him speaking with one another in tones descending to an argument. A little boy stood between them. A bright little man of about five years with a tuft of black hair. Sabienn listened in.

"I want you here," the woman said in her Turr tongue.

"It's all about you you you," the man said directly but gently.

"We're about to start a new life. I don't want you seeing those men," she said.

"Oh, c'mon. That's not fair."

"You always drink too much with them," she said.

"We're not drinking now."

"Stay with me," she pleaded.

"Is that an order?" he said quietly. "C'mon give me a kiss."

"No," she said.

"C'mon. Kiss me." The man puckered up for her.

"No!" She was more definite.

"They're just friends," the man said running his fingers through the boy's hair. "But you're family."

The man started to slowly walk away when she turned on him with heat. "I hate you."

He stopped and turned back to her and saw Sabienn looking on. "We'll talk later," the man said with gentle restraint to his wife and disappeared into the crowd.

*What should I do here?* Sabienn thought. *Should I just burst out and say what I think's going to happen? I could still be wrong.* At that moment his ears started to pop. They were losing altitude. There was a general feeling among the crowd.

"Oh, we're going lower, Mummy," Sabienn heard children say.

"No, that can't be right, dear," the parents would reply.

Sabienn had to ready himself. Quickly he removed his cloak trying not to attract too much attention. The cutaway in the back of his undershirt allowed his wings to extend and he flexed them in readiness.

The boy beside him looked on at Sabienn in shock. "Mummy. A short ears. With wings."

The mother immediately gathered her boy behind her. "Who are you? What are you doing here?" She spoke in Haydd.

"Ma'am," Sabienn said nervously, draping his cloak around his neck. "I think something is going to happen."

"How'd you get here?" she said.

"Stay close to the wall," said Sabienn. *They've got no chance. But I have to say something.*

"Mr Dare!" She was shouting now. She must have been notifying the leader of their group.

"Please, Ma'am," said Sabienn trying to calm her down. "Not now."

"Mr Dare!" she called again.

An older man standing near the middle responded to the call and saw the woman, her son and the strange human intruder with wings. With a frown on his face, he made purposeful steps towards Sabienn who was just watching him coming towards him not caring what the old man was about to say.

Then all hell broke loose.

The bomb doors opened. Sabienn looked on as if it were slow motion. He dropped with Mr Dare who cart-wheeled like a rag doll, hit the water as if it were concrete and busted his head. Hundreds of people in utter shock fell and tumbled, screaming in disbelief. When they all hit the water, some hit it hard and some slid beneath the waves.

Waiting for them were the churning beasts. The shardee as disgusting as they were, were an intuitive animal. They were lying in wait. It looked obvious they had fed here before. The burley burst like a bombshell and the waters lifted in its turbulence. The fish were seething for blood.

Sabienn dropped toes-down like a spear. Expecting the drop but still taken

unawares when it occurred and went like a javelin into the water. When finally he surfaced on the sea, he instinctively pulled away from the group with his wings being the sea creature he was. All this he had made himself ready for.

But what Sabienn wasn't ready for was what he heard, smelt and saw. The absolute carnage, the shrill screams and yelling. *Please. This can't be happening.* Before him there were people who had the filthy little creatures attach themselves. They were on their faces and necks just biting and savaging their flesh. The air was sharp with the smell of blood. *Please, no. I can't do anything.*

Men were in the water crying for their wives. Wives treaded water and shouted for their husbands. And they all cried for their children. And the screaming! *Why? Why is this happening?*

The yellow airship came around in the air and the hands rose for it desperately to return and save them; save their friends and save their families. But it kept flying around. Looking up, Sabienn saw some heartless bastard with a camera recording the scene for verification. He couldn't see his face but he had that sickening casualness of just doing his routine job.

One more fly-around and the vehicle headed on its way north to add insult to the dying. It was where they were planning on going.

A filthy fish attached itself to Sabienn's arm and he ripped it off and flung it far away. His second nature as sea creature had already kicked in and he was moving around the outskirts of the terrible mess. But he couldn't help but look on as a lone human witness. *I can't hate these people. I'm one of them. I just can't do anything.*

"Help me." Above the din Sabienn heard a lone voice speaking to him in Haydd that caught his attention. He looked around and saw the little boy. The bright little man of five.

"Help me." The boy had singled out Sabienn who was watching but was far away from the action.

"Help, please." The boy was struggling and had his mother in his hands. She appeared to be lapsing into unconsciousness and falling like a dead weight.

"I can't do anything," Sabienn said aloud, but not for the boy's ears. "I can barely save myself."

"Please, sir," shouted the little boy. "Help me." It was the most eloquently stated Haydd request he'd ever heard before. From anyone let alone a five year-old Turr.

As the boy spoke the words, his head went under the water again. As it reappeared, Sabienn looked on at his wet head and was shocked. *I swear, thought Sabienn. That's me. That's my face. I'm looking at myself.* He blinked his eyes and it was the same. *The boy's face is mine. Is this a trick of the light?*

The boy's head went down again and only the hair bobbed up above the surface this time.

Not knowing if it was from the shock of the carnage before him, Sabienn was not only seeing things but he heard a voice within him. He didn't know where it came from. It was Oololo. The lowly lonely sergeant.

"Every decision I made was wrong," said Oololo. "I just did what I thought was right."

"I can't do anything," said Sabienn.

"I know. I just made everything up as I went along," said Oololo.

"But that boy is me," said Sabienn. "That's me."

"Then get behind me," said Oololo. "Let's go." The voice left Sabienn and he was there on his own. Snapping out of it, he came back to reality, pumping with strength and purpose.

Another disgusting fish tried to attach itself to his face and he pulled it off. He then squeezed it till its pus-like poison popped out of its glands and he flung it to the edge. "Not today, you filthy piece of shit!"

Fully alert now, Sabienn looked towards the boy's location. He'd lost sight of him. The scene before him was just a field of horror on the water. Carcasses of people that were once so full of life and hope were now bobbing around and being pushed and tugged at the mercy of the scavenging fish. In contrast, a playful beach ball emblazoned with "Obey Me" merrily danced across the water in the breeze.

The boy's head then appeared for one lust lunge at the air. It was to be his final gasp. The look of resignation was on his face. No-one was coming for him.

Sabienn saw the boy and he felt that feeling like a tornado run from his head to his toes. He was imbued with that unstoppable reason and strength. "Get behind me, boy. I'm coming." He pushed out towards him and made short work of the distance between them. "I'm here. I'm here for you."

If he had been a second later it would have been all over. He grabbed the boy and grabbed his mother and pulled them up into the air. The boy's spirits immediately revived. "Thank you, sir," he said. "My mum won't work with me."

"What?" Sabienn couldn't understand him but it soon became apparent.

His mother came to and started punching him. "Get away!" She laid a slap on his jaw.

"I'm here to help you." Sabienn was now trying to grip her hand to prevent another strike.

"I have to find Neem. He's in there. I have to find him." She was in a panic. Her head swung everywhere looking for her lost husband.

"He's gone, Ma'am." Sabienn was the voice of logic.

He ripped off two vicious biters from her arm and there was blood in the water that was attracting more fish. They were on the edge of the carnage but the fish weren't stupid. They could sense the quarry.

Sabienn had to take control. "Ma'am, we have to go. Neem's gone. Choose one or the other. Choose Neem or choose your boy. I'm sorry. We have to go."

She let out the most pitiful keening moan from the deepest well of her guts. "My beautiful husband," she cried. "My beautiful husband." Her face was contorted with utter grief.

Sabienn held out the cloth of his cloak as it was draped around his neck. "Grab on. We've got to go," he said. "What's your name, boy?"

"Tier."

"And your mum?" asked Sabienn.

"She's mum," said Tier.

"I understand," said Sabienn. "Tier, I want you to look after your mum. You've got to step up now. You're the man. I want you to wipe away the blood with the cloak. I want you to see she hangs on. You understand?"

"Yes."

"Good man. Everything will be OK," said Sabienn. *Now how the hell am I going to do this? I can't swim front-ways. I'll hit them with wings. I can't swim under water. They'll drown. I can only swim on my back and stay on the surface.*

And just to add flavour to their forever mounting list of troubles, he could feel that they seemed to have been dropped on to the outer spiral of a whirlpool that was pulling them and taking them further out to sea.

He took his bearings from the sun and started swimming in the direction of the shore. It had been about ten minutes since they dropped into the ocean. They were now moving away from the scene of the horror.

And what was left now was silence. An all pervasive eerie quiet. Floating on the surface were small things that marked the items of a life. And the beach balls with "Obey Me" skidded across the surface and now moved further out to sea.

The silence was interrupted by the sound of the gentle sobbing of Tier's mother, holding on for dear life to the cloth in her hand. And in Sabienn's eyes, Tier grew up fast in ten minutes. He was very much the young man in control now looking after his mother and holding on.

With a system in place now, he found a routine stroke of the wings and settled in to a rhythm. *Four beats*, thought Sabienn. *The compliance of which I will offer up to the one person in the world that can exonerate and liberate me.*

He used the same chant that he'd heard less than a week ago and kept it running in his head.

The...Great...Leea...Duh.

The...Great...Leea...Duh.

With the rhythm working for him, he slipped into an automatic pilot mode. And thankfully his stroke was getting some results. He was moving his way through the ocean waves at a steady pace now. Now with the machine of his movement established and running, his thoughts turned back to the events just passed.

There was one overarching question Sabienn kept asking himself. *Why? He looked down at Tier and his mum. And why didn't I know this? Why didn't anyone know this? Did the person who told Jasspick the rumour, did they know this? Did In General sitting on his eight hundred and fifty seven passports, did he know this? And those passports. The woman about to burst into laughter and the grey man with the long nose. Those people would be gone.*

His wings were pulling water and pushing them forward so Sabienn paid some attention to his passengers. The mother was still in no state to engage in anything. She was like a grief stricken lump of ice, dead to any warmth. He was just glad she could hang on.

The boy looked up at him. His face wasn't the same as his. It must have been a trick of light. But he held Sabienn's gaze with the absolute trust of a man his age. Sabienn then noticed there was a small fish attached to Tier's neck which he reached down and ripped away. His hand checked the wound on the neck and it moved to touch the boy's uncut ear.

The ear was sharp on the top and on the bottom and it was the first time he had felt one. He was surprised at how soft the skin was to touch.

"Look," cried Tier, indicating the water beneath them. Beneath the flesh of the surface, the water below them became a blanket of white. Shimmering bright white and moving. Looking at each other Sabienn and Tier were stunned. It was school of eastern black fish. Now Sabienn could make out the dark rings around the eyes and just marvelled at their white flesh and the way they switched direction on a pinpoint.

As quickly as they arrived they then suddenly left. For Sabienn, the sea was full of danger but it was also full of wonder. *I'm a sea creature. I have been for a week. The community beneath the waves is my brotherhood.*

"Wow," said the boy. A school of blue chevron stingray swam with them with their distinctive three V's on the back. They were inquisitive yet kept their distance and viewed the strangers to the ocean with a pelagic encouragement for peers. They stayed with them for a time and left just as peacefully.

Then Tier shouted like a mad man. "Look!" Sabienn didn't have too much difficulty following his gaze.

*No wait a minute, thought Sabienn. That can't be real. There's no way that's*

*real.* At a polite distance, a whale breached the surface and slid below waving a massive tail.

“Mum, it’s a red whale. Quick, look!” cried Tier. The creature came to the surface and looked at them through its big eye and blew spray through its blow-hole.

His mother, in a dead and spiritless funk, raised her head to follow his gaze. “There’s nothing there,” she said pitifully. “There’s nothing anywhere.” Her head went back down to bury itself into the cloak.

*The kid can see it, Sabienn thought, but his mother can’t. I thought I could see it, but it mustn’t be there. There’s no way a red whale would be there.*

Sabienn looked again and it was still there. It blinked its eye then followed a slow downward arc and disappeared below the surface.

“Did you see that?” shouted Tier.

“See what?” said Sabienn.

“I saw it. The red whale,” said poor little Tier.

Sabienn needed to get his mind back on track. He could feel that he had left the pull of the whirlpool. The sun was still in the sky but now setting in the direction he was heading. Westwards to the shore.

They’d now been in the water for a few hours, and the sky was starting to turn a deeper blue. The two moons appeared more visible now, feeling more at home in their darkening sky.

Sabienn noticed Tier looking up to the green moon in the same way he was looking up to the blue. But looking at Tier, he knew they were both hoping and praying the same things.

Stars were starting to appear and for him it was a welcome arrival. He started picking out his guide points that had been there the previous night at Lake Loom. He believed he was going the right way.

“Look,” Tier called. “Boat lights.” *It was a good spot. The kid had Bray’s eyes.* Over Sabienn’s shoulder there were tiny pin-pricks of light in the distance hugging the surface of the sea.

It must be the shardee trawlers ploughing their trade. He needed to get close to them to improve his position but not so close as to encounter the filthy fish. He adjusted his trajectory accordingly.

“Sir,” said Tier. “Please help me.” It was an impassioned plea from the little boy as he was watching his mum about to let go.

Sabienn scolded himself. *How stupid could you be? The boy is small and lying on my leg. But his mother’s in the cold water and all her organs are chilling down. Idiot. You know there’s subtle differences in human and nebular physiology. She’s silent because she’s quietly dying on you.*



He looked over his shoulder way past the lights of the boats. Somewhere out there, he knew there was a south-bound current running warm water down the coastline. And from his geography, he remembered it was at its narrowest point along here.

*We need to get to the warmer waters. We need to get close to shore or Tier's going to lose both his parents,* thought Sabienn. *Why didn't you see this? What's wrong with you?*

Sabienn brought the woman close up on top of his body till her head was on his chest. "Rub her arms boy," he called to Tier. "Rub for dear life." With his own arms he massaged her torso trying to coax warmth back into her form. Her weight affected his buoyancy but he was surprised how compliant his body was in adjusting. His wings now started pulling at double the speed and he had picked up some pace.

"What's y' mum's name?" asked Sabienn

"It's not polite, sir," replied Tier.

*This kid has to live,* Sabienn thought. *He's just too nice.* "Stay with me, mum," Sabienn called to the woman. "Don't die on me. It won't be long."

He upped his rhythm.

The Great Leea Duh.

The Great Leea Duh.

The Great Leea Duh.

His form was pushing through the waves now. The air was getting cooler and there was no more sunlight to warm them.

"Keep rubbing, boy," said Sabienn. Tier was on top of him now massaging his mum's back with as much force as his little hands could muster. Sabienn saw there was a matter-of-fact no-nonsense approach about Tier that belied his years. He just went about his work with the minimum of complaining.

The lights were getting closer and at last he could see that haze of light in the distance. The kind of haze that indicated a large city sitting out there soaking in the imprint of its own light and reflecting itself off the clouds above.

A shardee then appeared and latched itself to mum's neck. Then another attached to her leg. Then another to the arm.

Tier ripped the one from her leg away and Sabienn disposed of the others. The filthy fish must have sensed the woman's vulnerability and tested their luck. Sabienn was drawing in too close to the trawler grounds and needed to get out.

It was only at the last moment he became aware of five fish sucking on to Tier's leg. He pulled the boy in further to him and with his help disposed of the awful little creatures.

"I'm sorry I did this to you, boy." Sabienn was trying to explain his bad

navigation.

“Save her, sir,” said Tier.

Sabienn pulled his wings hard and in quick time. His instincts were telling him to aim a little north because the current would take him back down the coast away from his target. But his priority was to get to the warm water as quickly as he could. He’d deal with where he was later.

The lights of the boats were now behind them and to the south. He was looking up into the night sky pulling his wings and starting to feel exhausted. But he had to keep on. Maybe Sabienn was hallucinating but he believed he could see a light in the sky, a pin-point beam. He imagined it as the single source of his species coming from millions of kilometres across the universe to this wet rock.

“Can you see a light up there?” he said to Tier, pointing to what he was seeing.

“No. I can see one up there,” he replied pointing to another part of the sky. It presented itself as a pit of darkness to Sabienn. But maybe it was where the boy’s species came from.

With a few more pulls of his wings he felt with relief the warmer water around his body. He let mum’s body fall back in to the water to bring her core temperature back. They both still rubbed her body to massage the tissues back to life. With a flicker they noticed her eyes come alive. They were sullen and dead in spirit but physically she was still with them.

And over his shoulder he caught the first glimpse of the shore. Four tethered gossip blimps with their flashing red lights. When he was in the town earlier he noticed the four blimps and the location of the most northern and the most southern.

With this in mind, Sabienn made calculations. *I see the map. In my head. With an angle to the shore and the forest. The forest bleeds down to the coastline and a connecting creek. There’s a mangrove with a fishing reserve. Keep aiming. Keep going.*

He kept pulling away at the water. *The new currents bring with them warm greetings from the equator.* Sabienn felt his spirits and hope lift.

The lights of the shore came closer and more and more became visible. Clouds which had moved in overhead of them let fall a light warm shower of water on them. *We can’t get any wetter. Just enjoy.*

Sabienn kept pulling harder now he could see the land in sight. *It must have been six or seven hours in the water. My muscles are aching. I’m feeling the first twinges of cramps and I’m exhausted. But the body’s performed well. This’s been the biggest test of my week. My new body. My wings.*

A grim thought came back to him now in the light of the horror they had all encountered. *I've taken a mother and boy across an expanse of sea. I'm exhausted but functioning. Maybe I could have taken the father too. If I'd pulled him out in time. If he hadn't been attacked too much. Maybe I was rash to leave early. Shut it, will you? I did what I did.* Sabienn looked down at Tier and his mum gripping on for dear life.

Then Tier started to push away from him. By instinct, Sabienn saw him push away and held on to him. But the boy left his grip and his head went below the waves. Tier's head came up and he was far away now.

"What're you doing?" said Sabienn.

"Look," Tier said, looking ahead.

The waves were crashing now but they were so close he needed to break free. But the boy was in pain. Sabienn reached out and pulled him into the safety of his arms.

A wave broke now and flung them all forward and they all slid on to the welcome sand of the beach. Sabienn dug his fingers in to feel the grit of salvation. *Heaven. Thank you, Great Leader.* He found his feet then collapsed. Sabienn crawled on to the beach dragging mum and tried to carry her but collapsed. Tier was swilling around in the wash-pool water of the beach now. Sabienn looked back in despair. *I haven't been carrying you people half way across the ocean to lose you. Not on some rough and uncertain beach.* In his exhaustion, he found new energy. *Not on my watch.*

He grabbed Tier and crawled up the beach pulling his arm. With effort now he found strength to place the dormant frame of the woman on his shoulders and steady his legs. There was twenty metres of exposed beach and he pushed on all the way to the cover of some beach vegetation.

When he looked back, Tier was gone. *No.* He'd been sucked back into the swell. Looking around desperately, Sabienn saw the head bobbing around in the dark. *You're not getting away that easy.* He pushed back into the water for him and grabbed him. He then placed him on his shoulders and strode back to the shore where, when he met solid sand, he collapsed.

It must have been a few minutes he lay there with the boy just coughing and gagging and they were both absolutely drained. The rain was heavy now and shrouded them in a steady spray.

In the distance to the south, the lights bobbed up and down of a vehicle making its way up the beach toward them. With urgency Sabienn picked up the boy and ran the distance of the beach to be in the undergrowth with his mum. He removed his cloak and covered them both making sure their tell-tale ears were concealed.

The vehicle got closer running silent. All Sabienn could hear was the rain and the wind and the thumping beats of his heart. "Not a sound now, Tier," Sabienn said in his best Turr.

The vehicle came by them and stopped suddenly. Two men alighted from the beach-going four-wheel drive. They both wore civilian clothes and held torches which they waved around with purpose. One held a rifle.

Sabienn looked on through the foliage at one man who jumped on to a nearby rocky groyne that pushed out into the sea. He ran and jumped like a goat and dodged the spray of the angry sea in its effort to dislodge him and swallow him.

The second man with the rifle waved his torch over Sabienn's tracks freshly made in the sand. The rain had mercifully smoothed them out a little but the man by his movements was alert and suspicious. He walked up the beach and shone the light into the undergrowth. The torchlight swung around through the falling rain and ran over the top of Sabienn as he huddled behind the leaves.

The rock jumping man came to join his companion on the beach up near the vegetation line. Sabienn was so close to them he could hear every word.

"What've you got?" said the rifle man.

"They're all there. Looks like a good haul," came the reply.

"Of?" The rifle man may not have realized but he was shining his torch beam directly on Sabienn in the undergrowth. In his concealment, Sabienn was hoping the leaves left him in disrupted pattern and he kept dead still.

"Meat hooks."

"How many?"

"Heaps."

They were both silent.

"What d'you want to do?" said rock man.

"Pull them out. Drop in some new ones," said rifle man, waving his beam over the tracks. "I don't want some prick getting his hands on them."

Rock man looked at the rain soaked trail in the sand beneath the beam of his torch. "That's a wolf."

"Bullshit," said rifle man. "Wolves don't walk on twos."

"It's a wolf," said rock man, pointing at sand near the water's edge. "There, here's dragging a fish." They both stood in silence for a moment.

"Let's go," the rifle man said. They both made their way back to the vehicle.

At that moment, mum let out a low moan from her depressed stupor. "Oooh."

Both men stopped and looked back into the undergrowth. Sabienn lay deathly still. Rifle man took one step towards the vegetation and both men stood in silence. Sabienn's heart thumped and his adrenalin pumped in his veins. The torch shone back into the undergrowth. Moving up and down the landscape. It

stayed there for seconds which seemed like hours, probing the leaves and branches.

Rifle man slowly turned and resumed walking back to the vehicle. "It's a wolf. Get the meat hooks."

Rock man gathered some empty traps from the vehicle and danced out on to the rocks as he did before. He came back with some traps seething with crawling animals. In the torchlight, Sabienn could see their catch. *Green-bellied meat hooks. Best lobster ever to grace a seafood table. There's a lot of money there. That man would use that rifle if he saw me as a thief.*

With the valuable haul stowed the vehicle did a U-turn and went back up the beach the way it came. Sabienn, Tier and his mum sat in silence watching the vehicle go. Sabienn sighed in relief.

Then there were more footsteps. Coming close now, from the north on the beach and close to the vegetation. Tier was sitting up now stroking his poor mother's back. Sabienn put his finger to his mouth to indicate for the boy to stay silent. The beams of more flashlights could be seen and the footsteps came near and stood near them.

*Soldiers.* Sabienn looked up to view the new intruders through the branches. *But.. That can't be?* He was looking at two soldiers dressed in weather-proof parkas with hoods covering their faces. But not just any soldiers. When one of them flashed his torchlight on the other he saw their shoulder insignia. They were Turr officers. They both had a rifle slung on their shoulder.

Sabienn was stunned. *We've been invaded.* He turned again to the boy to indicate silence. But the boy saw the Turr soldiers and became very excited. Tier jumped from the clearing in front of the soldiers and in his most express Turr stated, "Grandpa!"

The boy rushed to them and wrapped himself around the leg of one of them. Everyone was stunned by this act let alone the two officers. The one who had Tier attached rubbed the boy's hair fondly.

There was no choice on Sabienn's part. He got up from his hiding place and walked out with his hands up hoping for mercy. "Please," he said in his best Turr. "I'm caring for a mother and boy. Both Turr." The flashlight fell on Sabienn. The two soldiers approached quietly and took their weapons off their shoulders. They let down their hoods to reveal their concerned faces. It was Deep and Bray.

Sabienn sighed and let his hands down and after all that had happened that day, he collapsed to his knees in utter relieved exhaustion and began to weep. The two men knelt by him. "Nice dip?" Deep said, placing his hand on his friend's shoulder.

“I’ve had better,” said Sabienn with tears, accepting the comfort of his friend’s gesture.

## 35. A Night In The Cave

“Come on,” said Bray. “We’ve got a warm and dry place to stay. It’s home away from home.”

Sabienn brought Deep around to see the sad figure of Tier’s mum. She looked up at Deep with no reaction and allowed herself to be quietly scooped up on to his back. Bray scooped an excited Tier up and placed him on his back. Tier said, “Do you know Grandpa?” in his best Turr.

Sabienn came towards Tier, “We’re relying on you. No shouting. You’re a man among men now.” The boy nodded and kept quiet. Sabienn played pack horse and picked up the rifles.

“You’re in the middle. I’ll be watching,” said Deep to Sabienn. “Are you up for this?”

“You just don’t know what a day I’ve had,” said Sabienn exhausted.

“Plenty of time to tell us,” said Deep, hoisting mum on to his back. “Just not now.”

With his eagle eyes, Bray led the group and walked through the dark with his torchlight close to the ground. He deftly negotiated the forest pushing on with confidence in his direction. He didn’t need a map or compass. That was all in his head. There’d be tell-tale marks on the trail he’d be picking up to take them forward.

The rainfall slowed to a drizzle and eventually stopped. Then the clouds moved away and revealed the big beautiful moons which bathed them in an eerie blue and green glow. Instinctively the boys killed their flashlights and they continued in the light of the celestial globes.

Sabienn was starting to feel the full extent of his exhaustion. “How much further?” he said wearily to no response. It felt like they he had been walking more than an hour. They were moving further in and around some rocky outcrops then suddenly Bray stopped. They stood in front of a big rock and he looked around. Deep did the same. They kept silence for what seemed like a minute.

Then Bray pulled back a camouflage drape in front of him. It wasn’t a rock but an opening. Inside was a substantial cave shelter. Glow-sticks had been broken and were giving off an ethereal green glow matched only by the glow

worms on the rear ceiling. Along the side were boxes of army items with side labelling all written in Turr text.

The man left in charge to sort out all this army surplus was sitting on a box startled by the arrival of five. “Who goes there?” said Stork.

“Thought you’d have this cave sorted out by now,” Sabienn said lightly to his friend.

“Took us a while. But we celebrated,” Stork said, looking around at their shelter. “We ate your dessert.” The men hugged.

Then it was down to necessities. There were bottles of clean water broken out from their pack and a bowl was filled. With cotton wool dabs of disinfectant they tended to the wounds of the newcomers.

The woman was very wary of contact with the men but Sabienn saw that she allowed herself to be attended to by Deep. He had a patient and gentle temperament and he slowly moved along her arms systematically dabbing every sore inflicted by the filthy fish.

She still was sullen and unreachable. A dead person in a live body. But she did flinch with annoyance when Bray unintentionally caused Tier pain with his dabbing.

The men draped a cloth up to hooks that must have been placed in the ceiling thirty years ago. It afforded the woman some privacy as Tier helped her in changing into warm clothes. There were surplus uniforms on hand in the cave wrapped in plastic and were surprisingly sound after all these years. *Those Turrs in the Bol War*, thought Sabienn. *They sure knew how to do a supply depot. This is a holiday camp.*

The six people gathered around a battery operated hot plate but this wasn’t any old Turr stove. It had STL markings. “What’s this?” said Sabienn. “Looks like an alien in a strange land. A bit like us.”

“Oh there’s a story,” said Stork. “Later.”

Stork cooked up some coffee and handed it to the mother and made sachet soup for the boy. The mother and son received the offer gingerly. The mother held her cup to warm her hands and took a sip. Once it was OK Tier took some beverage. Sabienn looked on at them. *It’s understandable. Having received the welcome from Hayddland this morning. Once bitten twice shy.*

Food was handed around by Stork from the backpack. There were still some leftover sandwiches and more bread rolls recently bought. “I found a little money lying around here and there,” said Stork. “Luckily we don’t have to risk this.” He pointed to the numerous boxes stacked within the cave. There were hundreds of cans of ready to eat meat and vegetable meals. “After thirty years, I think we have enough problems already to get a dose of botulism.” Apart from



the cans, there were numerous packets of dry biscuits which he handed around. Sabienn bit into one. They were well past their use-by-date and the taste was like saw-dust, although not entirely unappealing.

Food was passed around and the mother and son, now a little warm to the advances of the strangers, accepted the bread willingly and they both bit ravenously into the meat and tomato oozing out into their hands.

After food, Deep found some bed rolls wrapped in plastic stacked against the wall within the cave and handed them around.

For the mother and boy, Deep set up their sleeping arrangements getting gentle confirmation that they were to their liking. Sabienn saw the pair huddled together as a sad pair and it seemed like they had slipped into a sleep.

The men then sat round the hotplate to catch up, clutching on to cups constantly being topped up. With his voice kept low, Sabienn recounted what had happened. He spoke of how he got lost and detailed the horror of his experience in the water. After a time, the four just sat silently, staring into their cups. "I'll need to tell The Great Leader this," said Sabienn with the light of hope in his eyes. "He'll sort it out."

They sat silently again. "Do you think," said Bray hesitantly, "Do you think he may be in on it?"

"He couldn't," said Sabienn, feeling just a little miffed by Bray's input. "He's The Great Leader." The others were quiet as Sabienn took a swig from his cup. "How did you find me?" he continued.

Stork recounted, "We were left stranded when all hell broke loose in the market. We had no choice but to get out and stick to the back-up plan. On the way, we dropped into a near-by shopping place. To get food, water and stuff. There we saw a Secret Police van parked. The guys were in an ice-cream parlour relaxing. Even a cruel and heartless man should enjoy a chocolate ice-cream. If it's well deserved. We parked next to the van and heard the broadcasts over the speakers. All the action had moved down the coast. To the yellow airship. As I was listening I saw the window down on the van. I reached in and souvenired this." Stork indicated the STL hotplate. "Seemed fitting that the quarry should sample a trophy from the hunter. And piss the next person off that goes out on stakeout. 'Cause they can't get a good hot meal because of me. There was a spare rifle in the back and I lifted that as well. Then the broadcasts ended. You were lost. The airship left and you were nowhere. Then a call came that there may have been vision of you entering the ship. I think they think you're dead. Sort of backs up that dickhead Jasspick. Every rumour has some sort of truth."

Bray took up the story. "We drove to the fringe of the city and trekked for hours. But we found it." He looked around at the humble abode. "The famed

missing depot. Even I nearly missed it. The camouflage was amazing. Once settled, Deep and I went out to look towards the sea. In the vain hope you escaped when the swimming pool dropped. We waited six hours. But I picked you out. In the darkness. Doing backstroke.”

“If we didn’t have Bray, we wouldn’t be here,” said Deep.

“Yeah,” said Stork. “Let’s hear it for sharp-eyes.”

They all laughed lightly. At that moment, a voice was heard from the end of the cave. “I hear you.” It was the woman and she was spitting her words like a loathsome poison.

Sabienn stared at the woman. She was alive now and disgusted. The comment stopped the frivolity of their meeting in its tracks. “Are you OK?” Sabienn enquired of the person he’d shared a harrowing encounter with.

“I heard you,” she said as if wounded.

Sabienn went back through all that was said. *Wait. “Sharp-eyes”. She thinks we said “sharpies”. I guess some Turrs find that derogatory.*

Sabienn walked to her and knelt before her, “Ma’am, he said sharp-eyes.”

“I heard what I heard,” she said. “I have ears.”

He looked at her almost for the first time. She was older but had those excessively resplendent Turr ears. She had short black hair and for a Turr was attractive.

Stork chipped in, “Ma’am, I said sharp-eyes.”

“You’re safe here,” said Sabienn.

“That’s what you people said this morning,” she said.

Tier was wide awake now and working into his mother’s protective crevices. *Poor Tier, thought Sabienn. The young man I’d shared a wide-eyed adventure with across the expanse of ocean. He’s now becoming infected with his mother’s distrust.*

“My husband, why couldn’t you help him?” she said.

The question sliced through Sabienn like a knife. *Why didn’t I help her husband when I had the chance? In hindsight, I probably could have.*

“Why couldn’t you save him?” she said. “You’re all the same.”

Sabienn saw red at the comment. “Well I wasn’t the one who said I *hated* him,” he said with venom.

*Wrong, Sabienn thought immediately. All those words that just left my lips, I need to pull them back in again. What a cheap shot. She didn’t deserve that. Especially after what she’s been through.*

She stared back wounded by the comment. But it shut her up. Sabienn walked away from her and stood at a distant end of the cave.

*Maybe I could have taken the three of them, he thought. Or maybe I couldn’t.*

*What happened, happened. Why am I being judged?* Looking back at her, he saw her still staring at him and feeling wounded. *This is my animal. This is my dark space. This is where I reach into my mind's cupboard and pull it out. That old familiar blanket that always keeps me warm. This is where I say, "Stupid Turr. That's gratitude." Does she deserve that too?*

It was left to Deep to take control. "Why don't we all get some sleep?"

"Regroup at six," said Bray. "Sort it all out tomorrow then."

Each grabbed a bed roll and found a spot.

Taking his bed roll, Sabienn just wanted to stay away from them and keep to himself. He laid his head down and waited for the sheer exhaustion he felt to sweep him to sleep. But it was increasingly obvious that his sleeping was forever going to be changed by what he saw and heard that day.

Thoughts crowded him. *I mean, is it me? I couldn't do anything. The desperate cries. The mothers. And the children, the poor children. Three hundred people died. Right in front of me. Can I make it up to them? Do I have to do three hundred good deeds? Is that what I need to make myself feel better? And someone higher up in this country. Someone important believed that action was necessary. Am I a monster because I'm one of its citizens? Because this country values monsters. And hear that. That pitiful moaning. A woman keening in her emptiness. Alone in the dark with her demons, her fears and her son. I abused a woman who lost the love of her life. Maybe I'm a monster.*

Sabienn flexed the wings that marked his difference. *Who am I?* He succumbed to uncontrollable jittering of his arms and legs and he felt his nerves unravelling in their sheaths. *Once I had such promise.* He turned over to face the cloth and swim once again in his bed sweat in readiness for restless dreams. *What have I become?* Merciful sleep swept him away.

Dawn light dimly lit the camouflage when Sabienn awoke again. He took a walk outside to get some fresh air. The terrain was rough and wild around him and there was a canopy of leaves above to shield any view from passing airships.

It was beautiful thickly wooded country and the soldiers of thirty years ago had great foresight in coming here. They made a masterful hideaway. His friends also showed foresight as there were pans laid around the entrance to capture the fresh water that fell from the sky. Sabienn also noticed a private area designated for a simple latrine which he summarily availed himself of.

The light became stronger and that moment of the day occurred when the sky erupted in colour. You had the cornerstone brilliance of the green and blue moon but there was also the flaming and temporary sheen of the clouds lit warm in crimson and peach. *If today I am to die,* he thought, *what a beautiful day it is.*

As he sat on a rock, his friends came out of the camouflage flap to greet the

day stretching their arms and undertake basic bodily functions. Stork collected his water and funnelled it into bottles.

It was still before the allotted six o'clock but it wasn't a joyful night. *Looks like they weren't in the mood for deep and restful sleep either*, thought Sabienn. After disappearing for a time, Stork returned to them from the cave carrying a tray of biscuits and hot coffees, steaming invitingly for them to imbibe.

"This cave business seems to suit you," said Bray to Stork laden with his tray. "You're proving the perfect host."

"Try this," said Stork. "These vintage Turr biscuits probably would have been just as ordinary thirty years ago as they are now. But dunk them in coffee and that kills everything."

They sat around for a time and enjoyed some laughs and silence. Deep produced the card from his pocket and held it up. "The Blue Air. Shall we go or not?"

"We have to," said Bray. "The tickets are there."

"It's a trap," said Stork. "That Peep, she's in on it. She can stick those tickets so far up her arse, she clean her teeth with them. It's a dead lead."

"She seemed OK," said Deep.

"That's because all that blood was in your dick and not your head, big man." Stork struck Deep's mug with his own. "That's a lot of blood, dude."

"We have to go," said Sabienn. "But we walk carefully."

"Any sign of trouble," said Stork, "we come back here, to Camp Earless." They all looked at Stork who was always a name-giver. It was a name, but it was as good as any other.

"Camp Earless it is," said Sabienn. "How are the rations?"

"I hadn't counted on the extra mouths," said Stork. "But .." He stopped mid-sentence and started sniffing. "Wow! What is that?"

The others were a lot slower on the olfactory uptake, but they all could eventually smell something. It was coming from within the cave and Stork had to rush back in. Stork looked like the bossy bird of the nest bustling around seeing no strands of grass had been kicked out of place. The others followed suit behind him back inside.

They witnessed mum busy over a large pot on the hot plate with about ten cans of opened Turr army rations.

"What the..?" Stork was puzzled at what he saw but the smell was glorious. He looked on with tacit approval at the way the quiet woman was working the food on his pilfered hotplate. She was working the contents with spices like curry and chilli and all the boys looked on in wonder.

"What do you think?" said Sabienn to Stork.

“You said we’re living dangerously,” said Stork. “We’re presented with a breakfast that’ll either fill us or kill us. I’m willing to sing happy birthday to a thirty year old curry. If the cans don’t give you the runs, the chilli probably will.” He turned to the others. “I’m game.”

Sabienn looked along the wall at the surplus boxes of cans. “If we survive today,” he said. “The ration problem is solved.”

Tier was the first to plate up and his mother gave a tussle to his hair to move him along.

The boys all lined up and took contents on their plate, thanking mum generously. Except Sabienn who held out his plate and took his food quietly and just moved along.

Mum on the other hand chose to speak to Sabienn, “Is that enough, sir?”

“Yes,” he responded sheepishly. “Thank you.”

“No,” she said significantly looking him in the eye. “Thank *you*.” She then plated up a dish for herself. “My name is Trio.”

“Thank you, Trio,” Sabienn said. “I appreciate it.”

Sabienn sat with them all and they ate and felt a lot more relaxed than the night before. After breakfast they prepared themselves for the trip back to Turmeric. Sabienn pored over the map. He said, “This time we head directly west. The target is this truck stop. Up here on the northern stretch of road. Just out of town. The Blue Air and the Stadium are all on the north side. Here and here. Within easy access. Are we all good?”

Wistfully Sabienn gazed at the map and saw the pinpoint for the historical site of Fort Heel on the northern coast. The place where he was to meet up with Captain Randd. *All those arrangements were made a lifetime ago*, Sabienn thought. *Fort Heel’s about an hour’s hike from where we are. I wish I could bypass everything. Go meet them now. The Captain and Ambell and little Tesser. But for the small issue of my Supreme Order. Once Jarrnee’s killed, I’ll be free.*

Trio and Tier came to meet them at the front where the men were laying their equipment out in preparation. “We are coming too, aren’t we?” said Trio with some disappointment.

Sabienn took Trio aside and spoke candidly, “Ma’am, I’ll be blunt. If you show your face outside this camp, you’re both dead.” He indicated her ear that had been cut. “You’ve been processed. That’s serious business. Stay here and wait for us to come back. We’ll sort something out.”

“You promise you’ll come back,” Trio said.

Sabienn saw the earnest look in her eyes and responded, “To some people,” he said, “we’re as much an outcast as you are. We could be dead tonight. I’m sorry, I can’t make promises.”

“Promise anyway,” Trio said. “We’ve got no-one.”

Her candour took his breath away. Sabienn thought, *I’ll be dragging this woman on my leg if I don’t give her a convincing lie.* “OK,” he said blankly. “I promise.”

She grabbed hold of Sabienn’s hands and went down to her knees. He felt embarrassed to watch her. *It’s all a hope game, isn’t it? If you throw someone some hope, they’ll chew on it for a lifetime. This poor woman’s got nothing. Just hope for her boy.*

All said and done, they bade a quick farewell and were off. Sabienn looked back for a final glance at the helpless Trio holding Tier in her arms receding into the trees as they walked away. And he wondered whether this would be his last view of Camp Earless.

Sabienn pulled his cloak in tighter and held to his purpose. With his friends he picked up the pace and spearheaded into the track unmade.

## 36. Baino's

Sabienn and his friends pushed westward through the bushes and branches in good spirits.

"Do you think we're getting predictable?" said Stork quietly. "Every time we walk now, we fall into a pattern. Like we're familiar and comfortable. I mean, Bray takes the lead. Because he has the eyes."

Sabienn jumped in to direct comment to Bray, "You're OK with the Oololo maps left back at Camp Earless?"

"They're all here," said Bray, tapping his head.

Stork continued, "Sabienn goes next because he has the.. whatever. Looking resplendent in his STL rifle I lifted for him. He's second best shot. He's second best wolf. And, oh yeah, he saves our lives sometimes. Then I'm next. I'm the domestic bitch."

"I meant that as a joke," said Bray politely at the front.

"I keep telling you, Steel," said Stork to Bray proudly. "You make up the T-shirt, I'll pay for it. And I don't know about you guys. But my anal passage is still stoppered. That killer chilli is staying put. Old Trio's got the Stork seal of approval. I'm feeling good."

"That's good to know," said Deep. "I'm behind you."

"Which brings us to Deep. Always at the back," said Stork. "Radar ears. The man's like the rugged mountains. Always there but he never shuts up. Slung with his Blue Hunter. The man who's our mother hen looking after the chicks. Oh, a masculine mother hen."

"Thank you," said Deep, enjoying the banter.

They pushed on through the forest at pace. The rocky outcrops and undergrowth before them being kind to their travel. The forest was full of stoneberry bushes which Sabienn ran his hand through and grabbed some fruit for later cracking. There were also some other native bushes he was familiar with which he reached out to.

"Oh. There's a bush like this at Academy," said Sabienn, grabbing some fruit from a bush. It was a railed dogberry bush with its sweet green fleshy berries full of minerals and they filled his hand.

"No no! Stop!" shouted Stork. He pulled some water from the pack and went

to Sabienn. The berries were knocked out of his palm and water was applied to clean the skin. "They're bad."

"How d'you know?" said Sabienn.

"I know," came the reply.

The friends took a pause from walking to watch Stork's actions.

"Well I'll be," said Bray. "We know where your heightened awareness is." Sabienn looked on bemused as Bray continued. "You know why the law doesn't send dogs into the bush to look for people?"

"They find these berries irresistible," said Sabienn. "I know that much."

"But every bush's chemistry is different," said Bray. "Depends on climate, soil, neighbouring plants, predators, all that stuff. They're either safe or poisonous. The bush at Academy must have been safe." Bray pointed to the fruit on the ground and then to the leaves where they came from. "What saved most of the dogs is this. The leaves give off an odour. In that small spectrum somewhere in the middle of a thousand shades of grey. But it let them know if the fruit was poisonous. Stork's nose just saved your life."

The group paused to take in what Bray had just said. Stork turned to Sabienn quietly. "I guess that makes us even." With that the men resumed their hike.

There was a warm glow to the sun now as it streamed through the forest giving directional light and shade. Deep called, "I'm hearing the jittering load of a truck up ahead. Somewhere there." He pointed through the brush. They appeared to be on track.

As they got closer, they saw the road through the trees and Bray stopped to get his bearings and note the surrounds. He then instinctively turned north and the others followed.

It came as a welcome surprise that the first person to notify them of the truck stop was Stork. "Bacon," he said, stopping to pore over the glorious breeze none of the others were enjoying.

They pushed on further through the woods and through the clearing trees faced the carpark of Baino's Merchant Diner. It was a clean looking place with its freshly white painted walls that called out to you with the promise of simple but reasonable food and showers.

"Baino's," said Sabienn to his friends, spying on the premises through the branches. "What've we got?"

"Visited once before. Average coffee," said Stork. "But brilliant view. Looks out over the ocean. A million kee vista for the working man. Where they can sit like kings and discuss the problems of the world. And how someone else should fix them."

Bray piped up, "Popular stop for truck drivers. I've been here once. A history



of government blunders helps it. A lot of the trucks here haul timber. From the northern plantations to the southern building sites. So government made a four lane highway for them. To run south then veer east. But in their wisdom, they slugged it with a vicious toll. No-one uses that sucker. And to add insult, Secret Police are always throwing up road blocks. So truckers choose the narrower and more dangerous northern coastal road. No tolls and minimal checks. And as luck would have it, the first decent stop they come across, is Baino's."

"I've seen those truckers," said Stork. "Man, they need that coffee and shower. They've been shitting bricks on that road. Plus it's a hub to offload and bitch."

"My only memory was a massive mural of The Great Leader," said Sabienn. "It dominated the north wall of the dining area. They'll all be looking at that mural today. Hoping The Great Leader will sort out their concerns. To give the small man a break."

"I didn't know you cared for the working man?" said Stork.

"I couldn't give a shit for the working man," said Sabienn. "But I have to know how he thinks if I want to use him. Deep, anything?"

"I've got nothing," said Deep.

"You've got to get out more, big man," said Stork.

Sabienn looked upon the carpark sizing up each vehicle before them. There before them were four hauling trucks and a flatbed truck with a bobcat on the back. "No smaller cars. Slim pickings," he said to the others. "Must be the coming of The Great Leader. No-one will be on the road."

With the others in tow, Sabienn casually strolled into the carpark noting all the security vision and sidled up to the flatbed truck and looked inside. "I don't like this," said Sabienn. "There's some elaborate alarm here. We'll need the keys. And look at this." He pointed to the surrounds and some building work. "He's parked next to this demountable dropped in. We're in a blind spot from the cameras. The guy who parked here didn't want to be seen. Stork, you and me. We lure the guy out. Deep and Bray. Just a little solid guidance. We need those keys."

With the plan understood, Sabienn and Stork entered the diner and looked around. It wasn't its usual bustling business as Sabienn remembered. There were only a few people at the tables taking breakfast.

The mural of The Great Leader was still there and Sabienn took a brief moment to marvel at it. It was a painting of the depiction he loved the most. In the simple uniform with The Blue Star. Above the mural was a banner hung across which stated "Baino's Merchant Diner Welcomes The Great Leader to Turmeric".

Sabienn stopped a waitress in her tracks, "Excuse me, Ma'am. A flatbed truck outside? It's left its lights on."

"Don't the lights sort of go off?" she said politely.

"Would you trust your vehicle, Ma'am?" replied Sabienn. Without further ado, the waitress went to the public address and made the announcement to the diners. As a result, a short and very muscular bald man stood up from his coffee and walked to the window looking into the car-park. His eyes looked in the direction of the flatbed then went back to his table.

The boys looked at each other. "I don't like this," said Stork. "What do we do?"

"Get his attention," said Sabienn. "Just get a reaction. I'll be over here."

Sabienn sat at a table where the bald man had his back to him but he was close enough to hear everything. Stork balked once or twice looking back not really knowing what to do but Sabienn just waved him on.

"Hi," said Stork, looking down at the bald man at the table. The man had appeared to be immersed in his own world until the intrusion. He viewed Stork's arrival with startled surprise.

Stork looked down at the table and saw his breakfast of coffee, a sandwich and two bananas and invited himself to sit down. "Mmm," he said, picking up one of the bananas and playing with it. "Two bananas.. Mm.. Breakfast of champions. That'd bring back some good memories.. Of *both* your daddies."

Listening on, Sabienn cringed with disbelief. *Oh my goodness*, thought Sabienn. *He's as subtle as a stomach pump. But he'll get a reaction. I hope he can outrun the punch when it comes.*

Sabienn looked on and where he sat he could see the rage and the colour working its way up the back and side of the bald man's head and neck. The man quietly but deliberately reached out to his table and grabbed a sauce bottle standing there. *Get out of there*, thought Sabienn because he'd seen that grip before. There was intent to smash it over the intruder's head.

Stork was perched to bolt from his chair when at that moment the bald man stopped. His breathing became deeper and calmer. The sauce bottle he was holding in his hand like a cosh ready to crack a skull was placed back on the table in front of him. His fingers ran up the length of the bottle neck as if in calm contemplation.

After a while the man spoke. "I'm sensing a little aggression here," the bald man said. "Is there something you want to talk about?" Stork offered a subtle glance towards Sabienn as if to say he had no idea where this was going. Then the bald man continued, "Well let me talk first. When I killed a man with my bare hands, I had to do some thinking. He was Secret Police, so it was serious.

He pulled me over and brought me in. No reason. Then he shoved a sauce bottle up my arse. Just like this one. All this time I was thinking. I'm a man. Protect the back passage. At all costs. But then I thought, the people that know me know I'm a man. There's a woman waiting for me. And I say," the bald man breathed deeper, "Breathe. Take a breath and obey. Obey the belief my little woman has in me. Taking a sauce bottle up the arse doesn't make me any less a man. You feeling comfortable about that banana joke?" Stork just looked stunned. "Now," continued the bald man. "Is there anything you want to talk about?"

Stork turned to look at Sabienn. Suddenly Bray and Deep joined Sabienn at his table.

"We have company," said Bray. Through the window on to the carpark, they saw a black van turn into the entrance. "We need to move."

Leaving his table, Sabienn sat next to Stork and the bald man. "Begging your pardon, sir," said Sabienn to the bald man. "We need to get going." Stork and the bald man saw the van in the car-park now.

"They're not looking for you," said the bald man. "They're looking for me. As I said to your friend," he indicated Stork, "I killed a man this morning with my bare hands. The Secret Policeman with the bottle came to try it on my woman. He dropped like a sack of shit. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to eat." With that the bald man wolfed in to his sandwich.

"Well no, you didn't tell me that," said Stork. "That's a crucial piece of information." Stork turned to his friends. "This is typical. The one person we pick to rob keys from is a nut-job. All hell's going to come crashing round our ears."

"I'll order more coffee," said the bald man, around the food in his mouth. "Have you boys eaten?"

"We're good, sir. But your truck? We'll take those keys," said Sabienn.

"No," said the bald man. He then called to a waitress passing by. "Four more cups of coffee please."

"Make it takeaway," added Stork.

"No no. It's not the same," said the bald man. "It's the whole experience. It's the cup. It's the froth. It's the steam. It's everything. I can't interest you?" The man held up his sandwich. "This is the dead man's breakfast. The bread, the meat, the cheese, the tomato, all good. The coffee gets you wired. The bananas calm you down. Gives you the perfect nutrition to face the after-life. Or so I've read."

"I'm not familiar with the term," said Bray. "But then I don't read the classics. Sir, we're not here to die. Could we borrow your truck please?"

"No," said the bald man. "I can see you boys have wings. You're being

hunted too. I don't normally have time for natives. I hate most of you." Sabienn bristled at the comment but let it pass.

The waitress returned with their coffees and placed them on the table. Sabienn stood to take her aside and feigned annoyance. "Ma'am, we've got Secret Police here. You tell your manager to *do* something. Otherwise we'll take our business elsewhere."

The waitress saw the black van through the window and with a shocked look on her face left him to rush to the back office. A neat man in a well-dressed uniform with the "Baino's" logo came steaming out of the back office with the waitress in tow.

"Mr Baino," said the waitress. "I don't know if it is a Day of Memory."

"Shit!" cried Baino. "Someone tell me! Are we supposed to be closed? Or are we supposed to be open?" He turned to a driver. "Kekko, you see anything?"

Kekko spun around on his seat, "Up from the north, Singo's was closed. But Badder Market was open."

"Jerbo's was closed," piped another driver.

"That's all I need," spat Baino. "Grief from these pricks!"

"It's not a Day of Memory," said the waitress. "It's not like Victory Day, TGL's Birthday, Three Prophets Day or Farm Day. We're allowed, Mr Baino."

"Yeah, but remember last year?" said Baino. "We opened when The Architect died. Some yahoo threw a brick through the window. There's always some idiot wants to put a full-stop on the sentence. Just to look fashionable. And we get caught because they said we needed a permit."

"But TGL's coming. That's big," said Kekko. "A lot are just closing."

Baino ran to lock the doors and post the "Closed" sign. He then started pulling the blinds down on the carpark windows. He then moved with a cloth to hastily wipe down the table Sabienn's group were at, "Finish up, boys. Sorry 'bout this."

"This is not good," said Bray to Sabienn. "Locking the doors is going to bring them round the back. If they're after him." He indicated the bald man. "We need to get going."

"Come on," said Sabienn and turned to the bald man. "Enjoy your breakfast."

"Wait. You want the keys?" said the bald man. "Finish your coffee, I'll think about it."

Sabienn looked at the steaming cups. They weren't going to go down in a rush. "No, we're good."

"We get keys," called Stork. "That's what we're here for. Just drink the coffee."

"Go," said Sabienn. "Let's go."

Sabienn followed by his friends hooded up and moved in single file through the kitchen followed by the other drivers. They made their way to the rear kitchen access and to the outside air. He was hit by the wafting smells and flies from the rubbish bins and the grease trap.

There was no evidence of the Secret Police making their way around the rear of the building. Sabienn now rushed to get to the cover of the trees at the rear of the property before the STL poked their heads around.

“Stop,” cried Stork.

“You want to stay?” called Sabienn as he wheeled on his friend. “Stay!”

“No,” said Stork. He pointed to the flatbed truck that had taken their interest. “Look!” They all glanced across to the vehicle and watched the rushed figure of the man that was called Kekko making his way to it. He was pulling keys from his pocket. “It wasn’t even the nut-job’s truck,” added Stork.

Sabienn looked around and went at full pelt towards Kekko before collaring him. “Got space for four?” said Sabienn with urgency.

“Get out of my face, idiot.” Kekko said trying to brush him off. From his back and ready for use, Deep drew his rifle and took aim at the driver.

“It wasn’t a question,” said Sabienn. “Work with us or we go alone. Going south or north?”

“North,” said the driver feeling in genuine fear of his life.

“Wrong answer,” said Sabienn. “Keys?”

Looking gutted, Kekko complied. “I know how you bandits work. Make it quick.” He then went down onto his knees and bowed his head expecting the very worst.

The friends piled in as best they could into the cabin of the vehicle. Sabienn shouted from the wheel as it moved off. “Thank you. We’ll take good care.”

Sabienn watched Kekko’s stunned face as they moved away. Then Kekko called, “Help! I’ve been robbed.”

“Hey!” A shout came from a Secret Police officer walking around the back. His partner in black gave chase on the truck leaving the scene.

With timely precision, Deep wheeled his rifle round and fired off two rounds towards the black van in the car-park. Both officers dropped to the ground and took cover at the sound of shots. One bullet hit the bumper bar and the other split the rubber of the rear wheel and they watched it spit and hiss as it dropped the rear.

Sabienn took the truck and entered the road to the screaming horns of braking cars as he turned its direction south.

“Take the next main road on the right,” said Bray. “We need to steer there.” He pointed to the foot-hills of the escarpment way off to the west. Before them

now as they travelled south visible in the distance was the mighty structure of Turmeric Stadium.

“Take a look guys,” said Sabienn. “All our actions, all our efforts are pushing us towards there. That place and all the events to happen this afternoon.”

“Sure wish I had that coffee now,” said Stork.

## 37. The Blue Air

With Bray's pinpoint eyes on the windscreen, Sabienn guided the vehicle away from the coast with the sun behind them. They pushed further into the forest areas at the base of the cliff and the canopy above began to swallow the light. In between surveying the road, Bray found some local maps in the glove compartment that he perused with interest and committed to memory. The track to The Blue Air went up and up and the road became harder to negotiate with the small cat on the back.

As they turned a corner on a twisting track they were faced with a group of locals. Some held shovels and some held rifles. They were all attired in muddy cloaks and they viewed the approaching vehicle with glee.

"Yaaay!" shouted the group and began to move in front of them.

Sabienn brought the vehicle to a slow crawl and began to push through the crowd in the road ahead of him. He wound his window up to keep prying hands out of the cabin. When it became obvious that the vehicle was not going to stop for them, the crowd became increasingly agitated. Some started trying to attach themselves to the front of the windscreen but they eventually fell away. A group from the crowd had fallen back and about three of them had guns pointing at the truck's cabin.

Bang! A shot went off. The bullet hit the side top of the windscreen and it shattered spraying glass over the occupants within. Deep now had his rifle out and had it trained on the person who delivered the round. The whole scene went from calm to panic in a split second.

Looking out over the shouting people, Sabienn viewed the man who had just pulled the trigger. He was a dishevelled man probably in his mid-sixties with a scraggly beard and long matted locks. In that millisecond Sabienn sized him up. *Is he rational or irrational? Is he capable or a fool?*

Jumping from the cabin, Sabienn waved hands playing peacemaker. He stood on the ground in front of the truck. "Stop! Stop! Everyone calm down. Guys get out. Everyone out. Everyone on the road." The crowd were at a fever pitch of emotional unrest. Guns were pointing everywhere. It just needed one hot-head to take this to a place of no return.

"Everyone put your guns down. Deep?" Sabienn addressed his friend. "Put

the gun down. Everyone, let's bring it down. The only one that can keep his gun up is this man here." Sabienn indicated the old man with the scraggly beard in front of him and pointed to him. "This man, *right here*. I want you to keep your gun pointed at me. Right between my eyes."

The comment stunned everyone, least of all Sabienn's friends. And they were used to his loose behaviour. With a brief aside, Sabienn spoke to Bray, "How far?"

"Ten minutes' walk. If we're alive," said Bray.

"Thanks." Sabienn noticed Deep still fondling his weapon by his side ready for effective use. "Deep, put it on the ground." Reluctantly his friend complied.

He turned back to look into the distressed red eyes of the old man before him. His entourage on either side had brought down their weapons and awaited for what was to unfold.

"Sir," said Sabienn, calmly and politely. "How can I help you?"

The old man still had Sabienn sized up in his sights and everyone could see his finger jittering on the trigger. They could see his breathing was quick and shallow like a man whose heart was racing laps. Sweat was pouring from his brow now down the side of his face.

After a tense time, his shaky voice broke. "We don't want trouble," said the old man. He indicated toward the bobcat on the back of the truck. "But we need *that*."

Sabienn looked behind him to the piece of equipment that they'd just stolen. The item that was neither theirs in the first place to take nor give away. He turned back to the old man with the gun. "Sorry," Sabienn said calmly. "You can't have it."

The old man's breathing became quicker as he pointed his rifle at Sabienn's head. "We don't want trouble," the old man repeated.

"We don't want trouble either, sir," said Sabienn, moving cautiously closer to the man. He didn't want to give anyone the impression he was going to lunge for the weapon.

"We need that thing," said the old man once again indicating the bobcat. His fingers were shaking on the trigger. "And I *will* put a bullet in your head."

Sabienn had to think quickly of his fake scenario. "Sir, we have orders. We're to go to The Blue Air. They have work to be done. Then there's another two."

There was a long pause. The man kept aim and there appeared to be more purpose in his trigger finger. "I will say this one more time," the old man said, holding aim on his target keeping it dead centre between the eyes.

"Sir, you of all people must know the value of an order," said Sabienn quietly. "I mean no disrespect."



The comment seemed to hit home with the old man. *He's military, thought Sabienn. I knew it. He may have fought with Oololo. A brave committed fighter. His lot was one of disgrace and humiliation now. Through no fault of his own.*

The old man held aim for what seemed like an eternity. His eyes became redder and tears formed on his face. His hold on his weapon became less secure and dropped a little.

At that moment, a young woman in a muddy cloak walked in from the side and looked into the man's eyes. She took the rifle from his hand and hugged him close to her. She then addressed the intruders. "Go!" she said without a pinch of civility. "Get out!"

Now that the drama had waned, Sabienn had a chance to look around at what looked like recent events. To the left of them was a patch of land covered in a layer of freshly lain brown mud, stinking and oozing under people's footsteps that had tracked across it.

"What's happened here?" said Sabienn.

"A mud-slide. Last night with the rain," replied the woman, who had ceased having an interest in Sabienn.

"Anyone hurt?" Sabienn enquired.

"No people were hurt," she replied blankly. "My father kept fifty chickens. They're all under there." She walked away but then turned on Sabienn with a little heat. "Oh yes, this is the part where you laugh. We're just here for you to mock."

Sabienn's eyes wandered around the area and he saw the little makeshift stall with the sign "Fresh eggs. 1 kee a box". It was furnished with an honesty box for unwatched people to attend to as they pleased.

*Barely enough to subsist on, thought Sabienn. But I can see now. It kept the old man active and happy. It's not the money. There's a real emotion here. The chickens were family. They were female companionship. Even if from another species. Females that he valued. That he'd talk to and protect. I feel for this man. I know now where all the pieces fit. But I still understand the importance of a bargaining chip.*

"I understand," Sabienn said with genuine concern. "Can anyone use this?" he said, indicating the bobcat.

"I can," said the woman.

Sabienn looked at the forthright daughter. *Why does that not surprise me?* "OK," Sabienn said waving his hand over the sickening mud. "This is more important. Take it."

The mood of the crowd lightened as if a light bulb had been turned on. The old man came up to Sabienn and shook his hand. Tears were streaming from his

red eyes. "Thank you." The old man hugged Sabienn warmly.

"May I ask a favour?" said Sabienn. By painting himself as the man who had something to lose if he committed this charity, Sabienn was expecting to reap some dividends.

"Please," said the old man with all ears. "Anything."

Sabienn pointed to the road, "Is this the only track that goes up to The Blue Air?"

"No.. Oh wait," said the old man. "Yes, it is. There's a side road but it's further up."

"My boss has a problem with STL," said Sabienn. "Any black vans up there?"

"No," said the old man. "And we'd know. Everyone talks to everyone here. There's some old cars. Some people with kids. Just holiday people."

"We'll walk up there," said Sabienn. "But if there's any black vans, can you let us know? Fire a shot maybe?"

"I can do that," said the woman. Somehow Sabienn knew she probably could.

"Thank you," he said in acknowledgement.

With that the four friends arranged themselves for hiking and took to the upward winding track. With The Blue Air close they took to the trees again on the side of the road to approach it with caution. The premises was now before them through the leaves and they stopped to survey their options.

"You're kidding," said Bray to a dumbfounded response. "Look at that car." There was an old battered vehicle in the car-spaces at the front he was pointing to that looked familiar. Bray saw he had to elaborate, "Old man Jasspick's car."

"No way," said Stork. "With his box of personal porn? I'm not going near that."

Sabienn looked on at The Blue Air. It was a three-storey walk-up hotel with wide balconies facing the sea and the city. Contrary to its name, the exterior walls had a dull yellow ochre finish. There were also two small push-bikes left by the front door to indicate the presence of a family.

"What have we got on this place?" said Sabienn. "Apart from the manager has four tickets to Turmeric Stadium for us."

Bray piped up, "What I've been told. This is known for walking tracks and scenic lookouts. There are caves nearby. Inhabited by people for hundreds of thousands of years. The caves have native etchings on the walls. One of my teachers visited the rock art. He was appalled at the graffiti and vandalism. Unchecked and unpunished. As an artist, a man's expression trashed is a tragedy."

"Interesting point. But it's only native art," said Sabienn. "One could say

vandalism is a way cultures of a planet assume dominance over each other. But I don't want to step on you. Keep your eyes out, Bray. Deep, keep us covered. Let's go."

The four men walked carefully from the cover of the vegetation to the front entrance of The Blue Air and entered the lobby. Standing behind the reception counter was a lady. She was dressed in a smart uniform and when her eyes lifted from her paperwork to look at the four men, she was startled. "Oh, one minute, please," she said nervously. With that she disappeared to the back office.

Sabienn looked at his friends then around the reception area. There was the obligatory portrait of The Great Leader on the wall and family photos, flowers and magazines to give a warm feel.

"I don't like this," said Deep. "She's taking too long."

"Give it a minute," whispered Sabienn. "Then we bail."

At that moment she appeared from the office doorway, carrying a tray full of steaming cups of beverage and plates of pastry snacks. She walked right past the boys and back out the entrance and down the front steps. "This way," she said, urging them to follow her.

Within the front courtyard of the hotel there was a grassed area with a fenced off kids' playground. Near this was a wooden table with long bench seats protected from the elements by a sturdy shelter of timber and metal sheeting. The lady proceeded to walk to this table and lay down the tray of goodies and the friends assembled around it. She then walked back to the shelter of her hotel. Sabienn noted her manner was jumpy and nervous and her eyes were darting everywhere as she made her way back to her counter.

Then like a human tornado, a woman appeared at the door of The Blue Air. "Come out, come out wherever you are!" she shouted into the courtyard at them. "Come out if you're decent. Better still. Come out if you're not."

"What the ..?" Sabienn was stunned.

With an ebullient personality about to take no prisoners, the woman made her cheerful and animated sweep into the courtyard carrying a photo album. It was Peep Jasspick.

"Thank you, Marla," Peep called out to the other woman who had disappeared. "What a magnificent spread. Excuse me while I demolish one of these pastries now." She made for the platter and devoured a treat and licked sticky fingers. "Ooh, that's good. But must think of the figure. Oh, what the hell. I'm a free woman. I'll take two."

"We saw the car," said Bray, indicating her father's vehicle.

"Don't worry 'bout that stupid old man," said Peep, like an old friend. "I've locked the drunk in his room. He's been out terrorizing Marla and the guests all

morning. Poor girl's been as jumpy as a frog." The boys moved in closer to the table. "Come help yourself," she said taking another pastry. "Wow, this is good." She got up and stood on the wooden bench seat. "This is for me," she said holding up her treat. "Ten years married to an idiot. Now I'm free. My first day out of prison." She took a generous bite and wiped some cream from her lips. "Mmm that tastes good." She noted Deep's presence. "But I'd bet you'd taste even better. All you boys, your rooms are ready. But you," once again to Deep with a wink, "I know where you're sleeping tonight."

Sabienn looked to the big man. He was knocked off his perch and giggling like a little girl.

"So formalities out of the way," Peep continued, slipping her hand into a pocket, "I have four tickets, almost front row centre for The Great Leader. You boys thank Marla later. She had to scrounge for them." She tossed them on the table for Bray to gather. He perused them with his eagle eye and all the security markings appeared legit. He nodded approval to Sabienn who then turned to her.

"Thank you," Sabienn said.

"Jasspick's gone?" said Bray.

"Gone. Goodbye. Forgotten. I'm free. Free at last. Hot and off the leash. Look out, boys. Man, that's good." She took another deep and engorging bite of her pastry.

Through her mouthful she formed words at Sabienn, "Hey, you," she said licking fingers. "You. You know about interior design?"

*That would have to be the most unusual segue I've ever heard,* Sabienn thought.

"You know about painting? Exterior walls?" Peep said matter-of-factly.

"You're in luck," said Sabienn pointing to Bray. "He knows painting. What he doesn't know's not worth knowing."

"Here. Take a seat. Well you know I have to shift," she said to Sabienn. "Marla's got me a place. And I need to spruce it up and buy some paint. What d'you think about these?" She placed the photo album before Sabienn and sat down across from him so she could see him better.

Sabienn had a gut feel. *She's persisting with me even after being told Bray's more qualified. Something's out of kilter.* He looked to the others. Stork was settling in to a cup of coffee. Deep was looking at the lady enjoying the blood moving to the area between his legs and Bray was relaxed enough to be looking over his shoulder.

Sabienn opened the album. He was looking now at shots of houses. There were photos of exterior walls and doors. But they were peculiar. If these were real estate shots, they were the weirdest shots he'd ever seen.

Rather than well-staged portraits of a property to sell its good features, they looked like photos taken under subterfuge. They almost looked like spy shots taken through bushes. He was startled by what he was seeing but kept looking through them.

“Where are you shifting?” said Bray, who seemed a lot more friendly and relaxed than Sabienn was now.

“Oh, you know,” Peep said relaxed and personal. “As far away from the drama as possible. You don’t know what it was like living with that creep.”

Sabienn kept flipping through photos. There was a red door with “343” in blue numbers. There was a white wall covered in lilac and red wildflowers.

“Oh, we’d have an idea,” said Bray sweetly. “We had a night with him at Lake Loom.”

A photo appeared in front of Sabienn of a yellow door, solid and wooden. A pathway of railed dogberry. A hammock festooned with stoneberries.

“You know he nearly killed us,” said Bray.

“You’re kidding,” she said with genuine interest.

“Shot at us on the island,” Bray said.

With ease, Sabienn flipped the book’s pages. He was now enthralled in what he was looking at. “Why am I looking at this?” he said.

“Just keep looking,” said Peep pleasantly. “Let me know if there is a style I might like.”

Before Sabienn was a photo of a green door with tiny windows of stained glass panels. There was a black door with white metal door knockers. There was a back patio area still untidy with used glasses and wine bottles strewn on the table.

“Tell her about the island,” Bray invited of Sabienn, trying to bring his friend in to the conversation.

Still flipping through the book, Sabienn recalled the events at Lake Loom warmly. “It wasn’t the bullet that was going to kill us. It was ..”

At that moment, the book’s page opened before him and his eyes widened like dinner plates. He must have let out a gasp of shock at what he was looking at but he couldn’t stop staring. It was a photo of a large double-doored access painted blue with small black metal digits “276”. The next photo was that of the pathway leading up to the door with its metal archway full of ripe grapes. They were exactly the same as he had seen them in his vision of Ramsess Finn’s house where his son had declared something big was going to happen to The Great Leader.

Sabienn suddenly realized he had made a reaction to the photo. Looking up he saw Peep’s eyes and noted the dark recognition within that he had just been

clocked. Continuing on with his last sentence, he finished ominously, "It was the snakes." He said it looking squarely into Peep's eyes and he noted her hands were moving under the table.

Then pop! There was a gunshot in the distance. They'd been had. With earnest intent, he shouted, "Deep. Rifle. It's a trap."

Without a second thought, Deep sobered up and pointed his weapon at the woman. "Hands on the table," Sabienn said to her. Stork came around and emptied from her pocket the pistol held within.

"Are you going to kill me?" Peep said to Deep. "You were my favourite."

"I have to shoot her," Deep said to Sabienn, stating the correct action to take place.

"I'm like you," Peep said to Sabienn. "I'm *just* like you. I had a Supreme Order. I've killed my father. I've killed my husband. Now I have the information from the forest. All of it was my Order." She pulled in the book close to her. Sabienn imagined that it was to allow any blood that might fall from her to stain the photos before them. As an indelible mark of recognition.

"We have about thirty seconds," said Bray. "Let's move."

Sabienn stared at her a second longer. *In an odd way I admire her. But she's going to strip me of the only bargaining chip I have to keep me alive. She has to die.* She stared back expecting the bullet. "Let's go," Sabienn said, jumping to his feet.

"No," said Deep.

"Well you stay. We go," said Sabienn, in no mood to argue. Reluctantly Deep slung his rifle and followed the others. They ran behind Sabienn past the row of units in the building. As he ran he saw the open door of a laundry with a back door which would afford a short-cut. Sabienn shouted out, "No, this way. This way." He headed off in the direction of the laundry.

As Sabienn ran through the laundry with the others behind, he caught a glimpse of the black van arriving at the front. Peep Jasspick was there to meet them. Making it to the back door, Sabienn worked the handle. It was locked. Locked and barrel-bolted. They ran back but balked at the door they came in as the Secret Police were in the yard in animated discussion with Peep.

"Try and outrun them, we'll be dead," said Stork.

"We're stuck," said Bray, closing the laundry door.

"I can't bring a fire-fight to a laundry," said Deep. "Let's sit tight."

"I did this," said Sabienn. "I made the wrong decisions." He went to the small window of the laundry and opened it so he could hear the voices from outside. He couldn't lock the door that they had come through. There was no key. The boys now crouched and huddled behind the unlocked door in the laundry trying

to be as quiet as possible

Outside Sabienn heard voices, close and clear now. A male Secret Police voice spoke, "So they went where?" By the way he spoke he was the leader.

"I'm not sure," said Peep. "They just ran. They'd be in the forest."

The leader then was heard to say, "Briskk, go take a look." Running feet went past the laundry door. "Not too much effort," called the leader. "We're almost wrapped up here." He then said, "Are you sure about this? It was the photo of Finn's place?"

"Absolutely," said Peep.

"This is serious now." The leader was definite. "He's big in the world."

"The one you call Oracle, he turned white when he saw it," said Peep, desperate to appear like a credible witness.

"Are you sure it was Oracle?" said the leader.

"I've met him before. At the Trek Shack," pleaded Peep.

Briskk returned from the hunt in the forest. His footsteps tramped past the laundry. "Gone," he said.

"No rush," said the leader. "We'll catch them. We have what we came for." He paused. "Ma'am," said the leader. "Thank you. You've completed your Supreme Order."

Sabienn heard Peep sigh heavily. "And my sister's children?" she said quietly.

"Are safe," the leader said. "But *I* have a Supreme Order. You know the Oracle? You know he has wings?"

"Yes," she said. There was a scared tinge in her voice again.

"You know he's a reader?" added the leader.

"Of course," she said. She was noticeably shaking in her tone.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry. You know too much," said the leader blankly. "You don't have clearance."

"Clearance?" Peep said nervously. "But .. But I .. Well how do I get clearance? .. No! .. No! .. NO!"

As Sabienn listened on, it became blatantly obvious that she wasn't getting clearance. And she wasn't going quietly. He could hear struggling and a stamping of feet. "No!" she cried again. Her cries became muffled as if something had been stuffed into her mouth. The stifled shouting moved around the back of the building. Pop! It was gunfire. Then there was silence.

As the noise had moved around the building, Sabienn chanced a stretch of his legs and a look out of the laundry window. All he could keep concentration on were the two kid's bikes near the front steps. Then coming into view for Sabienn was a zipped body bag being carried away.

At that moment, Sabienn had a view on a hotel staff member dressed in a white dress. She appeared at the front steps carrying a collapsible table. Through the window, Sabienn viewed the visibly distressed woman walk out with her table towards them in the laundry.

Without a word spoken, she key-locked the laundry door and set up the makeshift table in front of the laundry complete with a crisp white cloth. Sabienn looked at her. If she did know the boys were inside, she didn't let on. She kept her eye contact on her task at hand. Upon her retreat back to the hotel, the woman in the white dress collected their tray of coffee and uneaten pastries from the centre table. Sabienn now saw Marla reappear, looking very nervous but official carrying another tray of coffee and biscuits.

"Please, sir," she said, approaching the leader who was returning back from his van. "Some morning refreshment. On the house."

"Well that's very kind," the leader said.

She walked her tray of food now to the table set up in front of the laundry. Seeing her come towards them, the boys took up their crouching huddle against the door. They could hear the three officers speaking now as clear as a bell so for Sabienn and his friends, silence was imperative.

"Do you always get these butterflies around here?" said the leader.

"They're seasonal, sir," said Marla putting on a professional front.

"They're beautiful," the leader said. "I come from Nawt. You don't see anything like this on the plains."

"If you walk some of our tracks. They're all in the leaves," said Marla.

"Amazing," he replied. "You're very kind."

"Please," said Marla. "Let me know if you need anything further." Sabienn could hear Marla's footsteps retreat back to her hotel reception.

One of the officers commented, "My feet are killing me. These new shoes. I've got blisters like you wouldn't believe."

"I always carry extra bandaids," said the leader. "Put these on. Other than that, you just have to wear them in."

There was a whiff through the laundry door of someone removing their shoe. Stork who was supersensitive to odour now screwed up his face in disgust. "Pwarr." He inadvertently blurted out. The others looked at him as he put a hand to his mouth.

"What was that?" said one of the officers. There was a pause and tense looks among the men in the laundry. The handle on the door rattled from someone working it on the outside, only to find it locked. Birds flew over calling "Caw Caw". Then there was silence for an eternity of seconds. After a while, the sound of the slurping of beverages could be heard.



“Bring it down, boys,” said the leader to his charges tucking into their coffee and biscuits. “I’ve got to ring this through.”

Sabienn listened in as the leader was speaking into a device. There was a muffled introduction with time and date of lodgement. Then the voice was clear. “Report. Supreme Order of Peep Jasspick. Oracle was contacted. Confirm Oracle is alive. Target confirmed. Ramsess Finn. Repeat Ramsess Finn. Status of Order, Complete. Release bond.” Sabienn was stunned listening them. “Report. Supreme Order of Agent Torr Feyginn,” continued the leader. “Operative Peep Jasspick despatched. Status of Order, Complete. Release bond.”

He had no allegiance to her, but Sabienn’s thoughts went to Peep. *Poor Peep. A cold execution reduced to a few lines of gibberish. And these Secret Police, they’re keen to execute. It shows they’re reliable. Poor Peep.*

The leader’s report continued, “Colonel Torr Feyginn, awaiting further Orders. Standing By. Please acknowledge.”

After a brief pause his device splurged, “Acknowledged. Stand By.” After the transmission, Sabienn listened to the men outside and sensed the mood relax a little.

“Colonel,” said one of the officers, “I’m not speaking out of turn here. Are you going for the vacancy?”

“I’ve got a wife and kid,” said Feyginn. “Lifespan for a head of Shadows is about six months.”

“But you got the respect of the rank and file,” said the other officer. “You’re a good man.”

“Thanks,” said Feyginn. “But I want to see retirement.”

“General Kreem,” said the first officer, “Was he pushed? Did he retire or resign?”

“Can’t say more, boys,” said the Colonel. “But we’re in for a shake-up. And to be fair to the General, it’s been tough. There’s an extreme lack of readers. Good ones, at least.”

“What about this Oracle?” said the second officer. “If he’s so good, why don’t they get him on the books?”

“You’d think so,” said the Colonel. “But don’t even go there. That guy’s marked for death. For obvious reasons.” The other two men seemed to murmur in acknowledgement.

Sabienn sat there with his mouth wide open staring at his friends who were as equally shocked as him. *For obvious reasons*, he thought. *Marked for death, for obvious reasons. What the hell did that mean?* With his head bowed, he sighed deeply. *What was there left to hope for? Maybe I don’t have clearance. If not the Supreme Order, what was left?*

The friends sat there for what must have been a half an hour. The four of them huddled in silence. But less than three metres away, the mood was much more convivial. The hard men were laughing and joking as they imbibed their beverages and treats. The Colonel's device then stuttered to life. "OK. Bring it down boys," he said calling for calm as the device was answered.

"Report," the voice came through the device for all to hear. "Operation. Ramsess Finn. Items retrieved of extreme interest. Repeat, extreme interest. Son of Finn, Jeulree Finn. Status missing. Group Blue to attend. Group Crimson to stand down. Commendation recommended for Group Crimson. Acknowledge."

Sabienn couldn't see the men but he could feel them bursting out of their skin with joy. "Acknowledged," said Feyginn.

"Report Complete." The voice of the device died away and the men erupted. "Whoah!" cried one of the officers. "Ha! Ha!" They slapped each other's backs.

"OK. We're out of here," said the Colonel. "And boys. Boys. Good work today." The three men made a quick retreat to their van and within seconds were gone.

Once the coast was clear, Sabienn stood to look out the laundry window. He was just about to break down the door when Marla steamed toward them from the front steps. The way was cleared and the door unlocked.

She was in no mood to be conciliatory. "I want you people off my property. I want you off *now!*" She threw the keys that belonged to Peep's car to Sabienn. "You've brought nothing but bloodshed and misery to our fine home," she said. "And just a word of advice. Use those tickets at your peril. They'll be waiting for you. Now *get out!*" With that she stormed off back to the office.

"Nice chatting," said Stork in her direction now she was out of earshot. Sabienn looked in the direction of her leaving and felt shell-shocked. He and his friends walked out of the laundry into the morning light and stretched without joy.

"We're back to where we started," said Sabienn. "And I've lost some serious currency here. I let the vision get stolen. That's our only chance of finding Jarnnee Krenn or Jeulree Finn? We've taken a nosedive. Because our tickets are worthless."

"So what do we do?" said Deep.

"I'm lost. I've got nothing," said Sabienn. "The ideas cupboard's bare." He bowed his head and looked genuinely spent. There was a pause as they all looked at him.

"It's simple," said Bray, like the smart kid in the class. "We've got four A-list tickets to the event of the year in Turmeric. We just find someone who has four shitty back row passes and make a swap."

Sabienn's eyes sparked up. *That plan is so ridiculously logical. Why didn't I think of it?*

Stork could see Sabienn was having a tough time of things and came up to nudge him gently with his elbow. "He's good," he nudged, indicating Bray. "He's *good*."

"I'm the best," said Bray blankly.

"That's our modest little Steel," said Stork still nudging Sabienn. "Are we good?"

Sabienn could feel all eyes looking at him. "Yeah," he said quietly. "We're good." He began to think aloud. "We need to find a place of gathering. Like a sport's field, a temple, a school.."

"A university," said Bray.

"A university!" Sabienn shouted like his light bulb went on. "They'd have a Grey Shirt brigade. What're we waiting for?"

He ran for the car and his friends followed close behind.

## 38. The Grey Shirts

“Smell the bleach,” said Stork as he sat in the back of the vehicle. “Say what you like about Peep. She knows how to clean a car. Especially now I have to sit here. Where the well-used box of goodies was.”

“She’s given us a new battery too,” said Bray looking at the gauge from the front passenger seat. “A fully charged clip-in. It should last a few hundred kilometres.”

He was in an eager rush to get on the road but Sabienn took time to pull alongside the old man who’d lost his chickens. “Thank you, sir,” said Sabienn acknowledging their gun-shot warning. “We have to do a few things but we’ll be back. Use it as you will.” He indicated the bobcat which the old man’s daughter was flinging around on the mud field like a stunt driver. “Take your time.”

“Very obliged, young man,” the old man replied. “Very obliged. I’ve had the call right up and down the road. Your path’s clear.” With that Sabienn left him and hit the road.

“The path’s clear?” said Stork. “Boy when Group Crimson stands down, they *really* stand down.”

“They got the vision,” said Bray. “That’s all their mission was. Our fate obviously lies in the hands of some other ominous colour.”

“Suggestions?” said Sabienn.

“Only the obvious,” said Bray.

Sabienn grinned in acknowledgement. “How do we get there?”

“You drive, I’ll lead,” Bray replied.

“I’m lost,” said Deep. “What’s obvious?”

“Sorry Deep,” said Bray. “Have you been to Nutmeg?”

“Only once. For a chess tournament,” replied Deep. “Strange place.”

“It’s my kind of place,” said Stork. “Where else can you get three years of silliness, sex and substances before getting kicked out? Then get rusted on to the dad’s business. Having it on your CV does you no harm. Particularly in sales. It lets everyone know you can drink your clients under the table.”

“OK,” said Sabienn. “Nutmeg Institute. What’ve we got?”

Bray began, “It’s a higher learning institute nestled in the south lands of Turmeric on reclaimed sodden wet-lands. Also known as the Toxxo Renndo

Institute of Brilliance in Education.”

“Trust the idiot managers,” added Stork. “They orgasm over a good acronym. But TRIBE sure backfired on them. My assessment? A host organism for parasitic in-bred yokels. Stabbing black paint on canvasses in their dark and depressed rage. Then there’s the guy that was shooting at people from the courtyard clock tower. Enticed down by shaking a can of beer at him.”

Bray continued, “The Institute has respectable above average figures in academic achievements. What else do you want to know?”

“Who’s there?” asked Sabienn.

“Distinct groups,” said Bray.

Stork weighed in, “There’s the party animals. Then there’s dark and brooding types. Lost, disturbed and complex. The famous trio. Wandering the campus harmless and aimless. Sounds like me. But they take their art seriously.”

Bray turned to Stork, “All the true art in the country comes from Coriander.”

“Steel, you’re going to need a space suit,” said Stork. “All their practices are so foreign and alien. You might get contaminated.” He turned to Sabienn. “Are you into art?”

“Me?” said Sabienn. “Not my style. I like a nice portrait. Who doesn’t? Like of TGL. But art? It’s a bit of a snob lever. Empowers disempowered people to look down their noses at others.” He turned to Bray. “Present company excluded.”

“Of course,” said Bray blankly. “Then there’s the Grey Shirts.”

“Those Grey Shirts are bizarre,” said Deep.

“I saw them once,” said Bray acknowledging Deep. “While other students on campus are random, they’re into military drill. They paraded in a courtyard in crisp neat grey. Brandishing Blue Moon bibles across their heart, pledging allegiance to The Great Leader. But I had a feeling they were just as lost as anyone else.”

“You included?” enquired Stork. “I’ll always tell you where to go, Steel.”

“I’d be disappointed if you didn’t,” said Bray.

The trip to Nutmeg didn’t take as long as expected as they travelled on roads depleted with traffic preparing for the main event of the day. Sabienn drove the vehicle into the main courtyard of the Institute. It had been spruced up and tidied and walls had been dowsed with a lick of paint.

Sabienn saw these were pleasant surrounds. There were trees full of birds and flowers and the colours of the Institute, white and red, were festooned in banners. Across poles lining the main drive were signs declaring “Nutmeg welcomes The Great Leader”.

As they drove, over near the main hall with its big white wall on the green

was a crowd of people waving placards. By their grey turn-out they knew they were the people they had come to see. But there was an agitated mood to their gathering.

“Right on cue,” said Stork to his friends in the car. “Lost, disturbed and complex. Singing their number one hit. *I’m a Grey Shirt Jackboot but I’m Still a Woman.*”

“Let’s take a look,” said Sabienn.

Sabienn took care to park his vehicle in a concealed area that afforded reasonable escape and with his friends walked the rest of the way to the people. He could now hear them chanting “Shame, shame, shame.” The same words were plastered on the placards.

The friends reached the crowd of angry grey-shirted men and women and pushed their way carefully to the front. Their way was hampered because there were tents set up that people had been camping in for what seemed like a few days.

As they got closer, Bray pointed to a painted mural that was before them on the main hall wall. It was grotesque in its style and depicted some fierce battle scene.

“That is absolutely terrible.” Bray couldn’t hold back. “And if it’s what I think it is, these people are in trouble.”

Sabienn turned to a female member of the crowd. “Excuse me,” he said pointing to the mural. “What is that?”

“What do you think it is?” she came back wounded and defensive.

“Is that the Battle of Boss Ridge?” said Bray.

“If you knew, why ask?” came the surly response and she moved away.

Sabienn was acquainted with the painting of the Battle of Boss Ridge and turned to Bray. “This is not how I remember it,” said Sabienn. “Didn’t the painting have the moment The Great Leader pushed over the ridge? Leading his big and brave men and women to victory? This one has a tall and gaunt cartoon figure. Look. With toad-like eyes. Leading a squad of string beans onward and over.”

Bray was suddenly taken by something, “Oh, Oh my goodness. I.. I can’t believe this. Look.. Look at the pants. The *pants*. I can’t watch.” He averted his eyes to the poor taste.

With closer study of the pants of the central figure on the mural before them, Sabienn was shocked to see what seemed to be a significant bulge in the front of his pants. There definitely appeared to be a romanticised projection for the central character that he couldn’t remember in the original.

“I can’t keep my eyes off it now,” said Sabienn. “This is definitely a rewrite.

The Great Leader, hung like a horse, leads his faithful stickmen into the glorious unknown. I don't know much about art but that's not good, is it?"

"Did you hear what I said?" said Bray bringing Sabienn back to reality. "This is *serious*. You need a licence to paint the image of The Great Leader. And it has to be approved. Someone checks it. I know this. I had to do it."

"Is that bad?" enquired Sabienn.

"Only if you think execution's bad," replied Bray.

Knowing this, Sabienn had to push through to the people up the front arguing. As he got closer to the front he could see the vocal parties. On one side there was an older man and he was flanked by two security men. With him also were two women in painting gear. At their feet were cans of white paint, brushes and rollers and tarps to lay down to catch the stray drops. On the other side were two men in their neat grey uniforms.

One of the Grey Shirts saw Sabienn coming toward them and left the argument to confront him. "Are you our legal?"

Sabienn had a quick thought. *Legal? I could play this straight. But there may be an advantage in running with the ruse.* "Sorry we're late. I was setting a place at the table for The Great Leader. As I know you would be doing too for the festive gathering."

"It wasn't our idea to call you," said the first Grey Shirt. "Mr Botch said we should."

The boys looked at each other. Stork's eyes rolled to the sky. He still may have had a few scars from being climbed on by Mr Botch in the Turmeric Markets.

"If it was up to us," continued the first Grey Shirt. "We've got a wall, we've got our guns. It'd be bang, bang, bang. Sorted."

"Mr Botch is very wise," said Stork. "We treasure his input. He'd be horrified with bang, bang, bang."

"How can we help?" said Sabienn.

"This man is Rikk Steem," the first Grey Shirt indicated the other Grey Shirt in the altercation. "I am his brother Brinnt. Rikk is the finest artist in this college. We've camped here for three days. Preparing for the event. So Rikk made this." Brinnt waved to the Battle of Boss Ridge. "It's our Victory Mural. But these people are from admin." He indicated their opponents. "We received this."

Brinnt proffered a notice to Sabienn who read quickly. It required their group to remove themselves from the common area and white out their mural from the main hall wall which was Institute property. The notice was served three days ago to be complied in three working days.

The notice was passed across to Bray for his eagle eye to pass over it. "It

seems quite thorough,” said Bray. He passed it back but offered an opinion on the painting. “Are you aware you need a licence for this?”

Brinnt was dismissive. “That’s for someone else. To worry about, I mean. What do you think of it?”

“I think it’s vile,” said Bray quite definitely.

“So do I,” said Brinnt. “He should have gone bigger. He’s so good.”

To his credit, Sabienn saw Bray bite his tongue and keep his mouth shut. “May we hang on to this?” said Sabienn, walking away with the eviction notice to study it further. It seemed pretty black and white and water-tight.

“One question,” said Bray. “Why doesn’t admin just move in and not only evict the students but expel them? They’re violating property. They’re committing vandalism. But they just treat the Grey Shirts as if they are dealing with an angry child.”

“Politics, Bray. Take a look around,” said Sabienn. “Read their faces. The Grey Shirts are confident and assured. Look at the admin people. Standing with their backs to the wall. I know what’s going on here. Admin are shit-scared of the Grey Shirts.”

“Why?” said Bray.

“I keep asking myself that,” said Sabienn. “Why does The Great Leader allow it? You and I come from the Academies. We have the best military education for men our age. There’s hierarchy with The Great Leader at the top of the tree. If we stepped out of line, we’d get our arses kicked. Because we know our place. These dickheads.” Sabienn waved to the Grey Shirts. “They’ve got no lineage. They’re always beholden to the man or the woman with the biggest mouth in the group. But you know what The Great Leader said about youth.”

“The power of worship,” said Bray, “that I receive from rampant and unfettered youth is as wonderful as an untamed beast.”

“No no,” corrected Sabienn. “As *beautiful* as an untamed beast. It’s poetry. But it doesn’t make sense. Why does he turn a blind eye to their violence and intimidation? He just lets them have full rein. We’re sliding to war. The Great Leader needs our obedience. But the Grey Shirts can do what they want.”

“How do you want to play this?” asked Bray.

“Win-win, my friend,” smiled Sabienn. “We’re here to swap tickets.” He approached the admin people who viewed their arrival with suspicion.

“Don’t even think of talking,” said the old man. “That order in your hand is final. An order’s an order. It’s signed by the head. Of course *he’s* not going to be here. That’d be bad for his career. It’s left to us. Girls, I think it’s OK now. Just move in.”

The girls picked up their rollers and paint cans and the crowd became



agitated.

The security detail unclipped their holsters and placed their hands on their weapons. The crowd had hot-heads shouting and waving rifles and the situation appeared to be spiralling down into a place of no return.

“Wait, stop! Brinnt pull your people back,” said Sabienn. Brinnt’s group reluctantly pulled back and Sabienn waved Brinnt and Rikk to stand with them. “Why can’t you wait till tomorrow?” Sabienn continued. “The event will be over. The tents will be gone. You can paint away.”

The younger of the security men spoke. “In half an hour’s time, this campus goes into lockdown. We’re in the direct flight path of Blue Fire One. We’re expecting Secret Police here. If they see this, *they* don’t get the bullet.” The guard indicated the grey shirted crowd. “We get the bullet.”

*This security guy’s good, thought Sabienn. Even if he is shooting my arguments down in flames.* “What about my client’s artistic expression?” said Sabienn. “The painting represents victory, brotherhood and hope.”

“And a white wall represents purity, equality and protection,” said mister articulate security man.

With a brief glance to Bray, who was shaking his head, Sabienn knew he was way out of his depth on this topic. As a last resort he looked once again at the eviction notice. *Something. Please jump up from the print. Make the print change. Wait! There it is.* “This notice is for three working days,” he said. “But today’s a public holiday.”

“No it’s not,” said the old man.

“Yes it is,” said Sabienn.

“No it’s *not*.” The old guy was definite.

“Well that’s right,” said Bray. “Singo’s was closed.”

“And Jerbo’s,” said Stork.

“And Baino’s was closed,” offered Deep. “Baino’s never closed.” When the big man weighed into the argument, the admin people paid attention.

It certainly swayed the young security man to speak. “Come to think of it,” he said looking towards the old man. “My corner store was closed.” The old man was silent.

“Sir,” said Sabienn in a conciliatory tone. “As an act of good faith, my clients agree that their mural be covered in banners. This is to conceal it from the view of the authorities. But to move in and evict my clients on a public holiday would be a gross breach of their natural justice.”

“Whatever,” said the old man. “Girls, get the banners.”

The elder of the two security men chipped in, “Cheer up, Cowell,” he said to the old man. “You were skewered by bad paperwork. At least you can say it’s

someone else's fault. It's not *your* signature at the bottom of the notice."

With the admin people disbanding to attend to their instructions, the crowd sensed they had a win and started yelling some calls of triumph. Sabienn made his way back to a relieved Rikk and Brinnt Steem to offer his report. "Well they're moving away. There was some talk of covering them with banners."

"No way," said Rikk. "That's my work."

"That's what I said," said Sabienn, feigning outrage. "But then.. Look I'm just going to have to be honest. Promise you don't tell anyone. My firm does work for the big man. And you know how he visits after an event. Like a soup kitchen or library. He's heard of your devotion, Rikk. He *may* be coming here."

Rikk's eyes were like dinner plates, "The Great Leader will.."

"Sh Sh! Keep it down," Sabienn continued. "He needs to see this work of your love for him." He looked towards the painting with his eyes squarely on the bulge. "But maybe because *I* love him more than *you* do, it must be *unveiled* for him. I can see The Great Leader's eyes light up. He's like a little boy unwrapping paper to find his present. I can see this. The joy in his eyes when he beholds this as a whole. But no, no. You can't see this. I'll tell them to lose the banners. Only *I* love the man more than *you*. I'll go tell them now."

He began to move away but was collared by a wild and angry Rikk. "You will *not*," Rikk said. "You tell them the banners stay. But only because we say. And the banners come down when we want them to. Tell them this. You love the man more than *me*? Say that again and you die, pen-pusher!"

Sabienn feigned deferential fawning. "As you wish, sir. I am but your servant." He tried his luck and did his best to sound wounded. "Sir, I feel sad that I've offended you. Our firm in its work for the great man has tickets to the event. Mr Steel, if you'd please?"

Bray proffered the tickets before them and their eyes lit up. "They're so close to the front," said Sabienn, "as to have The Great Leader spit in your eye. What a joyous receipt of spittle that'd be. All we ask is a trade. Your tickets for ours."

"Our tickets are nowhere near these," said Rikk, now hell-bent on getting as close as he can to his hero. Sabienn offered a curt bow.

"Four tickets," said Brinnt to his brother. "We can take the girls."

Stork leaned forward, "I just hope you're trying to get into their pants. I'd hate to see these wasted."

"Are these to your liking, sir?" Sabienn kept up his act.

"Yes, of course," said Brinnt. "The only problem is that with our tickets you have to take the coach."

The words were music to Sabienn's ears. *Perfect. That solves the problem of access. Just like the coach into Salt Stadium. We'll have security clearance and*

*get spirited into the bowels. How good's that?* “The trade is here, sir,” Sabienn said. “We just need your tickets.”

Brinnt and Rikk disappeared and returned presently with four tickets and the exchange was made.

“Bus leaves in an hour,” said Brinnt. “It’s early. But there’s a full day.”

“It’s perfect,” Sabienn needed time to find the people he was looking for. An early arrival helped them.

The four men busied themselves in that time. They found a shower block near the campus lake and cleaned themselves up. Someone had left shampoo and male smelly stuff which they applied liberally because their clothes were getting a little bit on the nose.

At the allotted time and place, they queued with the rest of the Grey Shirts to enter the bus. There were stares of disapproval from the uniformed members.

“You’re not us,” said a young woman. “You people stink. Why’re you here?”

“Don’t look at me,” said Sabienn. “Steem boys wanted our tickets. Those tickets were A-list front row. Said they had hot girlfriends.”

“Typical,” said the woman. “Steem boys need our support when it suits them. And desert us when it suits them.” Sabienn didn’t care as long as it took the attention away from them.

Finally the bus was filled and settled and its battery came to speed. As they moved out of the courtyard, Sabienn caught a glimpse from his window of a black van up the road. The Secret Police had in fact arrived as they were told and an operative was walking along checking registration of vehicles parked on the roadway there.

Sabienn leaned to Bray and whispered, “If they get to the Jasspicks’ car that may ring alarm bells.”

“Nothing we can do now,” replied Bray. “They might keep to the road not the laneways. All our stuff’s in the car. Poor old Deep’s lost a rifle.”

“Easy come,” said Deep. “We may still come back.”

Sabienn tried to push it out of his mind. They were on their way now. They’d be in Turmeric Stadium within half an hour. Ten minutes in to the trip an announcement was made, “Change of plans. We’re stopping up ahead to regroup with other units.”

The boys weren’t sure what that meant as they looked at each other but they were in no position to bargain. The bus stopped at a truck stop adjacent to the forest and already some people were leaving to make a bee-line for the toilet. They all made the decision for a brief stint of fresh air and queued with the rest to get out.

As soon as they alighted from the vehicle, Sabienn was blindsided by a

familiar voice. "Well look what the cat dragged." He turned and was taken aback to see the surly face of Botch. His entourage levelled their rifles in Sabienn's direction and all they could do was raise their hands.

"Rip out the ropes, boys," said Botch. One of the men just happened to be holding a noose, as if awaiting Botch's further command. "We've got just enough time to party."

The four men were led at rifle point into the forest. Botch had four henchmen flanking him each with a rifle pointing at one of the boys.

Sabienn sized them up. *These guys are crazy enough to use those weapons. They look like they have to prove themselves. Be more unaffected than the next man. They want to look hard and be seen as reliable. What do I do? Rushing them would be suicidal. They're hanging us. They won't care about shooting us. This could be it. Of all the people to die to, it's this idiot. Options. Quick. Think.* He looked to his friends and they looked back with stares just as blank.

They came to a clearing with a tree with a long and sturdy bough. One of the men prepared to throw the four ropes over. *Judging by those cut marks in the top of the branch and the presence of wooden boxes at the side, possibly for standing on,* thought Sabienn. *This place looks like they've used it before.*

"You have any last words?" said Botch.

"Only you fight like a sponge. A very ugly sponge," said Stork. He summed their situation up with no hope so he decided he was going to go down swinging. "And I've known sponges. They're tougher than you."

"You boys are a pack of idiots," said Sabienn, taking up on Stork's lead. "You couldn't see we were putting away a drug dealer yesterday. And we put him away. What were you doing?"

Botch turned to his rope man, "Nearly ready?"

"The Great Leader hates drug dealers but you love them," continued Sabienn. "How can you say you're with The Great Leader? You're a disgrace."

Botch turned to Sabienn and made a hand motion like a quacking duck, "Yap yap yap. Lose the cloaks. Lose the shirts. Just keep the pants. You first," he pointed to Deep. He then pointed to Stork, "I'm leaving you to last."

Sabienn couldn't see any way out of this situation. He in some way felt responsible for their plight. So he wasn't going to let his friend be humiliated on his own. He walked to stand with Deep and they took off their cloaks together. Their wings extended from their back unencumbered by restriction. Stork and Bray seeing this followed suit.

"Whoah!" cried Botch. "I thought you were hunchbacks. Boys, looks like we got us some freaks. Man, I want to see how these guys squeal and choke and swing at the end of a line. Ha Ha!"

“If we put them on the box won’t they just fly?” said the rope man.

“They won’t fly. They can’t fly,” said Botch turning on his henchman. “Y’know Wess, sometimes I just can’t get over just how much you are such a dick. Just string ‘em up.”

Wess finished securing his ropes as Sabienn and Deep removed their undershirts to reveal their bare chests. There was an audible gasp from the henchmen. Sabienn picked up on it and tried to work out what was going on. To the side, Bray and Stork were just about to remove their undershirt when Sabienn looked towards them and caught their eyes. They looked back and kept their shirts on.

“They’re black wolves,” said a wide-eyed Wess.

*Of course,* thought Sabienn with a charge of hope in his veins. *We still have some currency in this gamble.* “All four of us are,” Sabienn said with authority. It was lucky Stork and Bray kept their shirts on so as not to reveal their unmarked chests.

“Prove it,” said Botch looking toward the pair still with their shirts on.

“You show us *yours* first,” Sabienn said to Botch. There was a sore look in Botch’s eyes as if this was an issue.

Sabienn assessed the situation quickly. *Anyone can sit the exam for black wolf. It’s not unheard of for Grey Shirts to win the mark. These men look two years older than me. They look like they shared the same school.* “Look, I’m just going to direct all my comments to Wess,” said Sabienn. “It’s obvious he sat the exam and got higher marks.”

Sabienn saw the comment brought a look of daggers from Botch but the look from Wess was pleasant shock. *Look at Wess,* thought Sabienn. *He doesn’t know if he is higher or lower.*

Sabienn continued talking straight to Wess, “Not many people know this but this year they brought in a special Cupp Ratio. That’s for Haydds who kill black wolves. And it’s two to one. Just like the filthy Turrs. So you kill the four of us, and that’s the five of you, plus,” he looked to Wess, “three of your family.”

“He’s bluffing,” said Botch.

Sabienn stole a brief glance from Deep to show that old Botch was on the ball.

“Well how do you know?” Wess came back defiantly to Botch.

“What d’you mean how do *I* know, you idiot?” came back Botch. “It’s made up. He’s playing you.”

Sabienn kept directing his remarks to Wess, “You know this is an official mark of the realm. Each one of these is personally endorsed by the big man. You kill us, you kill The Great Leader.” *Small detail that I just scraped in. But you*

*don't have to know that. But impostor that I am, the mark's there.*

"Don't talk to him," said Botch to Sabienn. "Talk to me."

"Why should he?" chimed in Bray bravely. "Who made you leader? Did they vote for you?"

"Yeah, there's no shame in being second best, man," said Stork. "There's more to leadership than *knowing* a lot of things."

"Tie their hands and string 'em up," shouted Botch having his authority threatened. "That's an order."

"They're black wolves," said another gunman to Botch. It was like a plea as if he were saying, "I hope you understand."

Botch turned to the speaker, "Tobbo I'm ordering you to put ties on them. You too, Teel. Get on with it. We'll miss the bus." He was desperately spraying his henchmen, trying to claw the mantle of leadership back.

"No," said Wess definitely. "Black wolves are sacred. The CLA hang black wolves. We're not the CLA. We serve The Great Leader."

*Fifty-fifty*, thought Sabienn. "We thank you, sir," Sabienn said to Wess. "It may be of interest for you to know that I am in the receipt of a Supreme Order. Are you aware of what that means?"

"I am, indeed," said Wess who was visibly impressed. "It's a serious thing for someone who doesn't have a Supreme Order to claim they have one."

"He's telling the truth," said Deep. Something about Deep's look added authority.

*Now, how am I going to play this?* Sabienn thought. *So far I've been telling a complete pack of lies and have them in the palm of my hand. If I start talking about a Supreme Order on how we're trying to foil a plot to kill the big man with a tooth-pick, they might dismiss it as too far-fetched. Too much of the truth might get us killed.*

Stork jumped in with a story, "There's a man who is the son of a wealthy wine grower. He's said he wants to kill The Great Leader. We're on our way to Turmeric Stadium to stop him. We.. Oh, wait wait. That's right. You want to kill us. Well, get on with it." He indicated his friends. "Y'know, some of us here are for The Great Leader." And he looked towards Botch. "And some of us say they are."

"Who's the man?" said Botch, trying to claw back his authority.

Looking to his friend, Sabienn thought it was a master stroke on Stork's part.

"Jeulree Finn," said Sabienn. Maybe it was the way he said it, because it was the truth, or maybe because young Finn was a man who was roundly known and hated, but the Grey Shirts before them spat on the ground.

"Jeulree Finn," said Wess, who seemed bold enough to speak up now. "That

poncing little fop.” He held his noose. “I’d like to get this on him.”

“We could sure use your help,” said Sabienn to Wess.

At that moment, Botch grabbed a rifle from one of his henchmen and went to Wess and with the rifle butt smacked him with force across the cheek. It drew blood and pushed Wess back on to his back on the ground. *A senseless and churlish act by a man feeling his status as top dog threatened*, thought Sabienn. *I’m loving this.*

“Nobody does anything unless I say,” Botch said and turned to Sabienn. “Prove it. Pulling someone’s name out of the air that everyone hates is nothing.”

“You listen to the STL. You’d be on their bandwidth, wouldn’t you?” said Sabienn. “What’s the chatter on Group Blue?” Sabienn observed Botch’s considered look. *That’s right. You can’t admit being on STL bandwidth. That’s a violation.* “Look,” said Sabienn in a conciliatory tone. “We all go to the stadium. If we’re wrong, we’re not going anywhere. You take us out into the wood after the event. If we’re right, The Great Leader dies. And it *will* get back that you stood in the way. You know it will. You’ve got everything to lose if we don’t go and heaps to gain if we do. Just let us get there.”

Botch was deep in thought watching Sabienn’s eyes to see if this was just another line.

At that moment a panicked voice could be heard rushing toward them from the roadway. “Botch, come quick,” yelled the voice. They all looked toward a man who burst into the clearing.

“Kleet, what is it?” Botch offered concern for the intruder.

“Brother, they’ve got Tosh,” said Kleet. He was breathless and distressed. But he wasn’t distressed enough not to notice they had company. Talented company. “Black wolves,” he said. “Can you guys shoot?”

“This is your man,” said Sabienn pointing to his friend.

“Quick,” said Kleet. “Please help.”

Kleet rushed back along the track he had come from. All the Grey Shirts followed and the four friends gathered their clothes quickly and robed themselves as they walked in pursuit.

They moved further into the woods and stopped. Ahead of them in a clearing they could see a man in a ranger’s uniform sitting on a rock eating a sandwich. At his feet, was a cage that held a very angry and growling Deerland fighting dog. His black fur bristled as he tried to bite through the cage. Next to the man resting against the rock was the ranger’s rifle.

“Bastard,” whispered Kleet. “If we make a sudden move, he’ll shoot us. Or worse. Stick one into poor little Tosh.” Kleet came up to Deep. “He’s my best dog. You’ve got to save him.”

Deep assessed the distance. It was a good thirty metres and he turned to Wess holding his rifle. "May I?"

"Don't ask him," said Botch. "Use this. Boys keep your guns trained." Botch handed Deep his rifle, which was better than Wess's, as the other Grey Shirts pointed weapons at the big man. To put his mark on the occasion, Botch sidled up to Deep. "Kill the ranger. That's an order," he said, then moved away.

Deep stole a glance with Sabienn who looked back to him as if to say, "Take the shot. Do what you feel is right." The weapon was taken into his hands and Deep felt the weight and worked the breach. When he felt comfortable he took aim from a standing position.

Sabienn was watching the ranger in front of them eating his sandwich. *Poor guy. It's sad to think that the last thing that goes through your mind before death is that your bread's stale.* Deep took another glance toward Sabienn and winked. The big man had a plan.

Bang. The gun fire from the rifle in Deep's hands rang though the forest. The ranger was not only still alive but he was searching from side to side for his weapon.

"You missed," said Botch. It was at that moment the cage door opened and a very belligerent animal escaped and started chewing at the ankle of the ranger. He was still away from his weapon and tried to wrestle the animal off his leg.

"Tosh!" shouted Kleet towards his dog. The animal's mood changed on a pinpoint and he rushed away from the ranger toward the road. Kleet rushed toward the roadway through the forest and the others followed.

As they spilled into the area near the buses, Kleet saw his dog and called, "Tosh!" The dog responded and ran joyously to jump all over his master.

"Who's a boy?" Kleet was ruffling Tosh's thin black fur vigorously as the dog's tongue and dangling boyhood swung from side to side. "Who's a boy? Who's a boy?" Kleet turned to Deep, "Sir, thank you. You saved my boy."

"Better put him away," said Sabienn. "That ranger's still around."

Botch moved in and he wasn't impressed. "I said kill him."

"Use your head, man," said Sabienn. "If your bullet's in the ranger that gets traced back to you."

"But I gave an order," Botch was unmoved.

Sabienn looked into the eyes of this man. *Tread carefully. This guy's trouble. Botch assumes he has leadership rights over us.* "Yes, you did give an order," said Sabienn respectfully. "But think back to your test for the black wolf. What was the first thing they taught you?"

Looking darkly into Sabienn's eyes, Botch paused.

"Come on, Botch," said Kleet offering consolation. "It was one of the regrets



of your life not getting the mark. None of us did. It's no big deal."

"Shut up!" shouted Botch.

Sabienn turned to Deep and gave him a surreptitious wink before continuing, "Because *we* were taught the rule of corpses. You kill a man, you make a corpse. And a corpse stinks. It also makes mothers cry, it makes friends get even and it doesn't give off any useful information. You're a nice guy, Botch, but I have to side with my lecturers. To kill a man is just bad house-keeping. Our black wolf says that we act in a certain manner. Higher than any order. You understand where we're coming from, don't you Wess?"

Wess who was just standing there still feeling keen about the fresh wound inflicted by Botch, was startled to find himself thrust back into the spotlight. "Oh," he said, rubbing his cut and looking at the blood on his fingers. "It sounds familiar."

"Sounds familiar?" scoffed Botch. "You're such an idiot!"

They all looked on at Wess. With starch and fire in his veins, he fronted Botch right into his face. "Don't tell me what to think! If it's familiar, it's familiar," Wess said. "I got a higher mark than you and you know it. Now shut-up and get the guns in the car and get on the bus."

They held a tense stand-off for seconds just eyeballing each other. But it was Botch who moved away first, smirking to his entourage to let them know this wasn't over by a long shot. "OK, big man," Botch said. "But only 'cause this is what *I* wish. Everyone, move."

The Grey Shirts put their rifles with the dog to stand over them in Kleet's car parked near a picnic area. Associates of the Grey Shirts sat at wooden tables to look after it.

With all the action happening, Deep sidled up to whisper in Sabienn's ear. "The rule of corpses?" Deep said with a smirk. "I wish we *were* taught that."

"Sounded convincing," said Sabienn. "This crap just falls from my mouth."

His friend slyly turned to Sabienn and made quiet and unobtrusive open palm bowing gestures like a man worshipping, "To the Prince of Liars."

"Oh please. Please," Sabienn waved slyly as if to acknowledge the accolades and keep the joke going. "I just hope there are no more surprises."

With all items stowed and organized, the men piled on to the waiting bus before them. The battery came to power and they moved on to the road. Sabienn looked out the window at the looming structure ahead. Hopefully the next stop would be Turmeric Stadium.

### 39. Turmeric Stadium

In the distance the massive structure of Turmeric Stadium loomed. The fierce warships of the realm were already docked and being serviced by the usual web of gantries.

To Sabienn's surprise looking through the window of the bus, Blue Fire One and Blue Fire Two were already there. The airships of the two most powerful men in the country would normally arrive closer to the ceremony for security purposes. But seeing the reliable shapes of the two vehicles sent shivers of excitement through the devotees within the coach on their pilgrimage.

The closer they came to the arena in their travel, the buzz became more heightened. Sabienn knew something special was happening when he saw so many police officers directing traffic and on nearly every corner, the licensed program and merchandise sellers plying their wares. And he saw so many happy and animated pedestrians all walking in one single direction. Youngsters were skipping and jumping and older people were chatting and laughing like children.

The bus ploughed on getting closer and closer and they found themselves being assigned to a special lane for coaches and moving quicker than the current car-park of traffic outside. Men and women with orange flags waved them on. And they finally turned, as he had done before at Salt, and faced the gaping entry into the bowels of Turmeric Stadium.

They stopped at their allotted park and there was a real feeling of relief and a joyous cheer that they'd finally arrived. The friends looked at one another as they hooded up. "Boys," said Sabienn as he briefly gathered his friends in close. "Today we clear our name. We come back into the fold. Keep your eyes peeled."

As they alighted from the coach they all formed a single line and passed through a weapons detector on their way up the stairs and up into the Stadium. Just like in Salt, the noise of the crowd was like a palpable entity in itself. Like a throbbing bass growl expectant of food.

They pushed upward and finally broke into the open air. Before them on the fields and stands of the arena and still filling was the crowd. *The crowd, thought Sabienn. I never tire of this. Just looking at the people. The vast throng are like a single organism. Like a cohesive sea of individual droplets making their own eddies and waves.*

There were singers and dancers and an orchestra on stage and the entertainment was keeping the crowd in fine spirits. Beside him he noted that Wess had produced from his pocket a pair of binoculars.

After Wess had a good look around, Sabienn said indicating Bray, "Wess. This is the man with eyes." When they were passed across he forwarded them to Bray who took a good ten minutes surveying the crowd. The binoculars were passed back without enthusiasm.

"Anything?" said Sabienn.

"Only about a hundred high-end purple and white "Place" cloaks," said Bray. "Impossible to tell if there're blood stains. I could see a quarter of their faces. Nothing. And the others. Their bodies just don't match."

"It's still early. Guys, gather," Sabienn called his friends in. "We need to stick together. We've got no communication. If there's any sign of drama, we need to bail in a heartbeat. All of you know what Krenn looks like. But none of you know Finn."

Bray offered, "If you were going to kill The Great Leader with a toothpick, where would you do it?"

The question brought Sabienn's mind into focus. "Somewhere from the back steps to the front," said Sabienn. "When he's making his entrance. It'd be the only chance Krenn or Finn could have?"

"Well that narrows it," said Bray. Sabienn gave Bray a pat on the shoulder. The four men went to Botch and Wess and their attendant Grey Shirts and explained their theories on where an assailant may attack.

"I say we search the front," said Botch. "The crowd's bigger. The security more lax."

"And I say the back," said Wess. "There'd be an element of surprise."

Sabienn watched the two men indulging in a verbal bumping of chests to gain dominance. *How did we get rusted on to such a pack of clowns?*

In the end the Grey Shirts agreed to disagree and they were set on their separate paths. Two attendants aligned themselves with Botch and the other two with Wess.

"Who're you with?" Botch enquired of Sabienn.

"We'll take Wess," said Sabienn. "He has binoculars."

"I have binoculars too," said Botch.

"We're going with Wess," said Sabienn emphatically.

There was a pause. "Noted," said Botch, staring daggers at the splitting group. "Good luck," he said parting, without a pinch of sincerity.

The friends followed Sabienn with Wess and his attendants Tobbo and Teel in tow. They moved down toward the field to make their way to the rear of the

stadium. There was preparation in place for another bonfire for a Turmeric book burning. The cordons were being put into place at the back of the arena and the tinder and logs were being stacked.

“How well known is Finn?” Bray trotted alongside Sabienn.

“His face is in nearly every gossip column,” offered Wess.

“So he’s known?” said Bray. “What I mean is, how do you get in unrecognized? Let alone close enough to the most heavily guarded man on the planet? A disguise would be needed.”

“How would you do it?” Sabienn turned to his friend.

Bray stopped them for a brief moment as he looked at an ice-cream seller. The woman carried an icebox on her chest with just enough product to save her back. She was passing change back to a little girl who was holding a wrapped ice chocolate pole. The woman was wearing the white cloak of her company and she was choosing to keep her hood on. She had a licence with an ID badge and no-one was questioning her.

Bray looked to Sabienn and they shared a mental link that this was definitely an option. With some surplus cash in his pocket, Sabienn sidled up to the seller.

“Seven poles, Ma’am,” Sabienn said. “Tough day?”

The woman set to oblige the order swiftly and politely. “I wish business was this good all the time.”

“You have to work all day?” said Sabienn. “Must be tough on your feet?”

“No we finish at two,” she said. She stole a glance across to Bray and must have taken a shine to his locks of hair as she added pointedly. “I’m definitely off at two.”

Sabienn looked across to Bray and saw he was appreciative of the attention. “Why two?” said Sabienn. “Doesn’t The Great Leader get on the stage at four?”

“Four? No no,” she said reaching into a pocket. “Here’s a spare program.” She passed it on to Bray. “The Great Leader is on stage at two. The fly-past is four. He leaves at five. Can you believe it? He’s here a whole three hours.”

Looking over Bray’s shoulders at the list of proceedings for the afternoon, Sabienn remarked, “That’s unheard of. Three hours on stage.”

The ice-cream woman said, “It’s The Great Leader’s present to Turmeric for our loyalty. To glow in our presence for three hours.”

“Two o’clock?” said Wess. Even he was out of the loop. The clock in the stadium was just past one and the excitement was building in the crowd. They didn’t have much time.

“Ma’am,” said Sabienn, indicating the product she was selling. “When you’re empty, where do you refill?”

She pointed to a far corner towards the rear. “The counter’s back there. I’ll be

there at two,” she said for Bray’s attention. “It’s exciting. It’s just at the steps.” She was referring to the steps The Great Leader will walk down. “Maybe I’ll see you?” She was smiling at Bray.

“Maybe,” he grinned back and they walked away.

“Maybe,” chimed in Stork like a mimic. “You think you’ll give her your icy pole?”

“Do you ever think above the neckline?” Bray returned feeling a little miffed. Stork winked to Sabienn and let the matter drop.

They worked their way to the rear of the stadium. Sabienn said, “If Finn or Krenn were posing as ice cream vendors, they’d need to come back to this counter to get more product. It’s near the stairs that The Great Leader would descend into the stadium. It’s tactically well-placed.”

All the time the men were scouting the crowds looking for any of the pair that they could respectively recognize. As they bit on their ice-creams they didn’t look too out of place from other people looking within the crowd.

As he walked Sabienn kept running over options in his mind. *This ice-cream vendor suggestion’s a start, thought Sabienn. But what were some of the other things the pair could be disguised as? Security guards? No way. The Ten-69 were pretty tight. They’d recognize people who shouldn’t be there. On-the-ground reporters? Like the ones we’re seeing splashed on the big screen. Coming up to unsuspecting audience members. Asking them their life story and why they’re glad to be here with The Great Leader. That wouldn’t work. They’d be trying to hide themselves. Not make themselves conspicuous.*

They arrived at the rear of the stadium and the counter where the icy poles were being refilled. It was a small stadium kitchen among the many kitchens there but the only thing being used was for this business was its well-stocked cold-room.

A quick look around found the area served by an access stairway to the upper levels. There was also large fire egress doors adjacent to allow a massive crowd passage in an emergency. They were within a stone’s throw of the well-guarded stairs that The Great Leader would descend into the crowd on.

“This would be where it would happen,” said Sabienn. “Wess. Binoculars, please. Bray and I will go to the next level for a look.” Bray and Sabienn made short work of the stairs. They found a spot with a good view of the massive throng and Sabienn took five minutes to look.

It was hopeless. He couldn’t see anyone like the young man Finn he’d seen in his vision. To him everything looked like cloaks, cloaks, hoods, hoods and hoods. Sabienn passed the binoculars in despair across to his friend who was chomping at the bit to use them. It was a good ten minutes but the result

appeared the same on the Jarnnee Krenn front. Nothing.

They went back down to rejoin their group at a time when the mood of the crowd was at fever pitch. The master of ceremonies had now taken to the stage. It was now time for the Champions of the Revolution to be announced and to mount the stage. It wouldn't be long now.

"Wait!" said Wess, as if he'd seen an apparition. "That's him." Everyone followed where his eyes were directed to a man unconcealed with his hood back. Tobbo and Teel gasped and then Sabienn saw him.

It was a strange feeling for Sabienn because he had never seen this person before other than in his vision. And he didn't look like the man in the vision. Not unless he augmented his nose a little. But once Sabienn was faced with Jeulree Finn and it had been confirmed by the Grey Shirts, he could see it was him now.

The young Finn was standing close to the security cordon guarding the passage the big man was going to take through the centre of the stadium. They needn't have bothered hounding the ice-cream sellers as he was dressed in a formal black cloak with his hands concealed by another garment draped over.

His hair was cleaner, blacker and shorter than in his mind's eye. His eyes were darting furtively from side to side and he did not appear comfortable. As if he were there for a more onerous task.

Sabienn turned to his friends, "That's Finn." He indicated unobtrusively. "Formal black cloak, eight metres away, two metres from the cordon. Deep take Stork and outflank him."

Just then, their delicate operation came crashing down as they forgot to give Wess the memo. "Hey," shouted Wess. It didn't take Finn long to know he'd been clocked. He started to move away quickly to the side and wove himself into the crowd. The Grey Shirts were now in pursuit in a direct line toward their quarry.

The friends chose an outflanking around the outside of the crowd pressing in on the cordon. Five minutes of frantic searching elapsed in no sight of the man.

Two of the Champions had already been introduced and were now in their seats on stage, soaking up the adulation of the crowd.

"There," said Bray. A head poked briefly above the crowd. It was back in the direction that they had come from. It turned and spotted the Grey Shirts homing in on it and turned to move in a different direction.

"These Grey Shirts have got no tactical savvy," Sabienn said to Bray before calling out, "Wess, stop! Work with us."

"No, we almost had him," came Wess's shouted reply. Their shouts could barely be heard above the cheers of the crowd as four of the Champions were now on stage.

Sabienn looked for Finn and saw the Grey Shirts looking around bewildered and empty-handed. They'd been given the slip again.

At that moment Bray called again as the head bobbed up, "There." This time it was closer to them. They rushed toward him as the head was working its way toward the back of the stadium. Suddenly it changed tack as it was confronted with Wess's team.

Finn was now making his way directly toward the security cordon. They followed because they knew he was going to have to stop. But he kept on moving, pushing his way through the crowd which was more tight and enmeshed now at the front. Logic would dictate he was about to stop soon. But he kept going. The crowds around were visibly disturbed by the intruder and were letting him know what they thought of his pushing.

Sabienn knew he had to grab this guy before he attracted too much attention. He and his friends now were getting angry calls at their attempts to catch up with Finn. Their quarry now had reached the uniforms of security much to the relief of Sabienn who knew he must stop now. He lunged at Finn and grabbed on to his cloak and tugged back as hard as he could.

"Stop!" cried Sabienn. He was still able to keep hold on to the cloak. But it had to end now. They were so close to the guards of the security cordon.

Finn must have found his way under the arms of security guards. He burrowed through and rushed into the no-man's land of the protected piece of hallowed grass that the great one would walk on.

Unable to help himself, Sabienn was unbalanced and was pulled in after him. Sabienn and Finn both fell on to the grass and Sabienn scrambled to get a hold of Finn's leg so he couldn't get away.

The crowd stopped cheering nearby and were stunned, looking on at this disorder before them. As Sabienn grappled with Finn he saw the crowd. There was a look of disgust as if it would reflect badly on their beautiful city.

Deep, Bray and Stork followed Sabienn to ensure their quarry was secured. Sabienn looked at them. They felt so proud. "We've collared this assassin," cried Sabienn to the crowd. "For the protection of the great one. All hail, The Great Leader." The friends took a brief moment to share smiles as this was the moment they were back in the fold.

Wess stood at the cordon. Sabienn turned to Wess. "Good work, man." Wess seemed pleased with his efforts. Sabienn knew this would probably bring a more improved standing for Wess in his group.

Then the guards arrived. Six burly Ten-69 boys descended on them like a ton of bricks. The crowd were now shouting and calling and booing the intruders that had disrupted their proud town moment.

“You’re under arrest,” the leader of the security detail shouted to Sabienn.

“Sir, we’ve foiled a plot,” cried Sabienn. “This man was going to kill The Great Leader.” His words came out in earnest but the leader wasn’t having a bar of it.

“You are in serious trouble,” said the guard.

“No sir, please. This man’s an assassin,” shouted Sabienn.

“I wasn’t going to kill The Great Leader,” said Finn, imploring for mercy. “How could I?” At that moment the garment fell off his hands to reveal that he had already been hand-cuffed.

Sabienn looked on at the man’s hands with wide disbelieving eyes and felt the rug shift out from under his world. It was another trap. They’d been tricked.

As he and his friends were having their hands secured with hand-ties, three Secret Police officers joined them on the field.

“What the hell do you want?” said the Ten-69 man.

“We’ll take these, sir. These are with us,” said the STL leader.

“The hell they are! This is security,” said the guard leader.

“We’re Blue Detail,” said the secret operative. “They’re ours. We’ll take them.”

“I don’t care who you are! You spooks shit me!” said the guard feeling miffed at the intruders. He directed his men on how the prisoners were to be dealt with. “Take these to the back.”

“General Kreem.” A voice boomed throughout the Turmeric Stadium and it came from the main stage and through the public address system. The crowd looked to where the words came from and hushed to an uneasy silence.

All Sabienn could see was the shocked faces of the men and the women of the guards and Secret Police standing over them. They were pale and absolutely petrified. Sabienn finally turned to see where the words came from.

On stage in front of the microphone was the Grand Inquisitor Profound Murrlock Hyde. Even from where he stood at the other end of the stadium, Sabienn could sense the dark energy of the tall black cloaked muscular figure. His bald head giving an intense feeling of strength and power.

“General Kreem,” Murrlock repeated, pointing toward them. “Please attend to this.”

Swiftly the General appeared from near the back steps and made his way to the gathering. He walked to the lead Ten-69 man and whispered politely, “Thank you. You’ve done very well here. But we’ll take these prisoners.”

“As you wish, sir,” said the guard and turned to his men, “Stand down.” It was an order they were only too willing to acquiesce to.

“Prisoners?” said Sabienn. The word made him shudder. *What’s happening?*



*Here's me expecting we would be riding high. But now we're back where we started from. Prisoners.*

They were led away with their hands bound from the field and some attendants came to dust down and check each blade of grass that had been disturbed. This was to make way for the footsteps of the great one.

The four friends and the Grey Shirts were led to a back room near the kitchens. Sabienn saw Finn on the other hand being led through the fire escape. Possibly toward a more immediate fate.

Sabienn and Bray passed by the kitchen counter and looked sadly into the eyes of the girl that had taken a shine to the curly haired one. She saw his hands bound and turned her head in disgust and Sabienn could feel Bray's heart get crushed.

The General took the leader of Blue Group aside and spoke into his ear. As this was occurring there was the deafening roar of the crowd.

"THE...GREAT...LEEA...DUH!! THE...GREAT... LEEA...DUH!!"

Sabienn turned and caught a glimpse of the great man's legs descending the stairs. He could see his side profile now and the great man was with eyes forward. And he was moving away from them. He watched the great figure leave them to walk to the front and he felt lost and alone.

As the General was still conferring with his subordinate, Wess turned to one of the female officers of Blue Group. "What's going on? We were here to save The Great Leader."

"I don't know who you are," the female officer said, "but you need to leave. These people were here to kill The Great Leader."

"That's a lie," said Sabienn wildly. He turned to the others and they were all absolutely livid. "That's a complete lie. Don't believe her."

Wess looked on and held gaze with Sabienn's eyes. After a brief pause, he leaned forward and spat into the bound man's face.

"I stuck my neck out for you," said Wess with disgust and turned to the officer. "Can we kill them?"

"No these traitors are destined for a hero's death," the officer said. "Can you believe it?" With that the three Grey Shirts turned and left.

"Wess, it's not true," shouted Sabienn as the Grey Shirt left the room looking back at him.

"Why do you even care what he thinks?" the officer said to Sabienn. "Nobody cares what you think?"

The Blue Group leader returned and saw the spittle on the prisoner. "What's going on here?"

"He insulted the Grey Shirt, sir," said the officer. "What could we do?"

“Wipe him down,” said the leader and he walked to the side. “No marks on the prisoner.”

When the leader walked away, she complied with all sugar and sweetness but when she looked in Sabienn’s eyes there was a loathing so intense as to be palpable.

“You liar!” shouted Sabienn. “Everything we’ve done has been for The Great Leader.”

“Don’t talk to me,” she whispered. “Tell your fan club.”

“What the hell does that mean?” cried Sabienn.

“What’s going on here?” shouted the leader losing patience with his subordinate. “I’m going to recommend you be executed if you don’t lose that attitude, understand?”

“Yes, sir.” The female officer held daggers in her eyes still for the prisoner.

At that moment, Sabienn saw Deep and Stork drop as a syringe entered their necks. As he opened his mouth to complain at Bray receiving one, the syringe entered his own neck.

The last thing Sabienn saw was the smirking face of the woman before him. Then his world went black.

## 40. An Interview With A Friend

Sabienn awoke still groggy and feeling the aches and pains of having his muscles stretched and tied. Laying on his side, he found himself on a concrete floor in a small room with a dim light.

The walls before him were smoothed brick and were painted white once, a long time ago. Now they were grubby and smeared and marked with unintelligible scrawling. He noted that some looked like it had been written in blood from someone's fingertips.

He turned still in an awakening haze and realized he wasn't alone. Someone whose face was concealed, an older man, sat huddled in one of the corners.

It was a small room with a floor area of about three metres by two with a sturdy metal bucket in one of the corners. The bucket had already been used for its intended purpose and stank abominably.

Sabienn must have groaned in his stirring as the older man turned to look to him. *Do I know this man? His face looks familiar*, Sabienn thought.

"Are you OK?" enquired the older man quietly.

"I think so," Sabienn said still getting his bearings. "I know you from somewhere."

"How quickly they forget," the older man said half to himself. He looked at the younger man. "You're a good runner."

Sabienn was then shocked. "Mr Cheel? Is that you?" He looked on at the police officer he'd ran away from the day before. "What.. What're you doing here?"

"I don't know," Cheel replied quietly. There was a pause as the pair looked at each other. "This happens sometimes," he continued. "STL call it quality assurance. They go through every detail of our work. It's not just me."

*What?* thought Sabienn. *In a bizarre upside-down way of thinking, that only the Secret Police would use, this makes perfect sense. STL put this man in prison. Because he's conscientious and the only guy doing his job properly. What better incentive could they offer than haul him in for humiliation?* "Will you be OK?" Sabienn said, with a genuine concern.

"I don't know," said Cheel blankly. "I hope so."

There was another pause as Sabienn looked around him. "Where are we?"

“This is our police station,” said Cheel. “It’s not the first time it’s been taken over. Because it used to be the holding cells in the Bol War. There’s lots of rooms.” The men looked at each other. Sabienn could sense that Cheel knew that Sabienn was there to die. After a brief pause, Cheel made the effort to extend his hand to Sabienn in friendship. “No hard feelings?”

“None whatsoever,” Sabienn took his hand generously.

The door clanked as a key was turned and it swung open. There were guards in view at the rear with guns ready and a pale functionary at the front with bound sheets of paper.

“Mister,” the man flipped through his papers in his hands and looked at the names, “Cheel. Your performance review. This way.”

Sabienn dared not wish the man luck in case it went against him. But as Cheel left, their eyes met and the younger man held an expression of hope for him which the elder picked up on and appreciated.

The functionary noted that Sabienn was conscious and he turned to someone out of sight in the corridor. “Tell the doctor, the patient’s awake.”

The door closed and Sabienn was alone. The cell was quiet again. His eyes moved around the room and settled on some scrawl on the old white wall. Someone cut into the paint with some unknown object the words, “I’m free.”

In a sense Sabienn could understand the sentiments behind the scrawl. *My fate is now predetermined. I feel a level of calm descending on me now. Most people don’t get to choose their death date. That marks their passing on records. But I can safely say I know it will be tomorrow.* “I’m free,” he said quietly to himself. *Who do I have to care for me? Who will mark me in this passing? Captain Randd, Ambell and Tesser? How I failed you. Joallee. Sweet, Joallee. Raajaa Deel. My best friend from a past life. I could tell you anything. And now my three friends. It’s safe to say, Deep, Bray and Stork will be enjoying the same fate as me. I just hope it will be at the same time. And I don’t see their faces. I hope it won’t be painful.*

The door clanked again and opened. An old man in a lab coat flanked by two guards stood at the opening. “Mr Feel. So glad you’re awake,” he said without a pinch of interest. “Please follow me.”

The guards entered and one cuffed his hands from behind as the other stood by. Sabienn didn’t fight and didn’t care. He allowed himself to be led away out the door. He was led down the corridor and shown into a large dimly lit room and taken to a seat. Then some hot and penetratingly bright lamps were turned on and shone in his face.

The man and another attendant in a lab coat were in front of the lamps. The man spoke. “We can’t do an examination if he’s robed, Mr Tawll.”

“Sorry, Doctor Borrlinn.” Tawll was quite a diminutive young man whom Sabienn saw didn’t live up to the expectations of his name. With the help of guards, the cuffs were removed and the clothes removed down to his trunks. He was then placed back down on the seat.

“Now no sudden moves, sir,” said Borrlinn, nodding his head toward the men with guns. “We don’t want these men to kill you.”

“Thank you,” said Sabienn, without fight.

“We need a perfect specimen for the autopsy,” said Borrlinn.

“I’ll do my best,” said Sabienn blankly.

The Doctor commenced by tidying up some cuts and scrapes with antiseptic. *I should have realized it wasn’t for reasons of compassion that they need an intact corpse, thought Sabienn. And I’m noting the pointlessness of tending wounds that will still be unhealed when I’m required to die. Very thoughtful. My guess is a lethal injection of soso. I’ve heard there’s medical staff in attendance. They ensure comfort. It’s a good way to go. But then no-one’s around to give a complaint.*

As Sabienn sat in front of the hot lamps, the two men took to work with tape measures and recorded every detail of his dimensions. Blood was drawn into a vial for further analysis.

Borrlinn pulled the skin at Sabienn’s neck, “You see here. A single gash on either side.”

“Gills, Doctor?” said Tawll.

“Yes.”

“Fascinating.” Tawll was enthralled.

They were fondling Sabienn as if he were already dead and on the slab. *Let them have their way, thought Sabienn. They have no concern for me as a person. I have the humanity of a prize microscope slide. There to be prodded and poked for science.*

When it came to his wings, they took extra care in analysis. They felt and fondled where they attached like trunks to his back and how they extended with their five finger like projections webbed with membrane. They took countless photos and pushed their fingers into all places and crevices.

*Feel away boys. Sabienn watched their fingers moving around him. I’ve seen guys like you before. Ogling a stripper in a bar. With that same curiosity. That same titillation. Viewing amazing skin growths on an object before you. And you say it’s research.*

“What is it, Doctor? Is it animal or human?” said Tawll.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Borrlinn replied.

“Is it a man? Is it a bat? Or a fish?”

“It’s a dragon,” came a bold voice. The guards snapped to attention and one could sense the aura of power even before seeing the intruder. The doctor and attendant pulled away from their subject in deference to the new arrival in the room.

“It’s a water dragon,” the voice continued. He walked into view fed by light from the spill of the lamps and there was no mistaking. Sabienn was looking at the Grand Inquisitor Profound Murrlock Hyde.

“Ten thousand years ago, this man would fly,” said Murrlock. “As proof positive of his dominance. But now he swims. The power’s more subtle. Speculation, Doctor?”

“I have nothing, My Lord,” said Borrlinn with a bow.

“This is what I think,” said Murrlock. “Three quarters of the planet is ocean. It’s like the planet’s subconscious. This man is in touch with the planet. He’s part of its healing. As we all are. This is a good omen. An omen for our endeavours. Would you agree, Doctor?”

“A brilliant analysis, My Lord.” Borrlinn tripped over himself with praise.

As Sabienn watched on he could tell that the GIP couldn’t care less if the Doctor agreed with him or not. And he could sense that he found his charge’s fawning to be distasteful yet he was prepared to accommodate it.

“Gentlemen, please leave us?” Murrlock offered politely and quietly.

“My Lord,” said a guard. “The man’s not bound.”

“Please.” The tall dark figure directed them to the door. The others dutifully left the room. Upon their exit, the GIP went to a side wall and flicked a switch which illuminated a desk with two comfortable chairs on opposite sides.

“Something more comfortable.” Murrlock directed Sabienn to take the seat in front of the desk. With a touch of something under the desk, Murrlock turned off the red light on the room’s corner camera that was there to make an official record of proceedings. Whatever was about to occur here would be between just the two of them. Sabienn took his seat and Murrlock sat opposite.

Sabienn looked at him. The first thing he noticed was that the buttons on the man’s black cloak were different. The one in the centre was a little larger and glassier which he deduced to be some kind of button cam. *The official camera may be switched off. But a man this powerful needs to keep his own records*, he thought. *To argue his correct place in history.*

Sabienn was now sitting there facing him and there was a pause as they sized each other up. The GIP was as he had seen at Salt Stadium, a tall man of commanding posture with dark penetrating eyes and a powerful bald scalp.

Sabienn thought, *What is it I’m feeling here? This is the second most powerful man in the country. He has his palpable aura which requires respect.*

*Am I making this up? He's emanating some subtle mannerisms of being uncertain and fragile.*

"Are you OK?" Murrlock's enquiry was genuine. The younger man stared back dumbfounded without reply. "You haven't eaten, I know," he continued. "I'll have something sent to the cell afterwards. Something nice." Sabienn was awe-struck. He couldn't say anything. "I want to say thank you," said Murrlock. "For your help with Finn. We retrieved something valuable."

From his pocket he placed on the desktop the green notebook he'd seen being haggled over in his vision at Finn's place. Murrlock added, "It doesn't look much. But it has personal meaning to me."

Murrlock left a pause and didn't outline further anything more of the mission that had consumed Sabienn and his friends. A small laugh left his mouth. "Heh heh. Thank you also for making a donation in my name to a children's hospital. Here I am trying to create fear in the people and you do that. I loved it."

Sabienn thought, *What is going on here? This man is laughing. I'm beginning to think I'm dealing with an equal.*

"He was a nasty man that we caught," said Murrlock. This must have been a reference to The Master. "You have great talent. But you have great wits. You remind me of myself."

"Not from where I'm sitting," Sabienn said quietly.

"Ha! You and I are so much alike." Murrlock said smiling and Sabienn was surprised that he took the comment in his stride. "I .. I feel I owe you an explanation," he continued. "Something terrible has happened here." He appeared to be glancing at Sabienn's wings and paused again, as if he was trying to find a place to start. "I'm aware that you have seen my brother. Please speak freely. It's common knowledge. And I believe he has spoken to you of the legend of ten thousand years ago. I want to show you something. Something so powerful, so valuable."

He reached into his pocket again and retrieved a small felt box which he opened for the younger man to view.

There sitting in resting holes were three stones. Two smaller ones pulsed and glowed with a blue fire. There was a radiance that was coming from them Sabienn could feel from where he was sitting. Sabienn observed them closely. *They're trying to talk to me. I'm sure of it. There's a distress in their glow. And they're looking for a language common to both of us. Look at that. They're so blue. Like the ear-rings I stole from Eel Turk. With that same roundness but a warmer hue.*

Sabienn then noted the larger stone. It was the size of a tooth but it rested in its hole dead. Like a lifeless piece of rejected plastic. He desperately wanted to

touch these smaller stones as he could sense that's what they wanted.

"So many battles have been fought for these," said Murrlock. "So many have died. Including the Turr General I took these from." The GIP's face reflected joyously the glowing blue of the two smaller stones. The "two" stones as he recalled, next to the lifeless "six". "Probability states these will lead us to victory."

As soon as Sabienn's hand moved to try and touch them, the box snapped shut and was placed back within the black cloak.

Murrlock then stared deep into Sabienn's eyes. He took the younger man's hands in his and Sabienn was hit by a strange energy he'd never felt before from a human. That feeling of being an equal was quickly knocked out of him.

"Sabienn," Murrlock's eyes implored, "Are you sure the Holy One had a lemon mask?"

"How do you know this?" said Sabienn.

"Please. It's OK," said Murrlock. "I'm talking about the vision you had at Ambia Vee. Where the Holy One and the Forlorn wore the lemon masks of restraint. They were in front of the Emperor Ryo who wore the red mask of aggression. And the lemon masks you stated were tied with a white and yellow cord. It's always been an opinion. The lemon masks are believed by the people for appeasement. The red mask for people wanting justifiable action. But you seemed to have seen it clearly."

"I saw what I saw, sir," Sabienn said.

"But there was no way you could be mistaken?" said Murrlock. "How long was the vision?"

"It was a few minutes," said Sabienn.

"A few minutes?" said Murrlock. There was hope to latch on to in his voice. "So they may have changed masks any time after or before? Outside your vision? Anything's possible?"

Sabienn paused still staring at his eyes. "Anything's possible, sir. Of course anything's possible. When I saw Finn in the stadium he looked different to my vision."

The man in the black cloak drew a big sigh of relief taking comfort from Sabienn's uncertainty. "Thank you," said Murrlock warmly taking his hands away. "The prophecy is fulfilled."

"Prophecy?"

The man in the black cloak looked fully and with great command into Sabienn's eyes, "I, Murrlock Hyde, am The Holy One, my brother is The Forlorn and The Great Leader is Emperor Ryo. We lead an army over a million strong. The prophecy for our impending victory has come to pass."



Sabienn looked at Murrlock, his face serious and certain. *Is this real? I'm expecting someone to laugh. This man is deluded. He believes what he just said.*

"You've been very kind," said Murrlock. "Now I must tell you the story of why you were born. It was in keeping with the prophecy that the army would be led by two hundred. Two hundred who are family. It's best I let the fool Krenn explain it. I blame this man for everything." With a touch of a button at his desk, a video image of the much younger Krenn, then a Colonel, was displayed on the side wall.

The image of Krenn paused as if to steel himself for the delivery of bad news. "This is a true and accurate record of the events of the past week. My name is Colonel Boxx Krenn. Today's date is day 5 of the month of 12 in the year Forty-nine ninety-nine. I am here in my office at Mission Cinnamon currently with just over one more year of lease from Deerland. We have still managed to conceal our activities here from local authorities." Sabienn stole a quick glance at a world map on the wall nearby and remembered the place Grey Cape pointed to. On this map it was marked in red. Krenn continued.

"Early this week we took shipment of a consignment of eggs extracted from Hayddland women. This was the result of two years screening. Only the brightest, most beautiful and athletic specimens were selected and signed waivers were received for each. Upon delivery however there was a massive power loss and a failure in refrigeration. All eggs perished."

"In light of the limited time of lease, a program was embarked to recruit the local Tee Lee native women. Already set aside to incubate the eggs once fertilized, the two hundred women were interviewed once more and were found to be sound. They showed intelligence, they showed poise and they showed beauty. They were the finer specimens of an inferior breed."

"I personally will take full responsibility for the wellbeing of each and every one of the two hundred children. I beg absolute forgiveness from you My Lord Grand Inquisitor Profound. It is recommended the program commence as soon as you see fit. This report concludes."

The image spluttered back to a wall.

"I never should have agreed," said Murrlock. "He ruined everything."

While he was viewing the image of Krenn, the GIP had produced a briefcase and removed a sheet of paper which he proffered to Sabienn to peruse. There was a list of two hundred students. Most he could recognize as his friends and acquaintances.

There were two columns on the paper, a long one on the left and a short one on the right.

On the left he read out the names. Shyne Dryde, Cole Dryde, Pattee Standd,

Steely Morris, Sandee Chenn, Peel Samjell, Roal Samlorr and it went on and on.

They were all there. Shyne and Cole, Sammo, Sandee who rushed to him when Wyllo died and his good friend Pattee.

The second column had nine names and he knew why they were there. He read, Sabienn Feel, Storkinn Keel, Dippin Trayne, Braylenn Skenn, Wyllo Wyde, Willninn Fateel and three other guys he'd never heard of before.

Murrlock pointed to the second column, "All these are dead now except for you, the curly haired one, the tall one and the stupid one."

"We.." Sabienn's mind was racing trying to keep up with the information he was being given. "We're all sons and daughters of The Great Leader?"

"No. There was an issue," said Murrlock. "I've known The Great Leader for sixty years. He's a man of immense power, intelligence and character. But there are some things he lacks strength in." Murrlock grabbed Sabienn's arm and pulled it forward so that they could read the word still vaguely visible on his inner arm. SEMEN. "As we are all family, it seemed reasonable someone else should step in so the prophecy be fulfilled," said Murrlock. "And that someone was me."

The younger man just looked at him stunned.

"Sabienn," said Murrlock, "It deeply saddens me that your body has chosen to let the imperfect nature of the native come through. You were my favourite son. You had so much to live for."

There was a pause because there was so much for Sabienn to digest. "I'm a good omen but a failed experiment," Sabienn said after a while.

"Don't say that," said Murrlock.

"But I don't understand," said Sabienn. "You put so much importance in the legend which is a native legend."

"I believe in it because it's a belief," said Murrlock. "There's a kernel of truth in all legends even those of inferior culture. If you control legends you can take the fight out of people."

Sabienn was still trying to get his head around his upbringing. "My mother was a native." *You fool, thought Sabienn. More than one person has said you're a native. But you rejected the notion outright. I feel like an empty glass jar. Everyone else can see through but I'm too screwed up to let air in.*

"Would you like to see her?" said Murrlock. The words shocked the younger man. Sabienn was thinking that a door would suddenly open and reveal his long lost mother and he would run to her.

From his briefcase Murrlock pulled a folder with his number "121" on it. From the folder he withdrew some photos and handed them across. In front of him was a front and side view of a woman with a startled look on her face, as if

concerned of what may happen to her. She looked like anyone else but Sabienn stared intently.

“These were some of her items.” Murrlock handed across a plastic bag filled with seashells and rounded pebbles. The items were emptied into the palm of his hand and he could feel himself transported. A tornado of feeling came down through his centre and he was taken away in his mind.

At that moment he was on the shore of a beach and there were four women sitting at the water’s edge letting the water roll over their full pregnant bellies. They were laughing and enjoying the sun.

He recognized his mother as she was laughing the loudest. There seemed to be a swarm of doctor fish nibbling the skin of their feet and the sensation was tickling her to raptures. In her hand were the shells and pebbles that he was now holding. Probably kept as a memory of such a perfect day.

Sabienn also recognized another one of the pregnant women. She was one of the seven women in the vision he had at Ambia Vee. The one known as Joallee that looked down history’s camera lens to communicate with him that his mother would be proud.

Looking at this woman, she turned to once again sense that Sabienn was viewing her and she smiled and jerked her head towards his mother as if to say “Check her out. Isn’t she beautiful?” And she was beautiful.

The laughter, the joy and the love didn’t show through the photo he had just seen. He had no history of viewing native women and seeing them as attractive. But this woman was radiant. The water rolled in over her belly and there were more inquisitive fish around. There were also little creatures with tentacles, harmlessly probing, exploring and guarding her.

Sabienn thought, *Somewhere inside of her is me. Waiting for the big journey into the world. And she’s trying to make it as kind as possible. She keeps me comfortable, she keeps me fed and secure. And she’s laughing in the sun. She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.*

Then the picture went dark as did the mood.

His mother was kneeling now and she was crying. There was a queue of women with their heads bowed behind her and a monk beside her and they chatted in words so quiet he couldn’t hear. She passed across the shells and pebbles to the monk for safe keeping and he placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

Before her was a trench and Sabienn in horror realized what was to happen. Then he saw himself as a baby. He knew it was him because his mother was looking longingly across the trench to him. He was being held by some uncaring functionary in a white lab coat. And as his mother looked across to him in all the

terror she must have felt and the horror of her fate, Sabienn looked on at himself as a baby. He was asleep.

A guard moved in behind her with a rifle and the picture mercifully went black.

As Sabienn emerged from the vision, he viewed the photo of this woman before him. Tears welled in his eyes and rolled down his cheek. He'd just seen his mother die and all he could do was sleep. As if from another world, words filled his head. But it was from the person across the desk.

"You have so much talent," said Murrlock. "I can't believe you could see all that. But not only see it, but feel it. I could really use a reader like you. If I could put a proposition to you, and of course it would be to you and not the other three. They would have to die. But I could keep you hidden. You'd read for me and be well tended. Would you entertain this proposition?"

Sabienn looked at Murrlock, watching his mouth move but still not connecting. He felt like he had some fool in front of him jabbering at him in a foreign tongue.

Now that he had his guts wrenched out from him at the realization of who he was, he felt that he was more than equal. "Here's a proposition," said Sabienn quietly. "My friends and I walk through the world with your blood and our native blood. And you live with it."

Murrlock looked back and colour filled his face as if he was just challenged to a duel. The younger man pushed the precious items forward on the desk and placed his hands down.

"You killed my mother," Sabienn said quietly. "And I *will* kill you."

There was a pause as the men stared at each other.

"Well," said Murrlock, still amenable yet more commanding. "Not from where I'm sitting." They stared into each other's eyes and Murrlock continued, "Look this has been so much information you've received. You're very emotional."

He pressed a button under the desk and the light came on for the room camera to start recording nothing important. The guards entered into the room again and the GIP addressed them. "I want this man well looked after. Please send him the best food you have."

As he looked on, Sabienn saw Murrlock hand across the green notebook and some other documents to an attendant who then moved across the floor to place them in a safe in the room's corner. It was a similar safe to the one he'd broken into while in the employ of Eel Turk.

Once this was done, Murrlock turned back to him. "We'll talk again tomorrow. It's either a hero's death or what I have to offer." He came in closer so

that he alone could hear. “And as for your proposition, Sabienn,” said Murrlock, fairly but firmly. “It’s not possible. It won’t happen, because I say so.”

Murrlock quickly left the room and Sabienn was led back to his cell.

## 41. The Tap In The Night

The cell wall felt hard on Sabienn's back and his folded wings as the tears fell freely down his face. His witness to the brutality against the gentleness of a woman whose only crime was to bring him into the world left him numb. "Mother," Sabienn cried. "Mother."

Sabienn began to assess who he was and what he had been and realistically saw himself being sickeningly short. His thoughts plundered him like diving birds.

*When I was young, I can admit to a time. I was just absolutely free. I was an orphan. And I played happily with no known bloodline. Then I was fed that old bull story. About my supposed parents. The heroes of the revolution. Dying in a non-existent bus crash. And that steeled me to a lifestyle. The Turr was my enemy and the native was my doormat.*

*Now I find myself with this sudden realization. Half the blood in my body is pegged to a culture. It's over a hundred thousand years old. And what I'm thinking is of all those cave paintings. All that rock art up near The Blue Air. And how I'd like to smack those little dickheads in that are marking them.*

*Half of me is rooted in the sand and the land and in the sea and the shells in my mother's hand.*

"Mother," he cried, wiping his face. And now he looked at his wings as they folded around him.

*Once upon a time, I would have given anything. Just to have these cut and removed from my back. To have them ripped away and be like everyone else again. Now I see them as part of my mother. An offering to me as an expression of her love and presence. He folded them in around him like a comforting blanket. Now I'd sooner die than part with them. They are my mother's gift and they are me. I am what I am. And I am desperately and joyously proud.*

"Mother!" he cried to no-one. Her face and her voice were before him laughing to the sky, tickled and teased as her dead skin was nibbled by toothless fish.

He pushed the plate of his half eaten dinner away and stood now. The lights had long been turned off in his cell and he walked to the ventilation grill to the rear.

It offered the only light in the cell. The blue and the green moon were high and full tonight and he caught a glimpse through the small opening in the bars.

Sabienn stared at the big beautiful blue moon with contentment. *Oh, blue moon. Tonight will be the last time I ever view you in the dark. I stare upon you the way millions of people have done for millions of years. With feelings in their heart of triumph and failure and sadness and love. Hear this blue moon. I die a free man. But if you are listening. Give me one slim hope. That The Great Leader may still step in. With his endless capacity for clemency. There still may be a stay of execution. If the big man finally realizes what we've done. And it was all for him.*

It was way past midnight. Sabienn needed to have his game face on if he had to plead their case. He needed to get some sleep.

It was at that moment he saw something unusual. A sliver of light appeared under the crack of the cell door. It was as if someone was waving a torch around. He then heard voices. Anxious voices speaking in a very quick whisper. They seemed to settle just outside his door.

Sabienn's heartbeat was pounding. *They're here to kill me now. I could sense there was resentment in the ranks.* Then there was a tap tap. Very low and very urgent. Tap tap. It came again.

Without waiting for a response, a key was placed in the cell door and it clanked slowly and quietly. The door opened and a flashlight shone through and illuminated Sabienn's face. His stomach dropped as he was blinded. When the light dropped from his face, he could see the intruders. They were two men dressed in black with black face masks over their heads.

Sabienn wasn't sure what to do but he saw the first man who appeared to be the leader put his finger to his lips urging for silence. Something was placed on the wall and he shone the torch on to it.

After squinting, Sabienn couldn't believe his eyes. It was a sticker boldly emblazoned in black background with three red letters "CLA". *It's Seal and Sale,* he thought joyously. *Bless their little hearts. And good old Korlay. He's the man and was good for his word. I knew there was a reason for me to keep him alive.*

Once he realized he was safe he almost let out a cry of relief. The leader placed his finger to his lips again and indicated that he follow. They moved in darkness lit by the occasional bursts of their torch down the corridor to a set of stairs that went down. They found themselves on another level of prison cells and they stopped to consult a piece of paper.

They pointed to a door and one of them made a gesture around his head like springy hair. It must have been Bray's cell. They knocked with the same urgency

as before.

“Bray,” whispered Sabienn. The door opened and the light shone on his startled friend. “Come on,” Sabienn whispered again. Bray didn’t need another invitation. Another sticker was placed on the wall.

They moved along the corridor and stopped in front of another door after consulting their paper. The man in black tapped again on the door. The door opened and the light shone on Stork sound asleep. Bray walked in to rouse his friend who looked up at him in the dim light.

“Please tell me I’m alive,” whispered Stork. “Or are there women in heaven as ugly as you?”

“We can leave you and you can find out,” said Bray.

Stork arranged himself and followed the rest. Another sticker was placed on the wall.

They re-entered the corridor and were making their way back to the stairs. Sabienn was the first to sense something was wrong here. He tapped the leader on the shoulder and indicated to them by his hand a tall figure. They would have known Deep as he was in the snake house with them.

The two men in black looked at each other and turned back shaking their heads. Sabienn was now more insistent with his hand gesture. His hand was high and firm and he needed them to know they weren’t going without the big man.

The two men shook their heads as if to say the matter was over. They moved off but Sabienn sat down on the corridor floor. It was an act to say if Deep wasn’t going then neither was he.

With perplexed looks, the two men looked at each other and were more insistent now. They waved to Sabienn to get up and follow. For all their troubles, the two men watched on as Stork and Bray followed suit with Sabienn and sat down on the floor next to him. If they weren’t going with their friend, they weren’t going.

With exasperated looks the two men did hand gestures to one another then threw their hands up in the air in defeat.

Their piece of paper was consulted again and they went back down the corridor. Standing in front of a door they quickly opened it and Sabienn entered. He suddenly found himself in a choke hold by the big man standing behind the door and he was struggling to breathe.

“Well that’s gratitude,” said Stork walking in. Deep was dumbfounded by the arrivals and quickly relented his grip.

He hurriedly and apologetically straightened out the kink in Sabienn’s neck and patted his shoulder to show there were no hard feelings. Sabienn made the mental note to never sneak up on this guy again.



Still feeling the crush on his throat, Sabienn led his friends back up the stairs to the upper corridor. As he passed by the room where he was interviewed and examined, he stopped. The two men in black and his friends made hand gestures to him to hurry up and follow. He waved them to wait one second.

The door of the room opened easily and he could see a light coming from under the door of the adjoining room. There were voices of men and women, possibly STL arguing over something.

The room was dark but Sabienn could make out the shape of the safe in the corner that he had seen. He sensed that if there were room alarms they'd be turned off if these people were still here so late. He moved in front of the safe and looked at it.

Looking back he saw the leader in black frantically gesticulating to him, trying to get him to return to the corridor. Sabienn indicated to him to give him the torch. His rescuer was feeling the urgent need to get out so Sabienn casually walked back to him and grabbed it.

He returned to crouch in front of the safe and suddenly had a hunch. *This isn't an STL safe. So it's probably part of the station. And judging by the feeling between STL and the station occupants, they wouldn't be forthcoming with combinations.*

With his heart in his mouth, Sabienn grabbed the handle and gave it a quick turn. It opened. But it made a loud clanking noise.

The arguing stopped next door. He crouched sweating and waiting. The others in the corridor were furiously cursing him under their breath. There was a pause of a lifetime. Then suddenly clapping and cheering. He could also hear the sound of a crowd. They must have been watching some kind of a game on a screen next door.

Sabienn relaxed and turned the torch light on to the safe's interior. There was the green notebook which he picked up and placed in his pocket. There was also identification papers for General Kreem which he pocketed as well. There was the General's cap which he placed on his head. He looked back to his friends who thought he was a complete idiot. They just wanted to get out.

The stones that the GIP showed him, which wanted him so much to touch them, were not there. There were other papers which he left and some cash which he pocketed. At that moment there was movement next door. People were walking around as if about to do their rounds. Quickly he pushed the safe door closed, this time without making noise.

In a flash, he was out the door and with his friends rushing down the corridor. They were making their way behind the men in black to a fire escape which had been chocked open. Outside the door they ran down the fire escape in fine spirits

believing they'd made the cleanest of getaways.

Sale and Seal's car was nearby concealed by bushes and they piled on in. The two men in black went into the front with Sabienn on the passenger window and the three friends pushed into the back with Bray behind Sabienn.

As the car came to life and pulled out from the kerb they held their breath waiting for an alarm or shouting. But there was nothing. The car came to speed and turned a corner.

"Whoahh! We can't thank you enough, guys," yelled Sabienn in disbelief that he was free. "You tell Korlay he's the man."

"He's the man," shouted Stork, slapping his knee. "Korlay's the man. I knew you didn't kill him for a reason."

"Will you take the hat off?" said Bray who was beside himself in rapture. "You look like a complete dick."

"More than usual," added Stork in high spirits.

Sabienn was so pumped with adrenalin he didn't realize he had the General's hat on. "I've got the hat on!" he yelled. "I've still got the hat!" The boys fell about crying with laughter.

"I couldn't believe you did that," said Deep, wiping tears of joy from his eyes. "With the safe."

"What? You thought he'd choke?" added Stork.

Deep and Sabienn buckled in an uproarious outburst. There was now snot coming out of their nose in joy.

Sabienn stole a glance to Seal and Sale. They had their eyes on the road and kept a serious look. "Come on. Lighten up guys," said Sabienn happily. "You just saved our lives. Do you have a map here?"

Sabienn was thinking he could try and get some orientation at their next stop. He had after all left his precious Oololo maps back at Camp Earless with his other personal effects. The man sitting next to him in black turned to open the glove box. There was a small street directory which he let Sabienn grab.

Sabienn was in great spirits watching the man in black help him when the stranger took a quick glance in the back at Bray.

Even in the dim light of the car illuminated by passing headlights and street lights, Sabienn could see the faces of his friends in the back all in a fine mood.

But when the eyes of the stranger met Bray's, Sabienn could see his friend's face freeze. It was as if the colour drained from his skin. Stork and Deep still yelped and carried on but all the party left Bray. It looked like he'd seen a ghost.

Not sure of what was happening, Sabienn turned back to view the road not wanting to let on that there may be something wrong here. Something had definitely spooked Bray.

As if to confirm his suspicions, Sabienn looked forward at the white line ahead and Bray's lips came close to his ear away from the stranger. "We've got a problem."

Sabienn received the news calmly. Nothing seemed obvious to him but if Bray said there was something wrong, he trusted his judgement implicitly.

"What do I do?" Bray's whisper seemed quick and on edge.

Unobtrusively Sabienn returned comment. "Just go with your gut. I'll follow."

He steeled himself now to be ready for anything. He thought, *Bray can handle this. As long as the boys from CLA don't find out they've got some black wolves in the car. It's just like the Grey Shirts said. The CLA always hung any black wolves they caught.*

Sabienn looked around at Bray steeling himself for action and he caught Sabienn's glance. "Hey!" Bray shouted. "What're you boys doing?" The mood of the car suddenly became quiet and serious. "I know you," Bray continued. "You know you have black wolves in the car, don't you?"

*What the..? That's the one detail we didn't want Seal and Sale to know,* thought Sabienn. *Where's he going with this?*

"Answer me boys," said Bray insistently. "Answer me!"

Sabienn looked across at Seal and Sale and they were nervously glancing at each other. The driver was shaking his head and gripping the wheel. He then started hitting his wheel in exasperation. "I knew this was a bad idea. This was such a bad idea. I *knew* this was bad."

"Shut up!" shouted the man next to Sabienn.

Bray took advantage of their confusion to reach over and grab and pull the mask off the driver. It was Tobbo; the Grey Shirt they'd spent time with the day before. With everyone looking on at the unmasked man, he whipped the other mask off to reveal Teel the other Grey Shirt and partner in crime.

"Stop the car, boys," said Sabienn. In response to his request, Tobbo planted the foot down on the accelerator and they pushed on faster.

"I thought I could smell a dog in this car," said Stork. It was Kleet's car alright.

"Where're we going?" said Sabienn.

"We're going nowhere," said Tobbo. "Just sit back."

"We were there trying to save The Great Leader," said Bray. "That woman was lying at the stadium. Get it into your head."

"No no," said Teel. "That's not what Wess said. You were going to get a hero's death."

It dawned on Sabienn what was happening. *That's how they got to the station.*

*The Grey Shirts have relatives. They helped them get access. They then broke us out of the cells. All to save us from a hero's death. That's what they want. They just want to give us a lynching. So we can die like the traitorous dogs they believe we are.*

Sabienn could see there were familiar landmarks out the window. He'd seen them the day before. They were close now to Baino's. *Well that would be ideal. A good place for a mob to meet. And enough trees around to let four corpses dangle.*

"Stop the car now!" said Sabienn. "Or Teel dies."

Deep who was seated behind Teel wrapped his arms around Teel's neck as he had done to Sabienn in the cell and applied a choke hold.

"Kill him. I don't care," said Tobbo flooring the pedal and pushing the car faster. He took time to look back at Deep. "You were the one we wanted to leave. You saved our dog. This is not good."

"Stop the car!" called Sabienn.

"Kleet's gonna spit," rambled Tobbo. "Wess's gonna kill me. This is bad. Very bad."

Sabienn could see the lights of Baino's up a head and just as he expected there were the cars of an angry mob parked nearby. Tobbo was finally relenting his speed to guide the car towards their destination.

Sabienn thought of making a jump from the car but thought again. The three in the back couldn't get out so easily. Deep's choke hold on Teel rendered the Grey Shirt limp but still alive. It allowed Sabienn to push his legs past the unconscious Teel and plant a foot heavily on top of Tobbo's foot. The pedal went flat to the floor.

The car leapt forward with a burst of speed and ran at full pelt into the assembled crowd. They were all looking at the headlights coming at them and holding their ropes ready for action. As the lights kept coming at them at speed they scattered and jumped out of the way.

The car was aimed directly at the dining hall of Baino's and gathering pace. Sabienn looked ahead and wasn't keen on being part of its million kee view. He lurched across from his seat and pulled hard on the steering wheel. The car drifted and fish-tailed across the carpark and narrowly missed Baino's front window. Some Grey Shirts dropped to the ground and one bounced off the side of the car.

With some control on where they were heading Sabienn pushed the vehicle at break neck speed towards the road going north. At the last moment Tobbo got his hands to the wheel and jerked it away sending them hurtling towards a parked semi-trailer.

Sabienn grabbed the wheel in time and pulled down making the car swerve and slam parallel into the parked truck. Relinquishing the wheel finally, Sabienn stabbed three quick punches into Tobbo's jaw to send him to the same place Teel was enjoying.

"Move," Sabienn shouted. They had about ten seconds to get out of the car and into the truck. The mob were regathering and picking themselves out of the dirt. They were raging and swarming like hornets.

Sabienn and his friends helped each other out of the only doors they could use. They all piled in to the cabin of the adjacent semi-trailer. Sabienn swung up to take the wheel. Bray took the front seat next to him. The others took the rear.

In the back seat, they had company. The owner of the truck had just shot a wild pig dead and it was resting its head against the window. More importantly the truck owner left his rifle. A reliable black-edition steelright. It was a night hunter's weapon and fell like a baby into Deep's grasp.

Deep wasted no time firing several rounds harmlessly and accurately into the tarmac of the car-park. It was to give the Grey Shirts something to think about. They dropped to the ground and found cover behind some cars.

Having watched Lyall drive a bus, Sabienn looked at the truck controls. He didn't know if he could do it but there was no alternative. Luckily the hunter left his keys. He brought the monster's battery to life and pulled out of its car-space followed by a posse of angry men.

Moving his head around, Sabienn realized he still had the stupid General's hat on. He took it off and tossed it on top of the dead pig's head laying lifeless looking out the window.

He was shocking on the gears and made the metal scream for mercy before he got the hang of it. They picked up pace now and there was only one place in his mind that he needed to get to.

"Bray," Sabienn called to his friend. "Point me in the direction of Fort Heel." He swung on to the highway to head north.

## 42. Fort Heel

“Just go forward.” Bray hunted for maps in the glove box. There was also a service pistol there which he handed back to Stork.

“We don’t have much time. There’s so much I’ve got to tell you,” said Sabienn, watching the chasers come up in his side mirrors.

The words just tumbled out of him of his encounter with Murrlock Hyde. He told them everything he could recall of Mission Cinnamon, of Krenn’s predicament, of the list of names, how they shared a father and how their mothers died. He even mentioned how they were referred to as the tall one, the curly-haired one and the stupid one. As much as he could remember, he laid it bare for them.

When he’d finished there was stunned silence in the cabin.

The man to break the silence was Deep. “So,” he said hesitantly. “If we die now, we die as brothers.”

“Don’t get teary-eyed on me,” said Sabienn impatiently. He was in no mood for a group hug. “We’ve got to lose these pricks. Any ideas?”

“Can we just make it up as we go?” said Stork. There must have been boxes of ammunition in the back which Deep and Stork were able to fill their respective weapons with. The clanking of worked weapons showed they were viewing only one viable option.

Sabienn was managing to get some speed now out of the monster and powered it up the highway. He was swerving across a few lanes to keep the chasers occupied.

Coming the other way were the headlights of a smaller truck. Sabienn steered his massive unit right across the lanes to face the vehicle head on for a collision. They both blared their horns at each other in an intense game of chicken. The other truck just kept on coming at him unswerving in its resolve.

The boys in the cabin were starting to get concerned seeing the headlights coming. They were practically on top and they were worried.

All except Sabienn. *I know who’s going to come off second best. And it’s not me.* At the last second, the smaller truck relented to common-sense and glaring physics, and swerved to miss the oncoming beast.

In its evasive move, the smaller vehicle became unsteady and toppled on to

its side and slid along the highway. Boxes were released from its rear carriage and they spilled and bounced and split on the bitumen and a fluid movement of oranges tumbled and flowed into the oncoming traffic.

In his rear vision mirrors, Sabienn viewed a very pissed driver struggling from his vehicle showing his middle finger in appreciation of a shared road. The tumbling fruit briefly halted the oncoming Grey Shirts who had to stop and take stock of their options.

Sabienn was back on track now and heading north.

“What’s at Fort Heel?” said Bray.

“Uh.. I...I’m meeting my friend and mentor,” said Sabienn. “His name’s Captain Randd. He’ll be there with his wife Ambell and daughter Tesser. It was agreed that when I completed the Supreme Order, we’d all get a boat to Cajj Cajj. Then move our way on to Deerland.”

“Cajj Cajj sounds good,” said Bray. “And there’s room for us?”

Sabienn paused and kept his eye on the road, “No.”

There was silence in the cabin for a while.

It was Deep who then spoke. “But you haven’t completed your Supreme Order.”

“But when they hear my story, they’ll understand,” said Sabienn. “I can then appeal directly to The Great Leader. When I get to Deerland.” He paused. “This has always been planned, guys.”

“Can you at least ask if he’ll help us?” said Bray quietly.

“Sure,” said Sabienn. “Of course.”

“I’m with you,” said Stork to Sabienn. “You have to look after number one. I mean, we’re replaceable. We’re only your brothers.”

Slapping the wheel, Sabienn spoke unsteadily, “I don’t even know if the Captain’s there. I don’t know if anyone’s there. I know nothing. I don’t know anything. It’s just a vow I made with the Captain. I.. I.. Look. If I can help I will.”

“You’re slapping the wheel again,” said Bray matter-of-factly.

Sabienn looked forward. “Sorry.”

“Look,” said Bray. “If he’s there, he’s there. If he’s not, he’s not. And any decision, we’ll all live with it. We’re all big boys.”

They travelled in silence for a while until he turned the vehicle into a road with a sign pointing to Fort Heel.

“There’re two turn-offs to Fort Heel,” said Bray. “I don’t know which is best. One’s long and one’s short.” Almost as soon as the words left his mouth, they rounded a bend and saw a checkpoint ahead. “No,” said Bray. “We need this like a hole in the head.”

There was a car moving off after being checked so they couldn't ram the point at speed. And they'd already been clocked. A uniform had his hand up requesting them to slow down. The boys in the back readied themselves with their weapons. This was going to end badly.

But Sabienn saw the uniform and saw he was regular police. "Hold fire, boys," Sabienn said to his guns in the back. *Fifty-fifty*, he thought. *I have to try and back myself.*

They slowed to a halt next to the uniform. "Could you step down please, sir?" said the man on the ground.

"What is this?" Sabienn feigned impatience and rudeness.

"Routine search, sir," said the uniform. "We're looking for something. What're you hauling?"

"I have no idea," said Sabienn indignantly. "We're STL. We've confiscated this. Go look for yourself."

The second uniform arrived and he was less polite. "Can you step down?"

Sabienn could sense Deep behind him with a rifle ready. But Sabienn persisted and handed the officer the General's identification he'd taken from the safe.

"Here. I want you to take a good look at that," Sabienn said to the second uniform and turned to the first man. "I'm sorry, you're still here. Why aren't you checking the back?" The first officer stole a glance at the second and went to look at the load.

"Now I want you to listen hard and I want you to listen well," said Sabienn to the second officer. "This is my General in the back." He indicated the pig leaning against the window with the hat on its head. "Look at that photo and tell me if he looks anything like him. Because if you had a bucket of acid thrown in your face, for the service of your country, you wouldn't look anything like your photo either. And you want a man, a hero of the nation, who is in complete agony, to step down from a vehicle it took us minutes to strap him in to? All because we're carrying something we couldn't care less about? Sir, what's your name?"

"Styall," said the second officer.

"We've just committed quality assurance on a station in Turmeric," said Sabienn, "And went through them like a pack of salts. Where did you say your station was?"

Styall would have understood perfectly the implications of this and turned very quiet. As if to save him, the first officer returned.

"And what are we hauling please?" said Sabienn.

"Logs," said the first officer quietly.



"I can't hear," Sabienn had his hand to his ear. "What're we hauling?"

"Logs," the officer repeated more definitely.

"And you found what you were looking for?" said Sabienn.

"Move on please," said Styall handing the General's credentials back.

"We have been in pursuit of escapees from a holding cell near here" said Sabienn indignantly. "And we've wasted a precious five minutes talking to you. This will go on our report. Now, Fort Heel. Which turn off? The first or second?"

"Take the second," said Styall.

"Thank you and good day to you." Sabienn pushed the truck through the checkpoint and joined the others in a collective sigh of relief.

As he looked back at Styall in the rear vision mirrors he caught the police officer lift his middle finger to the parting vehicle. "Displaying the undying respect for STL," said Sabienn.

"Must be the new salute," said Stork, picking up the same mirror vision. "Speaking of which. We have a real hero amongst us."

All four men turned to the pig and gave it a summary salute. Ahead of them lay the road to Fort Heel and he steered the truck onwards.

In his rear mirrors he caught the lights in the distance of several cars coming over a distant rise. It showed they hadn't shaken the Grey Shirts and they were bearing down on them like a swarm of bees.

"We've got company," said Bray.

"I didn't know we were hauling logs," said Sabienn.

"That'd make a bit of a mess on the road," said Bray.

"It certainly would." Sabienn turned to Bray appreciating the suggestion.

Ahead of them was a little rest area with wide flat verges on either side. Ideal for a larger vehicle to use as a turning circle. With deft precision he manoeuvred the trailer close to a small bridge affording access over a small creek.

The friends alighted to unload the freight which tumbled like sticks in random motion and settled in all sorts of angles on the road. It wasn't a perfect blockade but it would slow down proceedings of anyone following.

Taking his pistol in hand and with some spare rounds in his pockets, Stork faced the others. "You guys go ahead," he said. "When they come I'll hold them back from the other side of the bridge."

"Are you sure?" said Sabienn.

"No," Stork said checking his weapon. "I'm making it up, just like you. Just don't leave me."

Sabienn patted him on the shoulder as a gesture of good luck and returned to the cabin. They pushed on further up past the first entrance and turned into the

second. The vehicle came to a halt on the side of the road just inside the entrance.

Ahead of them was the eerie outline of the historical ruins of Fort Heel. It was illuminated by the light of the green and the blue moon but there was also a light coming from within. They made quick work of the walk to the ruins and could see the light emanating from the quadrangle which was not fully in view.

Sabienn remembered the last time he'd visited here back in happier times. He played with Tesser in the quadrangle which had been used once before in another time for military drill and ceremony. The quadrangle was bounded by brick walls and led by brick arched access ways into the bowels of the busted turret house which had rock steps spiralling upward to the cannon housing.

The lights were there for late night viewing of the ruins. But it was well after midnight. In Sabienn's mind, it was odd that the lights would still be on.

They were about to reach the brick wall to give them a view into the lit quadrangle when Deep stopped them and pulled them in close. "Did you hear that?" he said in a whisper.

"No," Sabienn looked on at the big man's worried face.

"Someone said, 'I'm sick. When do we stand-down?'" Deep said recounting what he heard. "Then someone said 'Shut-up'. Hold back. This is a trap."

Sabienn looked to Bray and saw the concerned face of Deep. "If it's STL, how'd they get here so quickly?" whispered Sabienn.

The three men approached the brick wall with caution to peer over the edge into the quadrangle. Sabienn looked from one end of the flat drill ground to the other. The light was strong enough to make out figures of people and objects. He was shocked at what he saw.

Sabienn sat down with Deep and Bray behind the wall, he said quietly, "That doesn't make sense."

"What is it?" said Bray.

The three men lifted their heads again over the wall.

Sabienn's eyes looked to the rear of the quadrangle. There sitting against a wall unhooded, and it was unmistakeable, was his Captain Randd. He seemed to have his hands bound behind him as he sat.

Sitting next to him was a hooded and cloaked unknown figure, crouched and concealed also with his hands bound.

In the middle of the quadrangle was a stand that had three rifles resting on it. Similarly to how they were rested centuries ago. Ready to be accessed.

At the far end of the quadrangle next to the brick archway that led into the turret house, was a stand. On the stand was a purple and white "Place" cloak. Even at this distance, Sabienn could make out it had the same tell-tale stains that

he knew to be on Jarnnee's cloak.

"That's my Captain," said Sabienn both nervous and excited.

"It's a trap," said Deep.

"It's.. It's my Captain," Sabienn repeated. "I've known him my whole life. I trust him."

"Do you trust me?" said Deep. "This is a set-up."

"I have to go," said Sabienn, hell-bent and emotional. "I'll take Bray."

Deep looked to Bray, "I'll take up position over there." He indicated an area on the wall with a good field of vision of the whole area and held his black-edition in front for Bray to see. "Anyone lifts a weapon at you, I'll slot them."

"Thanks," said Bray. "I guess someone's got to baby-sit the boy." They both looked to Sabienn who wasn't listening to either of them.

*My Captain is down there, thought Sabienn. This plan has come together.*

Sabienn and Bray stood at the top of some stairs that led down to another doorway into the quadrangle. Quickly and quietly they descended and stood just out of sight for a few seconds assessing everything. They listened for noises and they looked for the signs of other occupants.

Feeling as if the coast was clear Sabienn held Bray back for a moment and stepped out alone into the quadrangle. *This is a dream.* "Captain," Sabienn said quietly.

Randd saw him and a shocked look took over his face. "Sabienn. You're here." He almost shouted it. *There must be no-one around,* thought Sabienn.

"Are you OK?" Sabienn walked forward a step but kept looking around.

"Pick up a rifle, Sabienn," said Randd. "We're still in danger."

"Sabienn." The other figure sitting next to Randd let his hood fall. It was Raajaa Deel. His best friend he'd known for years.

"Raajaa!" Sabienn said startled at the recognition.

"Sabienn, the rifle," said Randd.

He strode now to the stand of weapons and chose a standard issue military rifle. It was fully loaded.

"Where's Ambell? Where's Tesser?" said Sabienn.

"Safe," replied Randd. "They're at the boat. Waiting for us."

At that moment, Bray ventured forth into the light of the quadrangle. He moved to stand next to Sabienn and was constantly looking around.

"Who's this?" shouted the Captain.

"This's Bray," said Sabienn. "He's my friend. He's OK."

Randd and Raajaa looked at one another with concern.

"What's going on?" said Sabienn. "Are your hands tied? Here let me.."

Sabienn made moves to walk towards them to free their hands but Randd was

quick to respond. “Stay where you are,” said Randd. “We’re in danger. The guards have gone for a minute. But they’ll be back. There!” Randd motioned towards the other end of the quadrangle at the brick archway. “That’s the man!”

Sabienn looked to where he was indicating. Once again he couldn’t believe his eyes.

Standing within the archway was the figure of his once-hated rival, Jarnnee Krenn. He looked slimmer and his hair was fairer but he was the same man. And he was carrying a rifle.

“Kill him!” shouted Randd. “Fulfil your Supreme Order.”

Mixed feelings shot through Sabienn with the adrenalin in his veins. *Nothing makes sense here! But there’s the man. The man I’ve been chasing since I had wings.*

Jarnnee held a rifle but Sabienn saw his whole body language wasn’t of being full of fight but being flaccid and defeated. Even his weapon was slung like it was about to hit the ground.

*This is not right, thought Sabienn. But I don’t care. I’m about to complete my Supreme Order. I’ll no longer be deemed unreliable. Just one touch of this trigger. And I’ll be back in the love and loyalty of The Great Leader.*

Sabienn lifted his weapon and pointed it towards Jarnnee. He was in his sights. *What’s he doing? Why won’t he fight?* Jarnnee just stood there with his weapon horizontal at the waist and his head was looking down at the ground. Sabienn’s finger felt the curl of the trigger and Bray finally interjected.

“Hey,” Bray said. “Sabienn, what’re you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” said Sabienn, a little annoyed at the interjection. “It’s my Supreme Order. I have to kill Jarnnee.”

“Jarnnee?” said Bray, looking at the man about to receive a bullet. “Where?”

“That’s Jarnnee,” Sabienn said with quickened breath indicating the man before them. “The man I’ve got to kill. You know that.”

Bray looked towards Jarnnee, “That’s *not* Jarnnee.”

“*What?*” Sabienn was annoyed now. “Of course it is. It’s the man we’ve been following.”

“That’s *not* the man we’ve been following,” said Bray definitely.

Sabienn suddenly remembered Bray had never seen Jarnnee before the bus from Mission Ginger. It was then that Bray turned and pointed towards Raajaa Deel.

“*That’s* Jarnnee,” said Bray. His finger pointed toward Sabienn’s best friend for years.

“*What?*” Sabienn was dumbfounded.

“That’s the man I saw on the bus,” said Bray. “And at the Trek Shack.”

“Raajaa?” cried Sabienn to Bray. “You’re wrong! He’s my friend. I trust him.”

Randd became annoyed that nothing was happening. “Quick kill Jarnee, Sabienn.”

“Kill Jarnee,” shouted Raajaa.

*Wait a minute, thought Sabienn. Raajaa wouldn’t say that. Not the Raajaa I know. He was the man who pointed out how ridiculous this Order was. What’s happening here?*

Randd seemed to sense that it was the interjection of Bray which stopped the execution so he stepped in. “If that man is stopping you fulfilling your Supreme Order, then you have to kill him too.”

Sabienn looked to Bray. *That’s an order. From my trusted mentor. I’ve never doubted him. I’ve obeyed him for as long as I can remember.* As if on automatic pilot, Sabienn lifted his weapon and pointed it at Bray.

“Hey! What are you doing?” said Bray, feeling he was about to die. “Kill that guy if you want. But it’s not the guy. Is it worth killing us both?”

*Killing us both? Sabienn thought. Oh yeah. OK. Deep’s sitting on a wall with his gun trained on me. Shitting himself that he has to put a bullet into my head. And he’s not going to miss.*

Realizing the situation, Sabienn slowly lowered his rifle and raised a limp waving hand as if to indicate everything was cool.

“Sabienn,” shouted Raajaa. “You have to kill Jarnee. I have a Supreme Order too.”

“Shut up!” shouted Randd to the man beside him.

At that moment there was gunfire in the distance. It must have been Stork holding off the Grey Shirts.

“What’s that?” said Randd.

Sabienn sensed the distant gunfire seemed to affect Randd and Raajaa. It was something they hadn’t expected. Their tension went to another level.

“Kill Jarnee, you idiot!” Randd shouted towards Sabienn. He was livid verging on unhinged. These were not the actions of the mentor he knew and loved.

“You’re a fool, Randd,” a voice said.

Sabienn turned to the brick archway and saw the full figure of Captain Cayninn behind a teary-eyed and emotional female figure. Cayninn held a rifle and was pointing it at the woman. Sabienn’s heart sank. It was Joallee.

“Just kill everyone and let’s go!” shouted Cayninn. “Who cares who dies first?”

More shots rang in the distance and Cayninn felt the pressure to get out. She

lifted her weapon to the woman in front and put Joallee's head in her sights. At that moment a bullet fired from the top wall and mercifully entered Cayninn's neck making her go instantly limp and lifeless. The rifle dropped to the ground behind Joallee who had her head bowed expecting her demise.

"Sabienn." A shout came from behind. He turned and it was Raajaa, his good friend from childhood, pointing a pistol at him. He wasn't tied up at all. "I'm sorry. I have an Order. It's my dad or you."

Raajaa lifted his pistol and just as quickly a bullet entered Raajaa's heart. Bray had made one of the fastest moves Sabienn had ever seen. He picked up one of the standing rifles, aimed and fired. His swift actions saved Sabienn's life.

As Raajaa slumped against the wall, another shot rang out. This time there was a guard dressed in black standing in the archway with a rifle. Deep's bullet pushed him back against the wall and he slumped to the ground.

The pistol that Raajaa was holding was flung to the ground to his side. The Captain made a scramble to get to it but Sabienn saw him move. They both dived for it and the younger man managed to push it away.

They grappled and gripped each other. With a free hand, Randd stabbed three punches into Sabienn's face.

The Captain was on top of Sabienn now. As a man for his age he was still muscular and fit. He was more than a match for his cadet. From the folds of his cloak, a knife was produced. Sabienn saw it and held the arm as it came closer, the blade aimed for the young man's heart.

"Why?" said Sabienn.

"Shut up!" shouted the Captain.

"What about Ambell? And Tesser?"

"In Mission Mint. In a cell because of you. You and your wings," said Randd.

The blade was touching Sabienn's chest now but he found his strength. Sabienn gained leverage off his wings working within his clothes to topple the larger man on to his back.

"You were my friend," Sabienn said to his mentor.

"Not any more. You freak!" They stared into each other's eyes and there was a savagery in the Captain's glare. What they had was lost.

A pressure hold applied and a deft move transferred the knife across into Sabienn's grip. The knife was now pointing down toward the Captain's heart. Randd found a reserve of energy to push back but the younger man's new found animal strength was relentless.

"I'm sorry," said Sabienn with feeling, straining against the Captain's grip. The knife cut into Randd. "I'm so sorry."

"Why'd you..?" Randd seemed to lose all will to fight. "Why'd you have to

grow wings?”

The knife pushed all the way in. Randd's head lolled to the side as his last words were whispered, “Why?” Their eyes met for the last time. “Why?”

The blood flowed freely from the Captain's wound and the young man stared into the still eyes he'd once confided in. Tears welled in him. *This's not how it's supposed to end. All the people who are loyal in my life are supposed to be loyal.*

Sabienn looked now to his dead friend Raajaa. Bray was standing over him seeing his lifeless form. Quickly Sabienn knelt next to Raajaa and touched his forehead. *You were my best friend. I would have died for you. And you were prepared to kill me. Wait. I know you. In your pockets. The answer is there.* With a heavy heart, Sabienn placed his hand into Raajaa's cloak pocket. He pulled several pieces of paper from them and placed them within his own cloak.

“Hey!” came a shout from the upper wall. Deep was pointing to the sky from the south. “Look!”

They turned to see the ominous sight of an airship bearing down on them far off in the distance. Blue Fire Two made its way towards them with its gun turrets and guide lights blinking.

“Move!” cried Sabienn. Joallee had disappeared behind the archway to lead out a frail old woman that Sabienn instantly recognized. It was Lucee Krenn, the General's widow and Jarnee and Joallee's mother.

“Sabienn,” cried Joallee. “Thank you. They were here to kill us all. In front of you. For what father did.”

“We need to get going,” said Sabienn stowing the rifles on his shoulder. “Bray, look after Mrs Krenn.”

“I can look after my mother,” said Jarnee in a sour and surly manner. “I don't need a black wolf to carry her.”

Sabienn looked back at Krenn Junior. *You idiot.* “Jarnee, I should've done everyone a favour and stuck a bullet in you,” said Sabienn who had no time for this. “Now, pretty please, pick up y' mum and get your arse in gear. We don't have time. Move, boys! Move! Joallee're you OK?”

The tears had cleared from Joallee's face and she took responsibility for her family. She gathered them under her wing and sorted out her aged mother and recalcitrant brother. Sabienn saw she still looked as beautiful as the last time he'd seen her but she had become thinner.

“I need to get something from Cayninn,” Joallee said.

“Quick,” Sabienn and the others were heading for the access in the quadrangle to take them back up the stairs.

He glanced back to see she removed from the dead Cayninn's pocket an item that she held with deference. The item was something Sabienn had seen before.

It was the small native bag Jarnee used to deposit the assassin's blade in back at old man Krenn's museum. Within a second it was stowed. With another deft manoeuvre she retrieved her old medical bag from behind the archway and she was away.

They rushed up the stairs to join Deep. The gunfire in the direction of the Grey Shirts was sporadic. But they had to get to Stork. They all had to get far away before the airship arrived.

In the distance they could make out Stork hiding behind a brick wall lifting his head to fire the occasional shot. The Grey Shirts were now hiding behind the truck that Sabienn and his friends had all travelled there in. He had fallen back making a fighting retreat from the bridge. It was a valiant effort and a credit to him.

"Stork," Deep cried. The embattled Stork didn't need another invitation to come and join his friends. He fell back to the thick brick divide the group had found themselves all hiding behind.

"It's not good," Stork said breathlessly. "I got Wess. I think he's dead," he said blankly and without celebration. "These guys are armed. I think we're done for."

The airship was now on top of them and shining its spotlight down on the Grey Shirts on the ground. Sabienn's group had some bush cover that kept them concealed from the air.

Sabienn gauged his surrounds quickly. He saw the airship moving around in a circular traverse and he saw the truck that they all had arrived in. Sabienn saw the Grey Shirts position and knew they had to get through them to get to safety.

But the top of the truck cabin intrigued him. "Deep," he said. "Look at the truck. The cabin's roof. It's a slope. That airship is coming around." Sabienn pointed to the warship moving around low in the sky lining up far beyond them in the line of sight with them and the truck. "Ricochet some rounds. Off the cabin at the airship."

Deep took the instructions as he always did. As a challenge. He hoisted his black-edition and as the airship came in line with them on the other side of the semi-trailer, he let fire about ten rounds.

There was about twenty metres distance between them and the truck. The Grey Shirt boys had already come out from their cover with a little steel in their nerves. When the bullets flew over their head and hit the cabin they all dropped to the ground.

Sabienn knew well the ricochet was not an exact science. He remembered soldiers were told never to shoot at a flat and hard surface because of rebounds. But in this case it didn't matter. Deep got three or four of the rounds to spray in



the general direction of the airship; limp in their direction and force.

“Beautiful” said Sabienn.

“What’re you talking about?” cried Bray. “They’re not hitting.”

“Look at that gimbal turret,” said Sabienn. The group looked up and watched the airship’s small central gimbal turret assigned to take out incoming ordnance. It was spinning confused and frantic like a top. “That spatter pattern is raising eye-brows on the flight deck. I’m the flight captain and my cargo is the second most important person in the realm. Some clown on the ground is taking pot-shots at me. I would lean towards over-reacting. Agreed?”

“Warning!” A booming loud hailer voice came from the ship. “Warning! Your next shot will be met with lethal force! Warning!”

As if to put the exclamation mark into their warning, two bursts of machine gun fire left the airship’s gun deck to land on the ground harmlessly nearby. But it was close enough to keep the Grey Shirts on edge.

In the spotlight on the ground, Sabienn could make out Kleet moving quickly and crouched, holding on to his beloved dog Tosh by the scruff of the neck in one hand and a rifle in the other.

With a spot gut feeling, Sabienn lifted his weapon above the wall and fired a shot towards them. The bullet landed noisily but with no harm into the wheel rim of the truck close to him.

It must have spooked Kleet because he let go of Tosh to take cover. The dog left him and ran full-pelt into the bushes and kept running.

Looking on at Kleet in the spotlight, Sabienn saw him stand and rail his fist at the airship.

Sabienn sensed that Kleet was a man more known for his passion than his ability to think things out. “Get down!” Sabienn called to his group. “Everyone!” They took cover behind the brick wall.

They then heard the distinct voice of Botch shouting. “Kleet! No! NO! NO!” A single gunshot was heard.

“Cover your ears!” shouted Sabienn. He covered his ears and the others with him followed suit.

The flash was blinding. Three cannon shells burst on the other side of the wall and they could feel the shock wave move over it. The deafening Boom! Boom! Boom! It shook the ground underneath them and they huddled for dear life.

When it was quiet Sabienn poked his head over the edge. The Grey Shirts were wiped out. There was nothing discernable left to suggest there were humans standing there.

As they stood Blue Fire Two had come around to the old fort and held

position above the old cannon housing. A drop ramp was quickly lowered and STL spilled out from the belly of the beast to fill the quadrangle where they had just been.

“Move,” Deep shouted to Sabienn. The others had already jumped the fence and were making their way through the charred remains of the cannon strike. Except Sabienn.

He stayed looking and spotted the lone dark cloaked man descending the ramp. It was the murderous figure of his father.

“Sabienn, move!” Deep was hysterical. “*Move!*”

Sabienn lifted the rifle he had in his hands and lined up the dark Lord in his sights.

“What’re you doing?” Deep was beside himself with shock.

Sabienn still held his weapon steady. *This is suicide. But I don’t care. Any shot on the airship would be covered. The cannons on the roof would triangulate. I’ll be with the Grey Shirts. I don’t care.*

Murrlock Hyde stood there and Sabienn saw that the GIP almost for a moment sensed that the shot was on. *There’s no way he could possibly know,* thought Sabienn. And rather than run for cover it appeared that Murrlock exposed the meat of his chest to Sabienn. Almost daring him.

“No!” cried Deep. “Don’t do it!”

Sabienn held him in his sights. His finger touched the trigger. “Bang,” he said without firing a bullet. Sabienn lowered the rifle, “Next time.”

He jumped the wall and was off past Deep, “Let’s go.” They moved together now at pace.

“I was about to put a bullet into you,” Deep confided in a bad-tempered spit.

“You’d be crazy not to,” said Sabienn, he said calmly to his friend. He understood the anguish he just caused. “But I will kill that man. I swear it.”

“Kill him on your own time,” countered the big man with heat. He took time to grab Sabienn by his cloak lapel. “Don’t take us with you.” With that he pushed him away and ran off in front leaving Sabienn lagging behind.

Watching the big man in front, Sabienn came back to reality. He looked at his hand that held the trigger. *What a stupid thing to do. That was totally idiotic. I nearly got everyone killed.* He ate his humiliation cold and quiet.

The seven took up their positions with Bray at the lead and followed the line of the creek back into the forest. Deep kept his spot at the rear to keep an eye and ear on things. Sabienn rushed up to take his spot behind Bray and Stork fell in behind him. Joallee then led her brother who was carrying their mother. They all began to find a rhythm and increased their pace.

Behind them they could see the lights of an STL scouring crew looking

through the ashes of the Grey Shirts.

“If we’re lucky, they might think we’ve been vaporized with Botch and the boys,” said Bray.

Sabienn spoke sheepishly, “Maybe.” He caught Deep’s face in the moonlight who was keeping quiet about what Sabienn just did. *I’m an idiot*, thought Sabienn. *There’s an unmistakeable mental link I have with my father. Rather than thinking we’re dead, he may have an inkling I’m very much alive. How stupid and self-indulgent I am.* They made good progress and found themselves moving parallel to the main road.

“Airship,” cried Deep. The silent whirr of the motors was picked up by the big man’s ears in time for them all to find cover in the trees. It made a few sweeps and moved on. They kept pace and saw the familiar lights of Baino’s. Bray found his markings on the landscape to take them all east. It was still dark but dawn was approaching. They kept watch on the skies and kept their talk to a minimum.

Feeling his pockets again, Sabienn thought about the pieces of paper that he relieved from his friend Raajaa Deel. *These weigh heavy. Please let it not be so.*

Finally they reached the familiar sight of the pans left out for water and the camouflage covering of their home.

“Welcome to Camp Earless,” said Bray joyously to the new-comers.

“Welcome all. Rest, recuperate and wash down your sorrows. A thirty year curry awaits,” called Stork.

They were safe. But Sabienn still had some matters to attend to.

## 43. In Black and White

It had been a lifetime of one day since Sabienn had seen Trio and Tier last. Trio in particular was excited at the return of the men. She paid particular attention to Sabienn whom she hugged warmly and checked his skin for cuts and abrasions that would need her attention.

“You’ve been busy,” said Sabienn, seeing Trio’s gathered harvest of berries, wild vegetables, flowers and tube-roots. She quickly began to prepare a very presentable salad.

“The forest is full,” Trio said. “We could live like this for years. Will these people be staying?”

“They have nowhere to go,” said Sabienn. “That’s Lucee, Jarnee and Joallee.” *Best to keep it first names*, thought Sabienn. *The name Krenn might resonate with the old man butchering so many Turrs.*

Trio watched as Sabienn’s eyes stayed on Joallee. “You like the girl” she smiled.

Sabienn smiled and pulled his tended wounds away. “Thank you. Please, I’ll introduce you.”

After a time, Sabienn noticed that Mrs Krenn and Trio got on like a house on fire. They discussed food, life and children with relish. Even Jarnee was bearable. He was quiet and even gentlemanly under his mother’s close influence.

With her medical bag, Joallee found some artificial Turr ear-lobes in her bag which she sutured with care to Trio and Tier’s cut ears. The Turrs stared with approval at their images in a mirror Joallee provided. In Sabienn’s view, they stood up now and faced the group with dignity.

All had been cheerful during the homecoming meal. All in fine form and fettle. All except Sabienn. He was quiet and withdrawn. With his second cup of coffee in his hand, Sabienn excused himself from the group and walked outside and slung his rifle on his shoulder.

It was early morning and the light was subdued but brought all the features of the trees into clear focus. From a distance he watch a flock of ghost finch, a designated pest of the realm, rise up in spiral perfection into the air.

Sabienn sat on a rock and made himself comfortable. At his feet was the lid of a biscuit tin that the boys had bought the other day. The biscuits had long

since been finished and the main container was away somewhere being used to gather rain water. But the lid was as usual like any lid. Boldly emblazoned with the portrait photo of The Great Leader in full uniform. The ubiquitous slogan, “Obey Me” accompanied him.

His heart was like a dead stone as he reached into his pocket and retrieved the papers he had taken from Raajaa’s cloak. The first was nothing but a receipt for hair dye. The second a tab for a hotel. But the third felt familiar in his hand. It was folded and the paper sent shivers down his spine as he stroked it.

He opened it. And there it was. In black and white. Sabienn read it once. He read it again and he read it a third time. *These words. As much as I will them, they’re never going to change.*

It was a Supreme Order. *Just like Raajaa. Poor guy, thought Sabienn. You are compelled to read and swallow. But he was true to his word. Raajaa never swallowed paper.*

Sabienn read it again. “I, The Great Leader, Orr Benn Kee issue a Supreme Order to Raajaa Deel who, upon the completion of the Supreme Order of Cadet Sabienn Feel in the killing of Cadet Jarrnee Krenn, and after the said Cadet Feel has witnessed the death of Cadet Krenn’s mother Lucee and sister Joallee, must kill the said Cadet Sabienn Feel in a manner suitable for the occasion and with discretion. This is decreed.” The rest was the usual. It had the official seal. It had the signature.

*It’s real. Real enough to know the man who made it was in the room at the same time.* Sabienn looked down at the biscuit tin lid and saw the photo as he had done his whole life. But he was shivering now and his breathing was shallow. His vision began to star. He stood and staggered unsteady.

Tears welled in his eyes. *This sacred ground within me. With its carefully tended scented flowers. Of who I am and who I have been for my whole life. It’s just had a rake run through it.*

He looked now down at the photo. The man he had loved his whole life. It had that carefully coiffured hair of a man that looked like he could father a nation and that manicured moustache that made him look able to inseminate it. With *blanks*.

Sabienn looked down at the man and his appraisal spilled forth. *You fop. You front. You sham. You sickening butchering bastard. You absolute piece of shit. You prick of limp pricks. Pushing your dead boys up the tube. You ambush merchant. You gutless manipulative coward. You state-of-the-art wretched prize dog turd. How could I be so blind? Why could I not see this? How could I have been such an idiot? All the time believing he was above the government. He was the government.*

Still unsteady, Sabienn stood now and opened the folds of his cloak and looked down on the picture that he once worshipped and he pissed on it. He pissed on his hair. He pissed on his moustache. He pissed in his mouth. And it splashed on his shoes. He didn't give a shit.

*I gave my life to you! This was all a game. Like pawns that have to fall. Poor old Peep Jasspick. She didn't have clearance. And neither did I. A black wolf of the realm. A loyal cadet of Salt.*

He kicked the lid away from him and looked now to the sun above the sea in the east. *It's a new day. And my life is over.* He sat down and scrambled around and tipped his coffee over. *Here's the descent. Here's the dark place. I look towards a rifle. There's nothing left to live for. So why live?* He took hold of the weapon, pointed it upwards and let the muzzle rest on the bottom of his jaw.

Sabienn let it rest there for a few seconds just breathing in and breathing out. *I am Sabienn Feel. I am my mother's son.* The rifle came slowly down and he placed it to the side. *Maybe I can eke out an existence here at Camp Earless? Hermits live in the forest. That would be some kind of life, wouldn't it?*

Within him, his stomach rebelled and spew came forth and sprayed his breakfast salad on the ground before him. Once again he got to his feet but they were unsteady now. He stumbled and fell to his knees. His vision swam and all went black as he succumbed to a fainting spell.

In the black room of his unconscious state, a vision appeared. He viewed a man with his back to him. He was sitting in front of a dog who was side on to him. He walked closer to the man and he turned and greeted him warmly.

"Sabienn, Hi," said the man.

Sabienn was stunned to see it was Captain Randd and it wasn't a dog he was sitting in front of. It was a black she-wolf. The Captain was sitting with his hands on the animals teats spraying milk into a bucket.

"Captain?" said Sabienn not believing his eyes. "I killed you."

"I know," stated Randd blankly.

"I'm sorry," said Sabienn.

"I don't care either way," said Randd. "The planet is trying to talk to you. It chose me. Here!" The Captain took one of the teats and aimed it at Sabienn's mouth pushing a narrow spray on to his tongue. "What's it taste like?" Randd said.

Sabienn smacked his lips. "Like spew."

"Good," said Randd. "I have a message. Congratulations. You're going to Cajj Cajj."

"No I'm not," Sabienn objected.

"I'm not here to argue," said Randd. "Like some more?"

After a brief pause and more smacking of his lips, Sabienn replied, "Please."

The Captain aimed another spray and hit the young man on the tongue. The vision faded as his eyes opened to view a canopy of trees. His lips still smacked of the taste of spew but he savoured it almost as a rare treat.

There was another vision over him that made him believe he may have died and left the world. It was the beautiful Joallee standing over him. He was staring below her neckline.

"Are you OK?" she said quietly.

Without a word, Sabienn roused himself and tidied himself up. He then proffered to Joallee the Supreme Order he'd taken from Raajaa for her to peruse. She read the contents and Sabienn saw the words hit hard on her pretty face.

They found a rock that they could both share and they watched the sun rising in the sky through the trees. The pair sat silently for about ten minutes listening to the birds and the insects, side by side each looking forward.

Joallee was the first to speak. "Thank you."

"For what?" he replied.

"For everything." She was genuine. They slipped back into quiet but the moment was briefer.

"Do you remember the note I gave you?" Joallee said.

He thought briefly and spoke, "Meet at Port Tyla and look for a man called Jossack."

"Exactly," she said.

"Mm," mumbled Sabienn. "Not interested."

Joallee paused then spoke. "I understand."

"Don't take this the wrong way," said Sabienn. "I don't trust anyone. Not anymore."

"Of course," she said and kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks once again."

With that she left him to go back to the others in the cave. *That went easy, he thought. She's one of my most favourite people in the world. But for once in my life, I'm looking out for myself.*

The events of the past day had wrung his nerves dry and exhaustion crept up on him. He found a nice hollow in the trees affording him cover from the tree tops and he rolled himself up into a little ball. In no time he was fast asleep.

Sabienn slept for hours and for once he was spared the endless barrage of dreams. They slipped by mercifully without trace or memory.

When he awoke the sun was above him in early afternoon. He saw his friends all looking rested and moving around with purpose near the front of the cave. They were packing items and preparing for something. Deep was pulling apart his black weapon and giving it a good clean. Sabienn walked over and they

worked around him.

“Hey,” said Deep. “We didn’t wake you, did we?”

“Wake me?” said Sabienn feeling confused. “What’s going on?”

“This lady wants to go to Port Tyla,” Deep pointed to Joallee. “And we can’t let a young lady go on her own. It wouldn’t be chivalrous.”

“I don’t want to go,” said Sabienn.

“No-one’s asking,” said Deep, blowing some dust off something in his hand. “You’ve earned a rest. You’ve done enough as it is. We’ll just walk her up there and walk back. Spend a night in the forest. Simple.”

“Yeah, we’ve got this,” said Bray packing an old Turr army pack. “You’ve done enough.” He turned to Stork. “Listen, I think I can speak on behalf of everyone when I say you’re the best one to lead us. You have the most people skills.”

Stork stopped to puff up like a blowfish, “Why thank you, Steel. Thank you. And it’s a tough job. But I want everyone to see how it’s done correctly.”

“Quit it, will you?” Sabienn came back with a little heat. “Stop trying to be me to me.”

“Hey,” Deep moved in like the conciliatory voice of reason. “It was a joke. No-one’s trying to trick you. Get some rest. We’ll be back tomorrow. We all heard about the Supreme Order. It’s tough. Just take it easy.”

Sabienn stood quietly looking on at his friends quickly go about their packing. “OK. I’ll come,” he said. “Give me five. I’ll pack.”

“Actually,” said Bray. “Not wishing to seem presumptuous. You’re already packed.”

The three men looked to Sabienn and he walked over to Stork. “People skills,” Sabienn mocked and placed Stork in a playful headlock. “You goose. Pack some bananas.”

“Breakfast of champions,” Stork countered. “Dead man’s breakfast.”

“I’ll give you “done correctly”.” Sabienn broke the hold and they were all laughing. It was his first time since returning to Camp Earless that Sabienn felt his old cheerful self.

His friends allowed Sabienn some time to sort himself out. After that he gathered with them for the trek. Joallee appeared at the entrance to the cave dressed in a grey cloak and Sabienn’s jaw dropped. She looked so good he ached.

“Why so keen to help?” Sabienn said to Deep.

“Because we know something you don’t,” Deep replied and moved to pull on his gear.

Trio came up to Sabienn with a tear in her eye. The spritely Tier was by her



side and he gripped on to Sabienn's leg. "Good luck," said Trio.

"I'll be back," said Sabienn.

"No, you won't," she said and hugged him generously before breaking to move away with her son. Sabienn watched her go feeling confused.

Joallee hugged her mother and brother. "I'll be back soon," Joallee said.

"Be safe. We'll see you," said her mother. *Some people are returning and some aren't, thought Sabienn. Why them and not me?*

Sabienn and his friends, now with escort duty on Joallee, pushed off once more into the forest.

The trip into the forest this time was a lot more enjoyable than the other hikes. Everyone kept good pace and held a steady rhythm. Joallee was refreshingly quick on her feet and kept good stride with the others without any comment or complaint.

Sabienn positioned her so that she was between him and Bray at the front. And he looked at the way she moved. *Oh my goodness, she's got a cute little bum, thought Sabienn. I love a nice woman's bum and she's got one of the hottest. Lucky no-one can see me. Just look at the way it moves. That's nice.*

"Hey Joallee," said Stork quietly from behind. "Nice arse." At the comment, Sabienn cringed in embarrassment and averted his eyes in case he was spotted looking. *Stork can really make you spit sometimes.* "Old Say can't keep his eyes off it," added Stork.

*Why does he do that?* Sabienn thought, his face flushing red. *Why did he say that?*

Joallee turned and replied matter-of-factly and without offence, "I suggest we keep silence."

"I agree," said Deep. "I hear noises up ahead." They were close now to Fort Heel. "There still may be some STL activity," he added.

From a safe distance, Sabienn could see tourists. People with cameras taking shots of family. Children were jumping around on the gun housing just the way he and Tesser had done so long ago. *Tesser, Sabienn thought. Here's hoping Radd's death released her. What a mess.*

They kept close to the wall and moved carefully closer to where the action had occurred the night before. From a safe vantage point Sabienn viewed the grounds. It was as if nothing had occurred here. The logs had been removed from the road and the vehicles of last night's participants had vanished. The charred ground had been tended to and raked.

The only tell-tale sign was a few large black kno birds. They jumped around and pecked at what must have been some charred pieces of meat and then defecated on the ground. It was a cleansing of the area in Sabienn's mind. *These*

*are sacred birds in native culture. So they're now sacred to me. They're the only bird to spread the hope tree. Through their eating of seed and subsequent disposal. In this place of death there'll be bright white flowers.*

They pushed on for another half hour around the coastal cliff face. They were so near to the lookout that had special significance to some of them that they allowed themselves a break there. From the cover of trees they viewed a few cars. People were standing taking photographs and lovers were kissing with the spacious backdrop of Port Tyla.

*This is the carpark, thought Sabienn. This is where the legendary sign is. Of the bus crash that never occurred.* When they felt the coast was clear, Sabienn and Stork walked to the sign and read it avidly.

There was the usual information they'd been fed about the incident. Then all the names. Sabienn saw Sabienne Feel and Addlinn Rayne. His made-up parents.

"Here's me," Stork pointed. "Baja Keel and Coinlock Binn. Coinlock? It's a question I've asked myself my whole life. What kind of name's that for a guy?" He moved away and viewed the panorama. "You'd think that if they were going to pull your leg, they'd put a bit of effort into it."

To the left, Sabienn saw the Deerland War Cemetery which was on Hayddland soil but was sovereign Deerland territory. He knew it as one of the sacred sites of Deerland and watched the tourist boats make pilgrimage to its jetty. Their large red flags with the orange sun fluttered in the late afternoon breeze high atop their massive white poles.

To the right, he saw the sprawling mass of Port Tyla. It was a staple hub of the northern fishing industry and fishing boats were moored to myriad jetties. Sabienn saw the boats were being used for more than fishing.

Joallee casually strolled over to Sabienn still concealed by her hood. Even under cover, the sea wind messed her mousy brown hair beautifully. "There's despair over this city," she said. "Look down there." She indicated the many people on the docks in the distance which seemed like a mass of brown and grey. "People. Ready to take the perilous trip to Cajj Cajj. The last resort for Turrs without visas."

Sabienn looked to the ever-growing flock of black kno birds perched in the car-park trees. "There's death in the air. Not even the birds are a good omen."

A car arrived to park. Sabienn and Joallee took cover in the trees just separate from the others. Sabienn wistfully looked across to the car and the man and the woman within. They were embraced in each other's arms kissing.

"Hey," said Sabienn nodding towards them. "Wish I was doing that."

"You will one day," said Joallee.

"But not with you?" said Sabienn. "There's no chance?"

“Who knows?” she said. “Maybe.”

“You were right about the buses and the safety,” said Sabienn. “Why shouldn’t you be right about that?” He looked toward Joallee and she looked back. She leaned to kiss him on the cheek.

“You’re my good friend,” said Joallee.

“I know you,” said Sabienn. Joallee looked back at him uncertain as Sabienn continued. “Remember that day in the club. And you said to me, ‘I know you.’ I think you know a lot more than you are letting on.”

Before him was a large tree filled with love hearts carved and initials scratched in passion. He took a knife from his pocket and went to the tree and carved “121”. He knew it would be anonymous and innocuous to mean nothing to anyone.

“This is me,” said Sabienn admiring his carving. “Number 121.”

Joallee took the knife from him and carved under his scratching the number “39” and gave his knife back.

“What’s that?” he said.

“Just a number,” she said smiling. “You don’t know me at all. Shall we go?”

*That’s weird,* thought Sabienn. *She’s not one of the two hundred. The Krenns were her parents. What’s 39?*

Quickly they gathered themselves together and headed down back streets toward the Port. Bray’s eyes spotted on two occasions a black vehicle crossing the road. Upon his warnings they placed themselves into the shadow of nearby trees.

At a back street where fishing nets were spread for repair and the roads were freshly hosed of fish guts, they singled out the rear of a dwelling and walked to its back door. They were alone but for a few inquisitive cats and gulls.

Their approach must have been expected as the door opened before they got to it. A hand appeared and ushered them to enter urgently.

An old man who smelt like a dead fish, totally ignored the boys and kissed Joallee on the cheek. Without a word spoken they followed him to a back room which was warmly lit with lamps and filled with the latest electronic devices and appliances.

Because the man smelt like a fish, it wasn’t what Sabienn was expecting. The room was very pleasant.

“I honestly didn’t think I would see you again,” came a voice from behind. Grey Cape entered, clothed in his customary brown cloak, and immediately moved toward Joallee but his comment was directed at Sabienn. He gave her an avuncular peck on the cheek and once again addressed the young man.

“I’ve heard of your exploits. You’re an impressive man.” Grey Cape then

turned his attention to Joallee, “And when was the last time we met, my dear?”

“Last year,” she replied. “I was with my father and Pattee Standd.”

“Pattee?” Sabienn was stunned at the mention of the name.

“She’s a low level reader,” explained Grey Cape. “But nowhere near your stratosphere.” Once again to Joallee, “I was so sorry to hear the news. But your father made no friends. Thank you, Jossack.” The fish man arrived with coffee and treats that were readily jumped upon by the boys.

“Do you have the carry bag?” enquired Grey Cape. From the folds of her cloak, Joallee produced the small carry bag which contained the assassin’s blade and she passed it across to Grey Cape.

The old man received the item with great reverence and opened it. From the inside he retrieved the assassin’s blade. Its green jewelled inlay of its handle sparkled lightly in the lamp light.

“You travelled all this way for that?” said Sabienn. “This jewelled blade must be worth a fortune. To take such a risk.”

Grey Cape looked to Sabienn and returned to his work. With a casual air, Grey Cape took the blade and unscrewed the cap of its small compartment, the one used to house the suicide pill. Satisfied that it was empty he screwed the cap back on and placed the blade on a nearby table with all the attention to care of a discarded piece of fruit skin.

He then turned his attention to looking within the bag. Not inserting his hands but viewing intently the contents that must have been within. “They’re all there,” he said. He passed it back to Joallee who then seemed to take control of the situation.

“Could we all sit please?” Joallee said. She was usually confident in her demeanour but at the moment Sabienn could see she appeared unsure. “I know you were never a fan of my father,” she said to Sabienn. “And I have no right to ask you this. My father was a Colonel at Mission Cinnamon. He oversaw many things. Terrible things. And I’m not here to excuse him. At the Mission, there was a story of seven women.”

“He knows something of them,” Grey Cape interjected.

“Look all I know is this,” said Sabienn. “I saw seven women pleading that their ears may be removed. If they cut off their left ear they can’t sit at the right hand of their maker. The Colonel was warned to be aware of The Year of Wings. The year when the Stone Shepherds would awaken. If the ears weren’t buried with the rest of the body by this year, there was trouble. The women would never enter heaven and Krenn’s family would be cursed. How am I going?”

Joallee and Grey Cape were taken aback by Sabienn’s outburst.

Sabienn continued. “Oh by the way, did you know the head woman was

called Joallee. She was the daughter of Jeel the right hand man of Jarnnee, the chief. Why does your father name his children after the Tee Lee, a people he absolutely loathes?"

"I didn't know that," said Joallee dumbfounded.

"And I had another vision," said Sabienn. "I was at Finn's place and you were there." He indicated Grey Cape. "There was some guy called Captain Strainer. He said Krenn butchered all seven women and went ahead and cut off their ears. Like common Turrs. He was trying to offload this thing." He produced the green notebook he stole from Murrlock Hyde and passed it to Grey Cape.

When the old man's eyes saw it he was stunned. He held it in his hand and started flipping through the pages. "Where'd you get this?" Grey Cape said utterly gobsmacked.

"From my interrogation room," said Sabienn. "So, everyone. Whatever you're asking, I have one answer. Not interested. Go find someone else. Go get Pattee. Go get *Jarrnee*. Wasn't he the first to be asked? Just don't ask me. I've done my bit. Now I'm going to relax."

He nestled back into his chair and sipped his coffee after dumbfounding his audience.

"Old Strainer kept talking about a package", said Sabienn blankly.

"Would you like to know what it is?" said Grey Cape.

"No. If it doesn't concern me, I'm not interested," said Sabienn.

"Just for old time's sake, how about a read? Just one more?" said the old man. He indicated to Joallee, "Let him touch the bag."

She passed it across hesitantly and Sabienn was even less keen to receive it. He eventually relented to taking it and felt compelled to look at what he suspected was inside.

It was a gruesome find. "It's the ears, isn't it?" Sabienn asked. Seven small pieces of shrivelled and preserved flesh that had once been attached to beautiful and vibrant women. *What's this feeling? Like with the blue fire stones. They desperately want me to touch them.*

He resisted the urge to place his hand in. But he was receiving a feeling from the bag. That same tornado feeling occurred as it had done before. Channelling its way down through the top of his head. His vision went black and he was gone.

## 44. The Package

As he awoke in his vision, Sabienn had an immediate feeling of high tension.

He was in a place he recognized. It was the laboratory he saw when he had his vision at Krenn's Museum. It was the well-lit clinically sterile floor, walls and ceiling of the room at Mission Cinnamon. The bag in his hand was already on a side table.

Murrlock Hyde was present, twenty-three years younger, dressed in his black cloak. Also within the room was the man he'd just left in the present. Grey Cape was younger and his beard darker. He seemed more subdued and sat in a chair.

*There they are together, thought Sabienn. In younger times. The two brothers. Twins who couldn't be more different.*

"My services are to be terminated?" said Grey Cape.

"As of now," said Murrlock.

"Who'll be cultural liaison with the women?" Grey Cape enquired.

"There'll be none."

There was a pause.

"Brother," said Grey Cape. "You've been lying to me all this time. There was no mention of harm coming to the women in the legend."

"I'm making my own legend," said Murrlock.

"If you are the Holy One," said Grey Cape. "You should be gracious and show the lemon mask."

"I have no lemon mask," said Murrlock, pacing the floor impatiently. "I have no time for this."

"Then make time, brother," said Grey Cape. "What did our own mother say to us? She thought I was the Holy One and you were the Forlorn. She was convinced of this. She wondered why you couldn't even defend your own brother."

"I don't need a history lesson," said Murrlock.

"Well you'll take one," insisted Grey Cape. "She wondered why you just stood around when those Turr soldiers thrashed me across the back. To cover for you and Orr Benn. At that checkpoint in the Green Zone at Luck. And you had to go to her the next day to apologize. We both saw the missing list for that day. Our mother and Orr Benn's mother. Number one thousand and sixty-eight and

one thousand and sixty-nine. We were kids. Let it go.”

“I have no time for this,” Murrlock said viewing the clock. “And don’t take me on for not defending you. Just a warning, brother. Openly opposing Orr Benn is now treason. If you keep opposing his command to change the Blue Moon Bible that means death. You know he hates your guts. It’s only my say-so has kept you alive. But keep it up and it’s exile.”

“What?”

“House arrest,” said Murrlock. “Within the country. No more opposition *please*. Pack your bags. You fly back tonight. Oh, here’s news.”

Through the door entered the younger Colonel Krenn and two very worried guards.

“OK. Please,” said Hyde impatiently extending his palm. “Put it into my hand now.”

One guard realizing his life was measured in seconds now spluttered, “We have nothing, My Lord.”

“No,” said Murrlock in controlled rage. “That is not what I want to hear. That is *not* what I want to hear. This is what I want to hear. “My Lord while you were at bath a woman changing towels walked in under our noses. She flipped open the blue fire box and stole the “six” stone. A relic that had led every major army to victory. A relic with a traced ownership of ten thousand years. Gone. Under our careless gaze. We’ve tracked down the thief and put them to the sword.” *This* is what I want to hear. Can you say this to me?”

“My Lord,” continued the hapless guard, “the woman appears to have passed the item on to someone else. There were two men. One ran into the forest and one ran down to the boats. We found both. But nothing.”

“Where is the “six” stone?” shouted Hyde. “When I open my box I find only two blue fire “two” stones. And now a depression where its brother has been. Give me the “six”. Give it to me, *now*.”

“My Lord, we will keep looking,” The guard felt his world fall apart as the GIP grabbed the back of his head and with his muscular frame pushed the guard down on to the tiled floor.

“No,” said the GIP retrieving a pistol from his cloak “This is failure.” He placed a bullet into the back of the guard’s head and pushed him forward.

“Please no, please please,” the second guard squirmed as he had the back of his head pulled down by the GIP next to the dead body of his friend.

“This is failure,” said Murrlock shooting the second guard and pushing his head forward.

“This is failure,” he said again, pulling on the back of Krenn’s head and bringing him down to the floor. “Something I should have done long ago.”

“No! My Lord, please. My wife’s having a baby,” Krenn screamed.

“Everything about you sickens me,” Murrlock said to Krenn. “You had one task! One! Recreate the legend. And you failed. And not only failed. The lineage of stones has ended. Because of you. This one bullet is overdue.”

“No!” Krenn was screaming now and crying like a child. He was now pushed on to the ground and wallowed around in his charges blood and his own urine.

“That’s enough,” said Grey Cape, stepping up to stand near his brother. “Krenn is the only one with all the formulas. He needs to be spared.”

Murrlock stood with the pistol to the back of Krenn’s head then slowly lowered it. He then continued.

“You’re an idiot Krenn. A complete fool. These seven women, the ones in prison, you butchered them. One of them the woman with towels. The only link to my precious stone. There was no asking them, no pretty please, no interrogation. You just butchered them. Then cut off their ears as some peace-offering to me. Sick trinkets in a bag for my favour.” They all pointed to the bag on the table, the one Sabienn still held in his hand.” Get rid of this hideous thing. You sick little man. You disgusting imbecile.”

“Colonel,” said Grey Cape as he helped Krenn from the floor. “Please say you didn’t cut the ears of these women.”

Krenn looked to the ground in deference to the man who had just saved his life, “I did, sir.”

“Even after it was explained to you,” Grey Cape’s tone was dumbfounded.

It was sensed that Murrlock took personal pleasure from his incompetent Colonel being cursed and continued, “Krenn your efforts have required us to bring forward the removal. Killing seven women in such a manner has sent the camp into turmoil. What was planned for next month needs to occur this week.”

“Brother, no!” said Grey Cape. “This is barbaric. These women have done nothing.”

“It will be effected,” said Murrlock to his Colonel.

“As you wish, My Lord.” Krenn was still looking at the floor in humiliation.

“Go and pack your bags, brother,” said Murrlock, making haste for the exit and making a final turn to Krenn, “And find my stone!”

The vision went dark now and Sabienn came back to the present.

Upon returning to reality, the first thing Sabienn saw was Joallee’s inquisitive face. *She’s a good woman*, he thought. *It’s best not to detail the extent of her father’s humiliation.* He turned to Grey Cape, much older and fuller in beard in the present.

“The “six” stone is missing,” said Sabienn. “Your brother showed me the stones in my interrogation. The two stones were glowing with blue fire. They



wanted me to touch them. The missing one was replaced with a plastic replica. About this size.” He used his fingers to measure something the size of a tooth.

“Interesting,” said Grey Cape. “Anything else?”

“Only that the two stones seemed distressed,” said Sabienn. “Sounds stupid, doesn’t it?”

“On the contrary,” said Grey Cape. “It makes perfect sense. If only I’d known you were to bring me this notebook,” he said, indicating the green book. He got up to stand, “Then I wouldn’t have done this.”

He opened his brown cloak to reveal the black uniform of STL. “I’m now a consultant. To General Kreem who is staying on. It was the only way I thought to get close to this information. And now you just drop it in my hand.”

At that moment Grey Cape’s pocket started ringing. He retrieved a device from his black cloak which must have come with his office and noted the caller.

“This is going to be difficult,” Grey Cape said. “Mr Jossack, curtains please.” Jossack pulled the white curtains closed as a backdrop behind Grey Cape as he set the device up on the table to allow him to speak hands-free to it. “It’s my brother. I need to take this call. We’re safe. It can’t be traced.” The room fell quiet with nervousness as the presence of the GIP amongst them was imminent. “Forgive me for what I’m about to say,” Grey Cape said to Sabienn. “I need to survive.”

Jossack set up a larger screen to loop into the images Grey Cape was watching come through his device. As the picture spluttered alive, there was the image of Murrlock Hyde in full black regalia. He stood in a crowded room with black curtains drawn behind. Sabienn saw that he could look on at the image but it could only see what was being viewed through Grey Cape’s device and Murrlock couldn’t see him.

“Brother, where are you?” said Murrlock.

“You find me in Cajj Cajj,” said Grey Cape. “First day on the job. I’ve hit the ground running.”

“Cajj Cajj?” said Murrlock in disbelief. “You were never much of a liar.”

“Is Orr Benn in the room?” said Grey Cape.

“We won’t be disturbed,” said Murrlock. “The Great Leader is at evening hallucination.”

The GIP then pointed his device at The Great Leader within his room. The scene that filled the larger screen occupied it for about three seconds but it stunned Sabienn and everyone else in the room. There was The Great Leader attired in a purple robe seated behind a desk. There were opened vials on the desk of some soso preparation that had sent him to a state of relaxed stupor.

But that wasn’t what interested Sabienn. The man was completely bald and

had no moustache. To the side on his desk there were some mannequin heads each with a full and lusty well-manicured head of hair ready for placement on the regal scalp. There were boxes of well-cut moustaches laying there for his perusal and choice to grace the sacred lip.

With The Great Leader's head back enjoying the fireworks in his mind, a servant was diligently manicuring his fingernails being careful not to wake him from his slumber. At the end of the desk a person busily wrote down notes possibly for an upcoming speech and people typed machines possibly for the delivery of Supreme Orders.

On a bench behind The Great Leader, Sabienn noticed there were three men who were absolutely identical in appearance to the great man. The doubles were sitting there reading magazines and they were all dressed in charcoal uniforms. They appeared to be positioned to receive immediate instructions.

The scene left Sabienn gobsmacked. *This isn't a man*, he thought. *This is an industry*. And there were more sinister overtones to what he was seeing. A table before the desk was filled with plates of magnificently prepared food which went largely untouched but stayed ready in case the chosen fingers wished to dabble. There were all sorts of fine wine and alcohol on display should the regal thirst need quenching.

And along the back wall Sabienn noticed a line of young men and women with their heads bowed like their spirits had been broken and busted. He suspected that they were there for some dark purpose of entertainment because they appeared fragile and scared.

*This is the crucible. These are powerful powerful men*, thought Sabienn. *Relieved of any modest downward force that will keep a lid on their appetites and desires. Any whim however questionable was able to be satisfied. Because it can*. He looked upon the bald man. *I can't believe I worshipped you. You are a pampered slave to sensation. And I stand here watching you. I'm sober. I'm relevant. I'm in the here and now. I am so much more superior to you*.

At that moment, the screen was filled again with the GIP's face as he kept talking. "I have news of the notebook, brother," said Murrlock. "It's gone. As is Sabienn Feel. Both were vaporized by a shell at Fort Heel. I'm speaking to you as a brother now. It's over. Please cease your consultancy, Rutherlenn. Our victory depends on you being alive. And you know how Orr Benn feels about you. It's time to go back to Ambia Vee. Please, I beg you."

"Is that so?" said Grey Cape. "Shows you're not much of a liar either, brother." Grey Cape held up the green notebook. "I have the notebook here. And.." Grey Cape moved around grabbed Sabienn from his chair who had just enough time to put his coffee and the native bag down. He pulled Sabienn

towards the camera to show the GIP. “I have this.”

Just the look on the Murrlock’s face as it appeared on the larger screen showed the powerful man’s jaw drop in disbelief. “Brother, you’re never content with private humiliation, are you?”

“When I volunteered for this consultancy,” said Grey Cape, “you’ve done nothing but give me obstacles. I asked for leads, I ask for readers, I ask for access. You give me *nothing*.”

“I’ve given you readers,” interjected Murrlock.

“You’re readers are *useless*. Brother, you display all the fine qualities of executive management. You’re sickening. You’re obstructionist. You’re prone to the abuse of surveillance. You strip away any resource that is useful. And you know everything but you know *nothing*. I said to you, I will find the “six” stone and I *will* find the “six” stone. Because I have the leads,” Grey Cape held up the notebook, “I have the reader,” Grey Cape pulled Sabienn in closer, “and I have the diplomatic passport that lets me go anywhere. So stay out of my way, please. Because I will find this thing. And I’ll find it despite your grief. I’ll find it just to spite you.”

Murrlock’s face was stunned. When he managed to form words he directed his response to Sabienn. “My brother is irrational, boy. But he has to live. You, on the other hand. You cannot walk through the world with your body singing any other song than mine. Your body has rebelled to show its weaker bloodline. So please, mark my words favoured son, because I have lost face here. I will kill you, but not before I’ve played with you like a cat plays with a string.”

“The notebook has a few pages,” said Grey Cape to his brother. “It’ll be copied and back on your desk in the morning.”

“Are we done here?” Murrlock’s tongue was poison-tipped.

“I believe I’ve stated my case,” said Grey Cape indignantly. “Please ensure matters improve.” The screen went dead.

They all looked to Sabienn. “You bastard,” Sabienn said to Grey Cape. “I didn’t sign on for that.”

“I’m sorry, I know,” said Grey Cape feeling remorse. His demeanour was now rational. “The only thing keeping me alive,” continued the old man, “is his deluded belief that I’m the Forlorn. And our victory depends on my survival. But my currency is wearing thin. The Great Leader loathes me. And once they find they can get victory without the “six” stone, then they could probably get victory without the Forlorn. My life’s on a tight wire.”

Looking toward the old man, Sabienn could finally get a grip on the predicament. And it made him think back to his old vision. “Your brother says he’s The Holy One. But at Finn’s place, they were talking about another Holy

One. One that only one person has seen.”

Grey Cape thought long and hard about the question before answering. “I have to believe this. I have to hope that this is true. I have no proof, no reports. Nothing. Just a feeling. A feeling there is a real Holy One. And all the stones will be gathered and taken there, so the healing can begin.” Whether it was exhaustion or a faint spell, Grey Cape went down on his knees in front of Sabienn. “My brother believes he’s the Holy One. He holds the absolute certainty that the killing of eight million people is part of the healing. I have to believe there’s more. I have to hope there’s more. All I have is hope.”

From the back of the room, Deep swept around and helped the old man to his feet. Sabienn looked into his eyes at the genuine pain there.

“Just say I agree to one challenge,” said Sabienn. “One, mind you. What is it you want?”

The old man looked to him and held up the green notebook. “Every one of the leads in this book,” said Grey Cape, “deals with some aspect of the death of the seven women. The women whose ears are now in this bag. When we find the truth behind what happened when the women died, we’ll find the “six” stone. Hopefully.”

Grey Cape moved closer to Sabienn, “I want you to go to Cajj Cajj. Speak to Jossack about passage there. I need a read on a photo that was owned by a guard at Mission Cinnamon. Go to Port Cord and await my message. You need to exit quickly from Port Shale. Cajj Cajj is to be invaded by our army. It is to be invaded for an incident that has yet to occur. I’ll send message through my dogs. They’re native hounds and you have native blood. One will be waiting at Port Shale. Simple.”

The young man took in all that had been said and was preparing to give his answer when Deep jumped in, “He’ll do it.”

Joallee entered the conversation. “Sabienn, these ears need to be buried with the mothers. At Mission Cinnamon. Jarnee can’t do it and I have to look after my mother.”

Once again it was Deep. “He’ll do it.”

Sabienn felt annoyed he couldn’t make the decision in his own right. Seeing Deep was volunteering him for a mission he wasn’t going on.

“OK,” said Sabienn feeling put upon. “Whatever.”

From outside the door there were murmurings building to crescendo and Jossack poked his head back in to the room and turned to Grey Cape. “Sir, there are visitors here,” said Jossack. “I’ve tried to send them away. But they heard you were here. They won’t leave.”

“Please,” said the old man, inviting Jossack to let them through. Into the

room came two elderly people. A married couple, although the husband was human and the wife had the ears of a nebula. But Sabienn could see they gave the impression of a comfortable happiness of people in their golden years.

“As I live and breathe,” said the man. “It’s you.”

“It is you,” chimed in the woman. They both fell to their knees in front of Grey Cape offering unadulterated adulation to a man Sabienn only knew of as an old friend.

“Please,” said Grey Cape taking everything in his stride. “I’m not supposed to be here.”

“Neither are we, sir,” said the woman. “If we were found, we’d be hung.”

“Do you need food?” said Grey Cape. “Please take some food. Make sure you use an accredited smuggler. These are very dark times.”

“Thank you, sir,” said the woman. “For your compassion in the Bol War.” She kissed his hands. Sabienn looked on in bemusement at Grey Cape, his old friend. *This man still is a Champion of the Revolution. That would have meant a lot to me yesterday. But does anything mean anything to me anymore? One thing I do know. More than anything in the world. What I would love to see is the overthrow of the fop, The Great Leader and my father, The Grand Inquisitor Profound. And I remember from school, a vacuum can never exist in politics. Those stories of starry-eyed revolutionaries ring true overthrowing a bad government. But they didn’t know how to govern themselves. And a year later, the dregs of the old government find purchase and get back into power. And then put the revolutionaries to the sword. He saw how Grey Cape was working the room and the old couple were still bowing reverently to him. In any new administration, this man would have to figure highly. Grey Cape has lineage and legitimacy. And he clearly has the respect of that dormant populace. This would be interesting. If I cared.*

The group within the room seemed now to adopt the air of a conversational party. The old people hung around for a few more minutes before graciously excusing themselves. Sabienn saw Bray was talking to Joallee and offering one of the Oololo map copies. Stork took some nibbles at food and Deep just stood at the back, as if he was stewing over something.

Grey Cape went around to each of his friends and quietly had a word in their ears which they took with a nod. When Deep received his comment in the ear, he took the old man’s hand and kissed it. Sabienn stood from his chair and held the bag of ears with a casual air. “Guys,” Sabienn called to his friends. “Let’s get some air.”

Sabienn walked to the front landing of Jossack’s place. It was now early evening and laid out before them were lights on the water as the boats threw

down their nets. “Well that would be the eastern black fish they’d be laying their traps for. They look in high spirits on the sea. But look at those dark clouds coming from the north,” said Sabienn. The darkening sky held the two moons in their bright green and blue.

Stork and Bray followed Sabienn on to the landing with Deep also there but keeping to the back shadows.

“I just wanted to say goodbye properly,” said Sabienn, choking back emotion. “I’ll miss you guys. When I saw the vision of my mother, I was asleep. But I’m wide awake now.”

From the back shadows Deep moved forward and cut him short. He lifted his big palm and slapped Sabienn firmly across the face. It rattled his teeth and Sabienn was shocked to the core. “Who the hell do you think you are?” said Deep. He was standing over Sabienn now with his fist clenched in his face. He was absolutely livid. The friends had never seen Deep this worked up. “What was that in there?” Deep said pointing back to the room. “Wake up to yourself! *Who* are you?”

Sabienn was stunned and could only look into the wild eyes that had always once been a sea of calm.

“What’s this, “I didn’t sign on for that” and “I’m not interested.”” Deep mimicked Sabienn to his face. “What a load of hot cock! What a weak and poncing wank! You are absolutely shameless! You had a Champion of the Revolution on his knees before you. And you called him a bastard. Who the *hell* do you think you are? Give me that thing.” He pointed to the native bag in Sabienn’s hand. “You’re holding it like a bag of laundry.”

With a glance down at the bag, Sabienn received what he believed to be a voice from within the cloth material. The voice said, “Courage, young man. Your mother would be proud.” Upon hearing it, Sabienn passed the bag across to his friend. Deep took control of the bag with a reverence as if he were handling the most precious diamonds in the land.

“You know I have never said this to you,” said Deep a little more subdued. “I’ve *never* said this. You are an *idiot*. You are so lucky. You know that when your mother died, she was buried complete. But part of *my* mother may be in this bag. Or his. Or his.” He indicated the others. “And even if it’s not, it’s a woman that *knew* my mother. Knew *your* mother. Even if this curse is nonsense,” Deep held up the bag, “it’s what *they* believed. So it’s got nothing to do with what I think. These women need to find peace. Don’t tell me I’m not involved.”

He stowed the bag carefully into the security of his inner cloak next to his hard chest.

*Oh my goodness, thought Sabienn. I got it. I needed that shock of shame.*

*Tipped like ice cubes and water over my head. I'm sober now. What an idiot. I was acting like some spoilt-brat superstar laying down demands. When I'm just a small stitch in a larger piece of fabric.*

With new eyes, Sabienn looked now to Deep. He was offering some words under his breath to the item he had just secured. The two others moved in and placed a hand on the bulge in his cloak that the carry bag made, like it was some delicate egg awaiting to hatch.

Sabienn looked on at his three friends. *There's obedience here. Just as important as any Supreme Order. It's the unwritten instructions on display of a dutiful son. The laws of gravity of a mother and child in orbit. And there was a need here to fulfil the wish of someone who suckled and held them. Nurtured and loved them.*

"That old man," said Deep, his eyes indicated towards Grey Cape in the room. "He's a good man. I don't know anything about a "six" stone. Or whether it'll help save a world that couldn't care less if I lived or died. But if he says it's important, it's important. He came up to me and said I'm the "ears". So here's my rifle." Deep lifted it from his shoulder. "Here's my ears. I'm in."

"Hoo," said Stork to Deep. "How many words was that? I wasn't counting."

"Grey Cape came up to me," said Bray, "and said I'm the "eyes". You couldn't find your way out of a paper bag," Bray said to Sabienn. "And if I've got this straight, we're looking for something that can't be found. And when we find it, we take it to someone who may not exist. That doesn't sound too difficult. I'm in." Bray pointed to his own eyes, "Because I'm the best."

"Grey Cape came to me," said Stork, "and said I was the "orifice". Which I think was good. He didn't say which one. But being the stupid one, I feel I have so much to live up to. So if these women need to find peace, we'll need a leader. If you're just going to stand there and play with yourself, we'll get someone else. If you want to get your hand off it and join us, I'm in."

Sabienn looked towards his three friends. *There's dark blood in my veins of a father that wants to kill me. But it's the one thing that unites me with these magnificent men. My fellow failed experiments. My brothers whom I'd gladly die for.* He teared up and faced Deep, "I'm sorry. I didn't think."

Stork faced Sabienn and was more insistent, "Lead us!"

As if a tornado entered Sabienn's skull from the top and went down to his boots, he felt energy and pulse and adrenalin of excitement of the quest ahead. He looked to sea at the dark clouds in the distance. Somewhere out there was the distant landfall of Cajj Cajj.

"Maps?" said Sabienn.

"All Oololo maps are here," said Bray patting his pocket.

“We’ll need a new pack,” said Stork.

“Get one,” said Sabienn. “Check Jossack. We’ll need plastic bags. We’ll be in the swim. Bray, Stork check the village. Deep hold back and guard them. Anything black, slot it. No brother, *no* brother of mine dies. Not on my watch.”

Lightning flashed in the clouds before them and thunder rolled from Cajj Cajj across the sea. “Only a lunatic would go out in that,” said Sabienn.

As the four men watched on, a breeze rolled in and they let their wings extend to their length and catch air. The three friends each placed a hand on Sabienn’s shoulder.

“We make Cajj Cajj tonight,” said Sabienn. “Get behind me.”



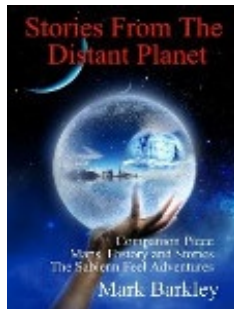
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