

The Kingdom of Tharg

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Contents

1	A Lost Journey Home	5
2	The Dark Mirror	17
3	Finding Home	29
4	Home Time	49
5	The Call of the Mirror	61
6	A Doorway of Doorways	73
7	The Kingdom of Tharg	83

Chapter 1

A Lost Journey Home

The land was warm and yellow. A rich, golden light bathed the mountain tops as Calir and his friends made their way home. The path they were wending their way down was an easy one and the evening was comfortable and still.

“Ah! Well, that was a wonderful celebration, Cally!”

“It certainly was”, replied Calir, after taking a draw on his pipe. “A splendid celebration indeed.”

“I enjoy these little excursions of yours, I do, but I enjoy returning home almost as much.”

“Oh, Placor”, chuckled Calir, “never did I meet a citizen of Domum more prepared to return home after stepping out from his door for a pipe. Even when he’s still in his slippers and was just after a draft of air!”

“Guilty as charged Cally, guilty as charged. There really is nothing like home after all, as they say. Its nice to go away,

but it's nice-the-more to return to one's door."

"Careful Plac, any more of that and I'll have to brand you a poet!"

Calir and his friends were in high spirits on the gently falling path back out of the mountains that evening. Nothing could have been further from their minds than the ordeal that was about to present itself to them, nor the hardship that they would be forced to endure before even one of them saw the pleasant townships of Domum again.

"Will we walk back through the night?" called one of the younger men from the rear.

"Not afraid of a night-time stroll through the mountains are you?" called another.

"Not at all! I was asking out of hope - I love a good stroll under the stars!"

Calir smiled to himself at the enthusiasm of his friends. He was looking forward to the return journey as much as the rest of them, possibly even more than Placor. He'd been organising these annual get-togethers for a few years now. He kept it up as much to get him out of the house as to meet up with old friends. But he really was most happy sitting on his front step on a Summer's evening, watching the gentle sunset and blowing smoke rings into the ruddy sky. Being away for a couple of nights once per year was enough to clear the cobwebs, stretch the legs and rejuvenate any ailing desires to be right back where he'd started from.

"Absolutely my friends, I wouldn't want to deprive you of the glory of the mountain foothills lit only by the moon and the stars. We walk to day break and fall asleep with the dawn!"

As the evening progressed into night, the friends became quieter and lost in their own thoughts. Each had a glimmer of a smile on his face as he glanced amongst his fellow travellers or up at the night sky, or out at the receding mountainside bathed in moonlight. The temperature dropped as the night chilled towards midnight. No-one remarked upon this at first, but towards two in the morning, someone piped up from the middle of the group.

“It’s uncommon chilly tonight!”

Murmurs of agreement came from all sides. The group stopped and, after some minutes of debate, they decided to camp up there and then, rather than waiting for dawn. They had but to unfurl their blankets, huddle up next to each other and they were all fast asleep within the space of ten minutes. Twelve friends, lined up next to each other, gently snoring.

It was at this time, in the dead of night, whilst all were in a deep and pleasant sleep that odd things began to happen. As the morning progressed, so did the night. Rather than a pale red beginning to colour the eastern horizon, the sky cleared into a frozen vista of stars that were fixed and unchanging. A light snow began to fall and tufts of grass here and there beside the path turned into glistening white stalks of frozen dew. Crystalline shapes formed on the scattered pools of water caught amongst the rocks as their surfaces froze. In short, the mild mountainside so full of joy and warm feelings a few hours earlier became frigid and icebound.

One by one, the friends of the party stirred and shivered, huddling themselves under their blankets and trying to preserve the warmth that had fled in the night.

“Phew, it’s snowing!” came the first of the exclamations.

“Mercy me, it’s freezing!”

“What’s happened to the weather!”

“Let’s move along”, Calir asserted, sounding more certain than he felt. “We’d best be off in this weather - the sooner we’re off, the sooner we’re home.”

It didn’t take much cajoling to get the group moving and before long they were trudging down the path, stamping their feet and blowing into their hands. Except, the path was no longer leading down. In fact, it was leading back up. And, rather than descending into quiet woodland amongst dappled light, they were ascending into a fractured ice field, bare and bright in the eery light of the clear night sky. All around were ice-blues and glistening-silvers as they began to be surrounded by teeth of ice shooting this way and that. They huddled closer together and kept going, but were quiet now, each nursing his own fears about where they might have gone wrong and when they might turn round. Calir in-particular was wracked with feelings of doubt about their way back home. He knew the path to and from the celebratory mountain retreat well, having made the journey many times in the past. He often wandered in the hills by himself when he was feeling restless or wanted to escape the confines of the port-town. Never in his wildest imaginations, let alone his living experience, had he ever seen a land so desolate and hostile as this. This ice-continent was barren and unwelcoming in a way that Domum was fertile and embracing.

They stopped once or twice. First to don their warmer clothes - shawls, cloaks and the like. Second to wrap themselves in their night-time blankets, re-buckling their belts around the outside and stretching the tops over their heads like ill-fitted cloaks. Their toes were numb and their hands blue. They trudged on in silence and fear, wondering where they’d end up and how they’d get home.

Just as Calir was considering turning back and trying to re-trace their steps back out of this ice-land and onto the mountain, he spotted a sheen of yellow amongst the desert of pale blue. He started forward with a renewed energy and saw that it was a tall, sandstone wall rising over the false-horizon of a nearby serac. Calir was more excited than surprised - or suspicious - to see such an unlikely feature in such an icy wasteland as this. He was simply relieved to find a break to the rising tension of the frozen landscape and eager to find a sign that might indicate the end of this hideous detour into the unwelcoming ice.

“Come on friends, up ahead: looks like an old fort of some kind. Maybe we just got lost coming down the mountain!”

Calir’s words were the first that had been uttered by anyone in the group for many hours and they shattered the silence like an icicle falling to the ground. They all hurried forward and, when the wall came fully into view, headed for the large, open door at the base. As they approached and passed through the opening, it turned out to be less of a door and more of a tunnel through the outer wall. Much like a drawbridge of old, it had a large, spiked, iron portcullis raised into the ceiling, until only the bottom protrusions were revealed. The tunnel led inside into a large hall with a vaulted stone ceiling. Tall, cathedral-like windows down either side of the hall let the pale, icy light in, but with none of its chill. The sand-coloured walls lent their warmth to the light, turning it yellow with a cheer that one could almost believe. Everyone felt the rise in temperature, accompanied by a rise in their spirits, when they stepped into the hall. They fanned out, shrugged off their outer blankets and looked around.

“Wow, look at this place! Its huge!”

“I wonder who lived here?”

“At least it’s warmer in here than out there!”

As soon as the group of friends spread out into the room, they relaxed and assumed their previous airs of cheerful optimism and good-natured friendliness. They wandered this way and that, stamping their feet and rubbing their hands as they warmed up in the hall, almost as if the golden light had the power to thaw their frozen limbs. Calir shared the general feeling of relief, but not to the point of abandon. He was still worried that they were a long way off course - even further from home - and had a niggling doubt about this oasis of shelter in the desert of ice without. There was something about it that was just too good to be true. It had been there right when they were reaching the limits of their endurance, right when they needed it - right when they were ready to turn around. He walked further into the hall, looking about him with more caution than wonder. The hall opened out into a roughly rectangular space, wider than it was deep. Calir was crossing the midpoint towards the opposite wall, which seemed to be a mezzanine level of some kind. There was a balustrade running along its top below the still significant rise to the vaulted ceilings above. A small doorway opened in the middle of this inner wall, behind which he could see the first few steps of a rising stairwell. A stairwell which presumably led to the higher floor and out onto the mezzanine. Calir had just determined to climb the stair so as to gain a better vantage of the fortress they found themselves in, when he was stopped dead in his tracks. His heart leapt in his chest, and the bottom fell out of his stomach. His already pale face turned to a picture of ice and his mind turned to the worst.

The sound of laughter broke into the warm echoes of the hall, dousing the idle chatter of the group with a draft of

chill air. It was the sound of a predator closing in on his prey and taking amusement in doing so. Except that the laughter was akin to that of a hyena, and the hyena is no predator. The hyena is a scavenger and so was the man that appeared at the edge of the balustrade, looking down from atop the mezzanine at the folk scattered here and there, with Calir foremost amongst them. He was dressed in a ragged shirt of torn linen, with scraps of animal fur about him here and there. A rough belt of leather was slung about one shoulder and a loose loin cloth hung around his waist. His arms and legs were bare, as was much of his chest, displaying a muscular frame bound in ice-cold skin. His skin appeared ice-cold, because of its colour - a pale blue of deep, clear ice. His dishevelled hair and beard were pale to the point of albino. Even his lips appeared blue. The only colour about him, which betrayed his membership of the warm-blooded races, was in his tongue, which flicked and lolled as he spoke. It was a deep, blood red. Deeper than the blood that surely must have flowed through his veins. It was the red of old blood; of dead blood; of blood shed.

Silence reigned: every man in the room stopped and stared at this intruder to their peace, this claimant of their joy. The laughter trailed off and came to a stop. The man stood still, surveying the group with a easy, sly smile on his face.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here my boys, what do we have here...”

His smile deepened into a grin and his eyes came to rest on Calir. Calir’s gaze was already locked onto this pale omen of frozen death. He couldn’t look away. He could feel the eyes of the others glancing against him side-long, snatched away from the man above furtively in case he noticed. They were all expecting him to do something. Anything.

“Er, well,” he cleared his throat, “hello there, my good man, er, how do you do? Rather cold here isn’t it?”

Calir gave a single, fearful chuckle that was not repeated or returned by anyone, and continued.

“We were just looking for our way home, actually, we’re heading back to Domum Continent. I don’t suppose you or your, er, boys could set us on the right path, could you?”

Silence prevailed now as all eyes fell on the figure leaning over the balustrade. The smile seemed to wane about his lips and his eyes grew colder still.

“Tharg can, my boys. Yes, Tharg will, you just wait,” the last of which he uttered almost in a tone of fear or veneration, but no longer with intimidation. Now it was he who was intimidated and the rest of them felt it. They felt cold stabs of fear run through them at the name of Tharg. None of them had heard it before, but all of them felt that this name was linked to their fate in this place. He was the master of their destinies now and he may not be sending them home after all.

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“Indeed he can!” came a new voice, booming out into the hall. A rich voice, deep and velvety, full-bodied and hearty, but laced with deceit and treachery. A voice to fear and respect. A voice to hide from and run from. Not a voice to be at the mercy of.

Muffled steps were heard descending the staircase from the mezzanine and from the doorway in the wall ahead of them, a figure appeared. He was tall and broad shouldered, similarly attired to the man at the balustrade, but with thick, entwined hair falling to his shoulders and a full beard. All of his hair was a bleached white colour, whilst his skin

was a clear, translucent blue. His eyes were completely white and he walked bare-footed. He was a muscular and impressive figure, powerful in his physical presence and commanding in his gaze. Calir felt a thrill of fear as those white eyes glanced across him, surveying the hall.

"I am Tharg!" cried the newcomer, spreading his arms wide, "And I welcome you to my Kingdom, my Kingdom of Ice. And, I welcome you to my troop, my troop of mercenaries and marauders. I'm sure some of you will fit in quite well!"

Tharg was grinning now. A cruel grin, showing sharp teeth and extolling a malevolent threat that radiated from his lips and suffused the room. Calir felt colder than the ice outside as he listened to this and was filled with dread about the predicament he and his friends found themselves in.

"And those of you that don't," Tharg continued, looking back over this shoulder at the balcony upon which were now arranged a growing number of Tharg's followers. "And those of you that don't, will make a fine meal!"

With this, Tharg roared with laughter, as did the twenty or thirty bare chested, white-haired and blue-skinned thugs leering over the balcony. Some of them gnashed their teeth at the cowering friends below, others mimed tearing meat off the bone with their teeth. All took on a blood thirsty and violent aspect that left the poor men below quivering in their boots and huddling together for support.

As the laughter died away, Calir pulled himself together, drawing on his last scraps of courage and stepped forward, towards Tharg. This drew the King's eye, who now focused on Calir with fresh interest and a blood thirsty curl to his lips.

"Well, sir, we thank you for your, er, welcome to your,

er, mighty Ice Kingdom.”

Tharg inclined his head in a mock bow and gestured for Calir to continue.

“But we respectfully decline your invitation to join your, er, band of followers. Instead, we plead for your mercy and ask that you assist us in our journey home - we’re just trying to get back to Domum continent. To the warm and pleasant lands of our birth; to escape this icy desert and desolate palace and, er-”

Calir paused, catching himself finding himself unsure how to convince King Tharg.

“We just want to get home, your- your majesty,” he finished awkwardly.

A silence descended amongst all those in the room. The men from Domum looked cautiously from Calir to Tharg and back again, hoping against hope for a swift departure from this Ice Kingdom and a speedy return to their home land. Tharg’s mocking smile persisted as he slowly turned on the spot, taking in the crowd of Calir’s people spread out around the hall, as well as the gently chuckling faces lining the mezzanine above. As he closed his pirouette of judgement more and more laughter broke out amongst the mercenaries watching the scene until, as Tharg faced Calir again, he was chuckling himself as well. The gentle laughter petered out. Tharg’s expression soured as his amusement turned to contempt, which morphed into fury. He glared at Calir.

“Join us or be meat for our table!” he shrieked, “And you!” he pointed a blue finger at Calir, “You! We shall cast this one into the Dark Mirror so that he can forever ponder the fate of this friends!”

This last exclamation was met with rapturous laughter, approval and applause from the mezzanine. Two or

three of Tharg's men tramped down the stairwell and surrounded a stunned Calir, lifting him bodily from his feet. They dragged him up the stairs and out of sight.

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Suspended over the circular abyss, rimmed with irregular shaped blocks of stone, Calir felt a new level of terror. The men holding him on either side had ice-cold grasps and, this close, he could see frozen globules of saliva and blood in their beards. They smelled of death. The circular opening itself was a dark void out of which blew a continuous stream of cold air that seemed quite at odds with the immediate surroundings, which were still. As he gazed down into the pit, Calir tried and failed to see any features below. It was dark as night and hollow as his remaining hope.

Tharg stepped up to the edge and into Calir's line of sight. He leant over the edge theatrically and let out a low whistle.

"Its a long way down boys, a long, cold way down."

A few of the men laughed. The hands closed around Calir's arms didn't slacken, but they jostled him slightly, mocking him. Tharg turned slightly to Calir, addressing him.

"The Dark Mirror, they say, lies at the bottom of this abyss. Its a legend, of course, because we know of none who can confirm it. But, if the legend is true then you will fall for an age before striking it. And, upon striking it, will come into contact with all of the sorcery and wonder of my Kingdom. The Dark Mirror makes everything about our place in the world possible and you, my gallant, fearless hero, have the privilege of meeting her face-to-face."

This last was greeted with another murmurs of amusement from the small crowd gathered around the hole. Tharg

smiled, with less malevolence this time and just a touch of nostalgia.

“Give her our best...”

He nodded to the men holding Calir and, before he'd realised the intent of this gesture, Calir found himself being cast bodily into this abyss. As he fell, he let out a cry that was heard throughout the Palace of Tharg. It drew a smile on the faces of Tharg's band and a sick realisation of doom from the remainder of Calir's group. With Calir's death, they were absolutely destitute of hope or salvation and were abandoned to the evil clutches of Tharg and his mercenaries. Every one of them wept.

Chapter 2

The Dark Mirror

Calir's screams eventually gave out. When they did, he found himself relaxing slightly. He was falling and falling and falling, but he couldn't feel it any more. The sick lurch of his stomach, the thrill of his heart and the feeling of impending death had left him, replaced with numb realisation that he was falling from life. All he could feel now was the frigid rush of air past his face and the slow tumble of his body. He could see nothing, neither wall nor sky nor floor. Blind and frozen, he was falling into the bowels of this mysterious ice continent towards who knew what. Tharg's last cryptic words about the magic of this Dark Mirror were completely lost on Calir, whose simple mind could only think of the warm, golden fields of wheat and the merry ale houses of home. He was stunned into silence and remission by the endless wail of frozen air numbing his face and his body, his mind and his soul. He was lost in an endless fall from life to death, from light to dark and from the time of friendship and love to a time of loneliness and eternal isolation. He

was lost.

After hours and hours of falling, during which Calir found himself waking with a start more than once, a sensation in his gut told him that he was slowing. Against all expectations, he was being brought to rest rather than falling to his demise. Up ahead of him - or, rather, down below him - a faint postage stamp of dim light could be made out. Calir wasn't quite sure what he could see, but it looked like a dim circle of midnight blue growing as he fell. Soon it was the size of his palm, then two palms. Before long, he could see the disc widening, except now it wasn't widening - he was falling slowly towards it and it was getting closer.

He could make it out now. It was a disc of subtle, midnight blue. The light was rising from the disc like mist from a cold, dawn lake. It shimmered and shifted like a mystic ether evaporating into the darkness. From the looks of things, it was about ten metres across and was slightly concave - a shallow bowl of light. As far as he could tell, Calir was hovering about three or four metres above the disc's surface, gently descending now. He figured he'd probably land on it in the next few minutes.

"So, you must be the Dark Mirror that the mighty King Tharg was so afraid of, I suppose?", he murmured to the darkness.

The Mirror returned no answer and remained enigmatic in its silence. Calir was now a metre above it. He could almost feel the ethereal light brushing past his skin.

"What happens when I touch you?"

Calir was whispering now. The Mirror was impassive.

Centimetres to go now. If he'd been able, Calir would have reached forward and touched the surface of the Mirror, but some invisible force was holding him prone. He closed his eyes and held his breath. Any moment now.

*

Calir awoke with a start. He was laying face down on a cold, hard surface. It was slightly gritty and, as he raised his head, he could feel particles of dirt and sand sticking to his skin. He'd been laying there for a while. His entire body was cold from lying against the stone for so long - he groaned as he slowly picked himself up into a kneeling position. Looking around, he found himself in a circular room built of the same sandy stone as in Tharg's palace. Big blocks lined the walls and the floor was covered in flagstones of the same material. The walls gently arched upwards to form a domed ceiling. There were no doors. No windows. The room was sealed and Calir could see no way in through which he had arrived and no way out through which he could escape. He was in a cocooned prison cell. It took a few moments for Calir to realise that there was no light either - there was no source of light, yet the entire room seemed to be bathed in the golden, homely light of the stone below and the palace above.

A shuffling noise from behind him made him realise that he wasn't alone in his cell. He looked around sharply and noticed for the first time a small man seated on the floor, leaning against the wall. If Calir had seen him during his survey of the room, he could have been forgiven for taking him as a small bundle of rags. He was dressed in a loose robe of dirty brown fabric, with its hood over his face and his legs and arms tucked into its folds. The robe looked far too big for him, but perhaps his incarceration had shrunk his body within the confines of the garb. All of these thoughts flashed through Calir's mind in an instant as he reflected that this forlorn figure would be Calir's fate if he couldn't find a way out of this room.

"Er, hello there, my good man...found yourself a prisoner

her as well, hey?"

Calir tried to sound friendly, but his words sounded hollow and muffled in the enclosed space of the small chamber. The man looked up at Calir's words, making his face visible from beneath the hood. He had a dark complexion, with long black hair framing a sunken, sallow face. He responded to Calir's question with muted silence and an impassive stare.

"Yes, well, I've just arrived. Although, I suppose you know that. Probably saw me fall through the roof, or however I got here. Strange isn't it? That there's no doors? No entrance or exit? Come to think of it - how do we eat? What do we drink? Its like we're sealed in some kind of morbid burial chamber. Where are we even?"

Before he knew it, this torrent of questions had tumbled out of him like a river bursting its banks. He paused to consider the questions he'd asked. But, before he'd had a chance, the man offered some answers of his own.

"This," he began, his voice low and hoarse, "is the Dark Mirror. The centre of its evil magic. The source of Tharg's great power. A burial chamber?"

He laughed a cracked and crooked laugh to himself.

"No, it is the bringer of life to those who are cast here. It is the outside world that is buried, not us. We are set free in this place!"

Calir glanced about himself. He certainly didn't feel set free. In fact, if anything, the walls seemed to be closing in the longer he was present in this chamber of death and life.

"I don't really understand what you're saying, my friend, but tell me this: how long have you been here? Is there a way out?"

"How long? How long. Time does not matter here, newcomer, it is not a thing to be measured with words like

‘long’. Time is in the Dark Mirror, and the Dark Mirror is in time. As for a way out? Yes, yes, there is a way out. Impossible for one, but with two? Perhaps.”

“My goodness! Do you mean to say that you’ve been trapped here for who knows how long, tormented by the knowledge of a way to escape, but lacking only a fellow prisoner to execute your plan?”

“It is no hardship on my part, newcomer. I came here to wait, if waiting you can call it. I have been expecting you and I came here in expectation of you. Welcome, be welcome.”

These last words sent a fresh shiver down Calir’s spine. This odd little man had been expecting him? Had Tharg known of their arrival in advance? Had he warned him? Was this prisoner responsible for their straying into the Ice Kingdom? It was enough to make poor Calir’s head spin. He shook his head and promptly sat down in the middle of the room, where he’d found himself sprawled out a few minutes earlier, and faced the bundle of clothes expounding upon his predicament so confoundingly.

“Calir. My name is Calir, my good man. And yours is?”

“Aevum.”

“Well, er, nice to meet you my good, er, Aevum. May we forever be friends and never be enemies.”

Aevum stared back in silence.

“That’s what we say where I come from, when we meet someone new. It means, let’s start off by being friends and thinking the best of one another and try to get along. A wise idea for the two of us, eh?”

He chuckled as he spoke, trying to illicit the same from the stoney face of Aevum.

“I am Aevum, a Dark Mage and seer of the Crystal Night. I would make a poor friend and a worse enemy. May

we know one another and remain true to ourselves. That is the best I can offer you.”

“Very well,” replied Calir in friendly tone, “may we know one another and find friendship if we can.”

The mage nodded once in assent, which Calir took as a small victory. He smiled and Aevum, for his part, didn’t grimace.

“Now, what’s all this business about you expecting me? How could you have been expecting me when there is no way in and, as far as I can see, no way out of this place? Answer me that, friend Aevum.”

“You think of expectation as being the cause before the effect. In this place, where there is no time, sometimes the effect comes before the cause. If you like, your arrival led to my expectation of you and decision to seek you out in advance. The arrow of time can point any way in this place. Forward or backward - it makes no difference here.”

This left Calir feeling even more confused, sat on the floor, and he held his head in his hands.

“A way out, you said we could escape together. Just tell me about that!”

“Yes, yes. There is a way, but you will need to learn first.”

“Learn?”

“Mmm, learn of the dark magic that binds this place, learn some of the dark lore that I possess. Only with this knowledge will you be able to assist me in making a portal.”

“A portal where? Can we go back to Domum?”

“Domum? I am unfamiliar with that place.”

“Well! Not heard of Domum? What kind of mage do you call yourself?”

“A Dark one, friend.”

Calir paused briefly, evaluating the ominous expression on the mage's face, before carrying on lightly.

"Domum is my home continent, filled with small townships, green pastures and gentle rivers. Its warm in the Summers, mild in the Winters and a joy in the Spring! I've lived there all my life, apart from these short forays into the mountains - none of which have gone awry until now I should say - and would dearly love to get back there. No more of this ice and cold, Dark Magic and cocooned prison cells. Just warm evenings, good mead and hearty suppers. You'll like it there Aevum, it will put some colour on your cheeks and some meat on your bones! You'll be a different man there, I promise - it makes the best of everyone! Not like this place. This place seems to bring out the worst, especially of that bully Tharg and his cronies."

A shiver ran down Calir's spine as he recalled the recent past and his current predicament. He had almost forgotten himself in his recollections of home. But, all of a sudden, he found himself cold and shivering against the stone-cold floor. He got up stiffly and stamped his feet, rubbing his arms.

"Anywhere my good man, let's just get this over with and get anywhere but here. Then, I'm sure we can find our way back home. My sense of direction (never failed me before now), and your resourcefulness. We'll be back to Domum continent in a jiffy. Let's just escape from this awful place and put as much distance between us and Tharg as possible!"

A silence spread out from these words as Calir slowly stopped fidgeting and Aevum gazed at him impassively. Calir was beginning to think he might have said the wrong thing and that perhaps this mage had been friends with Tharg, or that he liked the Ice continent, when Aevum fi-

nally stirred.

“Yes. Let us begin.”

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What came next was the strangest experience of Calir's life. He would have said that they worked for days - weeks, even - except that he had no concept of the passage of time. They did not stop for meals or sleep, but Calir didn't get hungry or thirsty or tired. It was as if their bodies were suspended in a moment in time and their minds were free to work and work and work. And what work it was. In his previous life, Calir would have baulked at what Aevum asked him to do. Now, though, he was just glad to be doing something to aid their escape and keep his mind off the other-worldly experience of their state of suspended time. Aevum had explained that the only way out of their chamber was to summon the Dark Mirror to pull them out and deposit them some where else. It was this, Aevum explained, that had brought Calir here in the first place. The rite they would need to perform Aevum had conducted before - just once - and it had brought him here as well. They would need to replicate Aevum's previous success if they had any hope of escaping. To Aevum this might have been just another dark ceremony, but to Calir it was also a lifeline. He was suppressing all thoughts of Dark Magic and summoning evil spirits. He just wanted to get home to Domum continent.

To begin with, they would need to perform a complicated dance around the centre of the room, sketching out the pictograms of the Dark Mirror in time and space, before placing themselves in the centre of the circle of power that they had drawn. Then, they would need to chant the summoning spell of the Dark Mirror, coercing her into their

presence with lost words that only a Dark Mage would know (so Aevum said). Finally, when She was present they would need to shed the blood of the last person to pass through her gates. If she was satisfied with this sacrifice, she would pull the occupants of the circle into her darkness and expel them to a place and time of her choosing. This was the part that made Calir most nervous. He wanted to go home. Although Aevum wouldn't say where he wanted to go, he was helping Calir and that was something. But it was up to the Dark Mirror herself to choose where and when to deposit her summoners and, according to Aevum, she didn't take requests. Calir just had to hope that she would take them somewhere close to home. As for when, he couldn't wrap his mind around the idea of there being any-when else to be than here and now. He had asked Aevum about it, but all he had said was, "Time is in the Dark Mirror, and the Dark Mirror is in time," which, of course, Calir found to be completely confounding.

At last, after an immeasurable delay, Aevum was satisfied with Calir's recital of the ritual and allowed him to begin. They traced the filigree of steps, prances and hops necessary to draw the glyphs of the Dark Mirror's power. Then, with great ceremony, they stepped inside this invisible ring and began reciting the words that would bring Her in as well. Calir wasn't quite sure what to expect after this, but moments after they finished the final words of summoning, things began to change. He hadn't noticed it, but the entire time he'd been in the chamber the air had been still, the temperature cool and the illumination constant. Now though, with the last breath of sound leaving Calir's lips, a rush of air blew up from the floor dousing the room in an icy blast. This influx of cold air seemed to wash away the golden-yellow light, replacing it with a shadowy dusk

that transformed the stones from sand to the granite of tombstones. With his eyes wide, Calir crouched and looked around wildly. Air was rushing up from beneath him, the light was flickering and being turned black like the tongues of a dark flame and the temperature was dropping rapidly. He looked over at Aevum for reassurance and found none in his stolid figure and hooded face. The mage simply stood there with his arms by his side, completely unaffected by the maelstrom of air and darkness that was rapidly surrounding them.

Calir was about to call out to Aevum to ask him whether this was expected or if they had done something wrong, when a different voice interjected. It was a voice of echoes and reverberations, rebounding out from time like a voice run backwards. It was as if you could hear it before it spoke and it spoke before you could hear it.

“Who summons me with audacity and arrogance? What are you to command my mighty power! Speak now or I shall tear you down to an even deeper hell!”

Somehow even after all of their practising and rehearsals, Calir wasn't quite sure who was supposed to answer her. His palms were sweating with fear about the upcoming sacrifice, even though all he had to do was draw a slither of blood across his hand in a ceremonial gesture. Still, was he supposed to step up now and offer her his blood? Before he could take the hesitant step he was preparing for, Aevum stepped forward himself, casting back his hood and spreading his arms wide.

“It is I, Aevum of the Midnight Dark, seer of the Crystal Night and Dark Mage of Power! Hear me, oh mighty reflective one, and accept this sacrifice for our passage to other places and times!”

As if this was a completely normal occurrence, Aevum

then gestured to Calir to step forward. He did so and held out his damp palm towards Aevum. Raising his right arm, with a small dull blade clutched in his hand, Aevum continued.

"I shed the blood of a life not yet lived, of time not yet spent, of a journey not yet over. Take this blood and let it slake your thirst!"

With this, he quickly brought the knife to bear against Calir's slippery palm and, making Calir jump with its suddenness, drew it across leaving a line of dark red behind. Aevum mimed clenching his fist and waving it over the ground. As soon as Calir realised what he meant, he copied the gesture until a few drops of his blood dripped from his hand to land in a scatter-gun pattern on the floor. Almost immediately the howling air slackened, the temperature rose slightly and a somewhat more relaxed voice filled the air.

"Mmmm, I accept the sacrifice. When would you bid me take you?"

Aevum looked across at Calir and raised an eyebrow.

"Home! Back home please your, er, shininess," Aevum shot Calir a questioning look, who shrugged helplessly. "Dommum Continent please, or thereabouts."

The air continued to calm, the temperature continued to rise, and the voice became almost maternal.

"Indeed, but when child?"

This time, it was Calir's turn to looking questioningly at Aevum. He still didn't really understand all this timelessness.

"Before my friends and I were captured I suppose, before we were caught by Tharg!"

"Indeed..."

The breeze slowed to a stop and the temperature returned to normal. The room was suddenly calm and still,

with only the gentle glow of the walls remaining steady. Except that it wasn't remaining steady, it was diminishing almost imperceptibly. Dimmer and dimmer, as if it was lulling them off to sleep. Come to think of it, Calir did feel tired - for the first time since he could remember. His eyes were heavy and his limbs leaden. He'd just have a lay down on the floor, which didn't seem all that cold any more. It was getting dark now. He'd just have a nap and then they'd be on their way. These were his last thoughts within the Dark Mirror.

Chapter 3

Finding Home

Calir awoke frozen and hungry. He was surrounded by snow-covered rock, but he was laying in a wet patch where his body heat had turned the snow to slush. Aevum was sat next to him, huddled in his cloak like the bundle of rags that Calir had first taken him for. Sitting up, Calir looked around at the barren, icy landscape with despondency and wrapped his cloak around him even tighter.

“This is not Domum!” he called over the frigid wind that was blowing ice and snow around them.

“Indeed,” came the muffled reply.

“I thought she was sending us home!” cried Calir with desperation in his voice.

“The Dark Mirror sends us where and when she pleases, friend. Be thankful we’re on the surface and not in a deeper level of hell.”

With this the mage stood up and gathered his cloak about him even closer.

“Come! Have courage friend - I shall accompany you

on your quest. I was waiting for your presence for release from the clutches of the Mirror. I am in your debt. I shall help you reach this Domum place and then the debt will be settled. Come! What say you?"

He extended his arm to a miserable Calir, who had buried his head in his hands partly out of desperation and partly to try to shield his face from the icy wind. He looked up as Aevum proffered his hand and, taking a deep breath, reached out and let himself be pulled to his feet.

"Yes, well, it is what it is. We must make the most of what luck we have!"

He brushed snow of his cloak and tightened his belt, giving his surroundings one more cursory glance before turning back to Aevum once more.

"So my magical friend, since we are to be joined in this quest I shall give you the dubious honour of deciding on our initial path. Which way to Domum, oh mage of great power?"

The mage missed the sarcasm in Calir's voice, which was lucky for Calir.

"You do us both a great service to leave this decision up to me. A mage is never lost and I, for one, happen to know precisely where we are. Domum you say? The continent of your home is...this way!"

Aevum pointed to his right and slightly behind him and, without waiting to see if Calir would follow him, stalked away into the snow. Calir hesitated for a moment. After all, he was only being polite by suggesting that the mage should choose their direction of travel. But, after all, if the mage knew something about this region that was more than Calir. If he had been lost before when he had stumbled into Tharg's den, he was utterly astray now. At least, with the palace of Tharg, they had slowly wandered into that hostile

and alien landscape. Now, he had found himself suddenly and incomprehensibly in the middle of an shattered ice field unlike anything he had seen before. It was even different from Tharg's kingdom, if that was possible. Ice beyond ice with no friendly - yet deceiving - fortresses in sight. Yes, Aevum was right to take the initiative and Calir would be a fool not to follow him. With this realisation, Calir hastened to catch up with the mage who was already almost out of sight in the near-blizzard of the swirling ice and snow.

So began the long trek of Calir and Aevum across the glacial planes of the Ice Continent. Little did Calir know at the time, but they were still very much in the territory claimed by Tharg. Indeed, they had been released by the Dark Mirror not all that far from Tharg's palace itself. But, the mage said nothing of this—whether he knew it or not—and he and Calir trudged on in ignorance of their proximity to the site of Calir's capture. With the mountains—and it's path back to Domum—behind them and the expanse of the Ice Continent stretching away before them, an untrained observer would question the mage's choice of heading. However, for better or worse, he knew of an ancient pathway stretching back to the land they were walking away from. In this land twisted by magic and stitched together with sorcery away from home was the fastest way back. Thus, Aevum led the beguiled Calir off across the ice sheets until, after many days of frigid marching they reached the sea.

*

“Honestly my good man, will this devilry never end?”

“I told you, friend Calir, the further we are from the influence of the Dark Mirror, the less you will feel its effects. By the time we return to your own land, your hunger will be your own again.”

“So you keep saying, but I cannot get used to this. First we were frozen in time with no appetite or sleep, and now we’re frozen again you say, but this time with hunger! I say, what a hellish position to find oneself in. Hungry with no need of food. Tired with no need of sleep. Yet this abominable cold and no way to keep warm. Couldn’t she have made us immune to that?”

Aevum sighed. After a few days of listening to Calir’s good natured yet irritating complaints, he was starting to weary of the fellow’s company. Still, he had promised to help the man reach his homeland and a mage didn’t rescind his word simply because his companion wouldn’t stop extolling his.

“As I have said, friend Calir, the ways of the Dark Mirror are mysterious. It is not for us to question her wisdom or her sorcery. Be glad she did not cast these effects on us permanently. A few more days and we shall be home - your home, at least - and all of these inconveniences will be forgotten.”

Calir shrugged and huffed, clearly not happy with Aevum’s response but aware of a small degree of frustration seeping through the mage’s voice. Calir had decided that any magical person with the word ‘Dark’ in their title was best left un-enraged, whether they be friend or foe. Aevum seemed to be a friend, but still.

“Now, back to the task at hand. As I was saying, we will need to cross the Gelida sea to make it back to your homeland. It is frozen this close to the Ice Continent, but it thaws the further out we get.”

“An ocean? How are we going to cross a frozen ocean?”

Calir was beginning to get desperate. How did he find himself needing to cross a frozen ocean in a frozen wasteland when a few days ago he was a day’s walk from home?

“Its not an ocean, friend Calir, just a sea and barely fifteen miles wide at its narrowest, where we will cross. And there is a way to cross, albeit an ancient and dark way, but one that I am familiar with. Indeed, it is lucky for you that I am a Mage of Darkness, otherwise you would surely be captured and killed in the crossing. As it is, we are very likely to survive the attempt.”

Calir let out a high pitched choke in response to this and looked even more forlorn. All he wanted was to be back home, in a friendly ale-house with good food and good friends. Yet here he was, crossing an enchanted sea of dark magic by a secret way that that was only safe for sorcerers of the night!

“Strength, friend Calir, strength. Inside of two days, we will be back in the sunlight of your homeland.”

Stood in the icy wind, under a darkening sky and surrounded by the moonscape of shattered ice and jutting glacier, Calir could barely believe this. But, he had to put his trust in something and Aevum had proven himself a worthy companion thus far. Two days more and he would know for sure if he was being led home or into another frozen prison. He cleared his throat.

“Very well my good man,” he replied, sounding somewhat more like his former self. “If two more days are required of me to reach my home, I shall take it. I thank you for your guidance and protection, but beyond the stretch of those days I feel that I shall surely perish from cold, desperation and despair. Let us be gone from this place and find this dark crossing of yours.”

Aevum smiled in response to this (although Calir wouldn’t have called it that) and inclined his head, turning on his heel and leading the way, continuing across the fractured landscape.

*

“The Gelida sea!”

Aevum pointed far out to the horizon, across the smooth, white sheet of ice that was the only sign that they’d reached the coast. The sky was still a dark, steely grey above them. But, out towards the horizon it seemed to lighten slightly and you could almost imagine the sun shining somewhere out there, warming the ice to become gently lapping waves. The most curious feature of the frozen sea was the crossing that Aevum had led them to. Not far from the shore was an enormous, wooden galleon ship. It was glued into the ice at an unnatural angle, with chains and ropes trailing from it into the frozen water. It was if it had been sailing out of the bay and had been caught in a sudden permafrost, frozen into the unchanging landscape of the sea to become a permanent moment of pitching and yawing. It had an eery look to it, for whilst the ropes and lines were preserved in positions of life, the sails were torn and ragged, flapping sadly in the cold breeze. The only moving parts of the ships were these remnants of a past that had, in all other ways, been preserved on the ship.

“And that,” he moved his arm in the direction of the galleon, “is the beginning of the bridge across the ice.”

“The ship?”

“The ship. If you look further out, there is another, and another. They stretch all the way out to the ice barrier between the Ice Continent and the place you call home.”

“But why do we need them? Surely we can just walk across the ice?”

“We will need them before the end. The further we get from these shores, the more we will require food, sleep and shelter. The Gelida sea is utterly barren - even more so

than the continent we have just crossed. And, eventually, when we reach the edge of the sea - when it thaws into the milder waters you're used to - we'll need a vessel in which to cross the final stretch. This place is the only place where we can cross the sea with all of these things that we need. It was created in ages past, whether by design or some strange sea-battle no-one knows. But, it is here now and we will use it."

"Yes, of course my good man, I wasn't questioning your guidance for a single moment! Didn't you say something earlier about danger? Not for us, of course, but for those vulnerable travellers not aided by a mage of your power and experience?"

Aevum paused.

"There is danger. No-one knows the origin of this crossing, but the ships are preserved in some kind of frozen time. Parts of the ships age and rot-"

"Like the sails?"

"Yes, like the sails. But other parts are frozen in a moment of time. Perhaps when the ice came in, perhaps when the Dark Mirror came. No-one knows for sure."

"But the danger?"

"Hmm, but the danger comes from the crews. The crews are all captured in this moment in time in the same way as the ships. Parts of them are preserved in a frozen moment, locked into the ships as the vessels themselves are locked into the ice. Other parts are ragged and rotten like the sails that hang from the rank masts. We will need the ships before the end, but we must be wary of the crews. Most are afraid of dark mages such as myself, but not all are dissuaded by the power I can bring to bear. We will need to be on our guard."

Calir shivered at this thought and looked out to sea,

past the galleon and out to the ships beyond. He couldn't see Domum Continent beyond the darkness of the sky and ice, but he had to believe that it was out there. He had to believe that Aevum was leading him to salvation and not into a trap of his doom.

"Very well, my good man. Let us begin. All this waiting is making me feel jumpy!"

He tightened the belt around his waist, wrapped his cloak around himself more tightly and bravely began to lead the way down the coast towards the smooth, glassy, frozen sea. Emboldened by his fear, he struck a braver figure than he could have thought and Aevum felt, for a moment, a touch of affection for the simple-minded and fair-spirited man. Only for a moment, though. After this, he replaced it with his customary dark brooding and followed swiftly after Calir to take the lead once again.

*

Silence prevailed as they padded across the frozen water. Occasionally a vibrating tremor would run through surface, from the depths of the ice. Some shifting or changing that would propagate out to their feet like a leviathan of the deep reaching out for an instant. Silence prevailed between them as well. They walked on in silence. They had passed twenty or thirty great galleon ships now, Calir had lost count, yet still the ice stretched on ahead of them. Calir was certain he could see a lightening on the horizon now. It was if the dark ceiling of cloud above them stretched out to a particular point and then dispersed, revealing sunshine and warmth beyond. That's the way he imagined it anyway, with the ice ending at the same point, giving way to a gentle sea, lapping against the ice gaily with a pleasant warmth that welcomed

the weary traveller. Calir was hungry, as usual, but now he was beginning to feel tired as well. Unlike previous days, he felt that he needed food to give him strength to carry on marching, not just to satisfy his unwavering hunger. Not only that, but he was thirsty too, and felt a renewed need for rest. He was terrified by the idea of climbing up into one of these ships for shelter and rest, but at the same time he didn't think he could make it all the way out to the horizon without respite. After several hours of brooding on these thoughts, he decided to broach the topic to Aevum.

"Well, my good fellow. I don't know about you, but I'm just about ready for some supper and shut-eye. What say you, eh?"

He tried to make this remark sound as jovial as possible, but the energy in his voice was muffled by the silent ice and ominous hull looming ahead of them. The ship they were drawing close to was stuck in the ice at an angle close to thirty degrees as if it had been swaying in the swell of the sea at the moment it was captured by the mirror-flat surface of the ice. Lines of rigging dangled over the sides in loose strands here and there that were frozen in a swish of wind that was forever immortalised by the freeze. Contrary to the timeless moment the ship was caught in, there was a tattered black and red flag hanging from the jaunty mast, flapping limply in the still air. To all appearances, it looked like a long-dead wreck imprisoned by the ice and mercilessly held captive across the centuries.

"That looks like a homely spot if ever I saw one!"

Calir gestured towards the wreck optimistically, looking at Aevum for affirmation.

"Indeed, it is drawing close to that time. We're close the edge of the ice shelf now, nearly at the boundary of the Dark Mirror's influence, but we will need to rest before we

reach it. This one will do as well as any other.”

They shuffled over to the ship across the ice, slipping here and there as it started to take on a wet sheen that foreshadowed the impending end of the ice sheet. The near-side of the ship was its port side and it was pitched over such that they could see the far side of the deck above them. Close to, the balustrade around the edge of the deck was only a metre or so above their heads and was an easy climb up the trailing ropes hanging over the edge of the ship here and there. Despite the braids of the ropes being frozen, they managed to clamber aboard and were soon looking up at the width of the deck sloping up in front of them. On either side of them, the forecastle and poop were at a jaunty angle that served as a constant reminder that the ship appeared to have been frozen part way through being swept to one side by the swells of the water. They walked awkwardly towards the poop, where they both agreed a door would probably lead to the captain’s cabin. Scattered along their path were the flotsam and jetsam of a working ship - crates and frozen spools of rope, barrels and rags of sails. They had clearly been flung about violently in some prior storm or battle, but now were all laid to rest against the balustrade that teetered out over the frozen sea.

“I hope there’s a good meal to be had in their somewhere,” Calir said under his breath, indicating the captain’s cabin. “I heard that there was always a good stash of salted fish, or rum-soaked biscuits or other such sea-faring food, hidden away in the captain’s trunk for when times ran hard on board ship. Hopefully the cold weather will have helped preserve it and there’ll be enough for a snack. A snack and a snooze, that’s all I need and then I’ll be ready for one final push.”

Calir paused, waiting for Aevum to agree - or disagree -

but the mage was impassively silent.

“What say you, eh? My good man?”, he prompted, still in a whisper.

“It is best not to hope or to speculate on the frozen wrecks of yonder year. There might be more than food and less than life hiding in that cabin and we should prepare for anything we might find.”

“A little hard to do, don’t you think?”

Aevum raised an eyebrow.

“Prepare for anything we might find? Might as well suggest that we measure a never-ending rope or boil a forever frozen pot-”

“Hush, friend Calir! Let us proceed with caution. There may be danger ahead, even to a mage such as myself. Hush.”

Despite feeling more than a little put out by Aevum’s abrupt tone, Calir acquiesced and clasped his belt with cold fingers as they approached the door. The door itself was closed, but at this angle, it would only take a small push for it to swing open with a bang. This made Calir think it was either locked or frozen shut and would certainly be hard for the casual passer-by to open. Aevum approached the door first and pushed gently with his fist around the handle. The door gave easily, almost as if it had been waiting to be opened by a warm-blooded hand all these centuries. It yielded without a squeak or a squeal. Despite clearly having been frozen amidst the violence of the sea centuries ago, this door was as ready to be opened as the day it had been fashioned.

They stepped in and adjusted to the lack of grey light that filtered in through the rear, grilled window. Inside the low room was a short, rectangular table around which were arranged six chairs. The chairs were turned this way and that as if their occupants had been halfway through the cer-

emony of standing or sitting at the time of their disappearance. The table itself was covered in plates and bowls, all of which were covered in a thick layer of dust. As Calir acclimatised to the light, he noticed that the chairs were also covered in large quantities of thick, grey dust, as was the floor around the chairs and tables. At first glance, the rest of the room was unremarkable. There was a writing table in front of the window, which was empty and a large trunk in the corner of the room. The fact that it was still in-place suggested that it was fixed to the floor in some capacity.

“Humph,” Calir remarked involuntarily.

“Yes?”

“Well, it’s odd isn’t it?”

“These ships are magically frozen in time and space, in the midst of an enchanted sea that is trapped in a permafrost for all eternity. The whole thing is odd, friend Calir.”

“Yes, well apart from all that, the trunk there, it’s stuck to the floor. You see?”

“Yes...”

“Well, I thought, ‘Oh it must be nailed down’ - you know, to stop it from sliding across the floor down to this side of the room. But then, the chairs and the table. The dishes and the plates. The dust and grime that’s covering everything. Its like none of it is affected by the angle of the deck. And, I say, that’s odd isn’t it?”

“Well, now you mention it, yes, that is odd. Very odd.”

“Out on the deck, all those crates and so on had slid down the left-hand side of the ship, where we’ve been walking.”

“The port side.”

“Yes, well, they’ve all slid down as one would expect them to. Its hard enough to walk along the deck when it’s pitched this far over.”

“Indeed.”

“But all the furniture in here, it’s sort of - well, stuck I suppose. As if it hasn’t noticed that the ship’s halfway to capsizing.”

The two men looked around thoughtfully, not daring to venture any further into the room. A minute or more might have elapsed, before they both exclaimed in unison.

“I say!”

“What the devil!”

“You see it?”

“Yes, it’s getting thicker...something’s...forming...”

As they watched, the dust around the chairs and table seemed to be wafting across the floor and sliding up the chair legs. It was gathering on the seats of the chairs and clumping into piles here and there. The same thing was happening on the table top, as the grey powder swirled in drifts from place to place, concentrating into thicker patches on the plates and bowls. The dust on the chairs was now a solid mass growing upwards into a conical pile. Moments later it was changing colour from grey to greens, browns and reds.

“Phwoah, do you smell that?”

The mixture on the chairs was turning slimy and slick now, oozing over the edge of the seat and dripping down the legs. The smell was offensive. The reds looked awfully like decaying blood and the greens had the odour of rotting flesh.

“What’s happening?” Calir exclaimed in a choked voice. Aevum watched impassively, a frown crossing his face.

As they watched in horror, the flesh and liquids began re-assembling themselves into bone and muscle, skin and hair. A rotting form of a corpse took shape before their eyes, the ageing process reversed. Time running backwards.

Before long, the corpses had turned to peaceful figures sitting calmly at the moments of their death. The food on the table had passed through rotting and mouldy phases to appear again fresh and appealing. For a moment, the scene was peaceful and calm and, bizarrely, the most normal sight Calir had witnessed in what felt like years. Three men sat around a dinner table enjoying an array of foods and drinks. This moment perched on the edge of a temporal fulcrum before plunging back into the destructive rampage of age and decay. The eyeballs turned black and sunk into the skulls, the food was engulfed by grey-green fur and collapsed in on itself, the skin sank between the ribs exposing bloody bone and shredding meat. The figures crumpled into a ruin of maimed flesh and weeping fluid. The foods were just pools of mottled liquid. The wetness dried, the colours dimmed and seeming moments after it had all begun again, the table and chairs were once again covered in thick piles of grey dust. Time had erased the lives of men and meal alike, leaving nothing but ash.

A pause spread out between the two men and them now empty room. They stared at the dim, grey room aghast. Calir's guts rumbled.

"Do you think it's safe to eat?"

Aevum turned to face Calir, a look of horror on his face.

"Safe? Sorcery this dark is a rare and malevolent thing. Before your hand had reached the table, you would be doomed to the same fate as these poor souls. Eternally suffering death and decay, only to be reincarnated at the apex of your peace. No, friend Calir this is the least safe place we have seen together and we should leave at once. Your next meal will have to wait a while longer, we must reach the edge of the ice or we shall be trapped in the dead time of this place. The Dark Mirror does not let her charges go

idly and it seems that she seeks to entrap us again in her iniquitous ways. Let us be gone from this place!”

With this, the mage turned on his heel and left the cabin, carefully but swiftly making his way back along the pitched deck to the nearest of the trailing ropes. A moment later, when the shock of these words had worn off, Calir followed as fast as he could, stumbling on the awkward angle of the ship. He was suddenly afraid of the horrific visage perpetually repeating itself around the captain’s table and was desperate - more than ever - to reach the safe and pleasant shores of Domum. Slipping and sliding down the frozen ropes, they made it back to the ice. Landing with a dull thud on the mirrored sheen of the frozen sea, they disturbed the silence that ruled the glacial waves. From out here, there was no sign of the hidden malice contained within the belly of the ship. Just an old wreck of a galleon, held fast by a timeless sea and a still air.

“Let us be gone,” Aevum repeated in a low voice.

The pair struggled on and on. Calir’s hunger had increased to fervent levels now and his legs were weak and trembling. He was stumbling with fatigue and beginning to suffer from the cold in his bones, not just in his hands or his feet. Aevum wasn’t in a much better condition, although he was better at hiding it. He knew that their situation was becoming desperate and that they needed to reach the edge of the ice soon. He had started to entertain the idea that the Dark Mirror might have been tricking them into a path that led back towards the Ice Continent, rather than away from it and that they might end up making landfall back at the ice where they had begun. If this was happening, all was lost. They had lost the strength to go on and she would have ensnared them forever in bonds that they could not break. The mage was simply holding out hope that his in-

instincts were worth following and that their course was true. If it was, then any minute now they should be able to see the end of the ice. The sky was lightening beyond doubt and he was sure he could feel more frequent stirrings in the air. Even if these could not be described as warm, they certainly weren't the Arctic blasts they had experienced inland, and that was a good sign. He shared none of his concerns with Calir, of course. The poor fellow was suffering terribly and a word of bad news was likely to finish him off. So, he pulled together his spirits and tried to encourage the forlorn Calir with as much vigour as he could muster.

"Almost there now, friend Calir. I can smell dry land from across the seas. We are surely at the end of our journey. Moments more, you'll see, and we shall reach the final ship and the edge of the ice."

Before he'd finished uttering these words, Calir had stopped in his tracks and raised his face with a fresh look of hope. Aevum hadn't imagined that he could be so inspiring, but perhaps the poor fool was easier to convince than he suspected.

"Do you hear that?"

"Why, yes," replied the mage, "those are the words I just spoke to you."

The poor man was even wearier than he had thought.

"No, not that," Calir waved his hand dismissively, "that!"

With this, he pointed straight ahead and cocked his head. Aevum listened. Right on the edge of his sense of sound was a gentle lapping sound. Come to think of it, there was a faint odour of salt in the air as well.

"Its the seal"

His fatigue forgotten, Calir sprang forward as if he'd just had a good night's sleep and a hearty meal. He ran across the ice with a dull thump that became more of a wet slap

as he began to stumble through puddles and pools. Within fifty metres he came across a beach of ice, with gentle waves washing against it in a warm caress. Ahead of him was a calm sea and a mild breeze; clear skies and a bright sun. It was as if they had suddenly walked out from underneath a freezing cloud into a warm, tropical landscape of humid airs and mild waters. And then Calir saw it. Out beyond the tranquil waves was a shoreline stretching right across the horizon. A band of browns and greens with a haze of warm cloud hovering over it. No blues or whites, no ice of glacier. Just home beyond home beyond home. Domum Continent was there, not more than five or ten miles from the edge of the ice shelf upon which they finally stood.

Aevum caught up with him and stood beside him, gazing out to sea.

"Ah. So we have made it after all. I am thankful, we will be safe now."

Calir was looking crestfallen.

"But friend Calir, whatever is the matter? We have succeeded in our journey, have we not? You are in sight of your home land, you should be celebrating!"

"There might as well be another gulf of ice and snow between it and us though, mightn't there? How on earth are we going to cross the open ocean - you've led us to a dead end!"

Aevum smiled.

"Far from it, friend. It is not an open ocean, but merely a straight of six or seven miles. And we will cross it in that, of course!"

He pointed out to their right in a direction Calir hadn't looked in yet, having been so fixated with the view ahead of them. A great galleon ship, bigger than any they had yet seen, was trapped in the edge of the ice and facing out to

sea. The stern was frozen fast and perfectly preserved, much as the other ships they had seen had been. The ship leaned forward and the bow, however, was partially submerged in the gently sloshing water which flowed in and out of innumerable holes making the ship look more like a wreck at the front. Halfway along its length, where the ice ended and the ship entered the water there was almost a clean line where these two halves of the boat joined. To the rear, a frozen, preserved vessel with only ragged sails to show its age. To the front, a rotten and smashed wreck nearing collapse. Aevum saw Calir looking puzzled at this.

“We have reached the limit of the Dark Mirror’s influence. Beyond the ice shelf, her reign over space and time is diminished and all things return to their natural way.”

Calir turned his confused features to the mage.

“But how does this help us? Its a wreck that’s half encased in ice and half ready to sink! Seven miles at sea in a wreck is still seven miles!”

“Yes, but this was the flag ship, friend Calir. The ancient armada of ships captured by the Dark Mirror all those ages ago was led by this vessel, which was caught at the last and who’s escape was forever thwarted. This is the biggest, grandest and most well equipped ship of the fleet. Do you not think we might find something seaworthy onboard?”

“Ah! You mean like a landing craft or a lifeboat or something?”

“Indeed, yes. And, with luck, the dangers we encountered on the other ships will be less readily felt here. Let us investigate further and find a way to your home.”

Aevum made his way over the flagship and Calir skipped after him with a renewed sense of energy that thirty minutes earlier he would have thought impossible. Sure enough on the port side, obscured from their previous vantage point, a

small craft was suspended from frozen lines halfway lowered to the frozen sea below it. It was perfectly preserved like the stern of its mother-ship and was even complete with oars. After some struggling with the frozen ropes holding it fast (which was made considerably more difficult due to their reluctance to board the galleon itself), the pair managed to free the dinghy and drag it to the water's edge. Aevum held it steady in the peaceful waters, whilst Calir climbed aboard. The mage climbed in after him and they cast off. Within moments they were clear of the ice and, after about fifty metres or so, the entire frozen coastline began to disappear into a hazy sheen. By the time they'd covered two hundred metres, the flagship, the ice and the cursed continent beyond were all shrouded in a simple, white haze of cloud. The uninformed mariner would have no idea they were sailing so close to being caught in the snare of the Dark Mirror and neither would they know the risk of coming aground against the ice itself. It looked like a pleasant bank of cloud hovering over the sea, masking nothing more than the expanse of gentle, warm waves and still, pleasant air.

"Let that be the last we see of that accursed place," Calir murmured as they departed. "I just wish my friends had a more pleasant fate than being locked away in the wintry fortress of King Tharg."

"Tharg?"

Aevum had been lost in a reverie of his own.

"Mmm, yes. Your friends will be caught won't they. Well, let's not think of that now. Let's get you back to your home and rest our weary bones."

"Amen to that, my good man, amen to that."

And so the two prisoners, travellers and companions rowed away from the ice continent. The frigid wasteland home to the Kingdom of Tharg, the Dark Mirror and their

hidden, timeless prison cell was now behind them. Against all odds they had escaped and made their way back to the land of time and life, back to Calir's home: Domum Continent. But, even in the relief of their freedom, Calir could not help casting his mind back to the friends he had left behind. He couldn't help feeling he had abandoned them to a life of despair and misery at the hands of Tharg and his cronies. And, deeper down, he couldn't help feeling that something was wrong about their escape; something was wrong about this homecoming. The path in the mountains that he had somehow strayed from all those days ago seemed far removed from their present situation. Only time would tell now. However, with each oar stroke they were closer to home and, smothering all of his feelings of disquiet, he couldn't help feeling an overwhelming sense of deliverance from the horrors of the Dark Mirror.

Aevum stared ahead implacably. He pulled on his oar, but said nothing more.

Chapter 4

Home Time

As they bobbed into the harbour, Calir felt a deep sense of calm. He was home again. He didn't recognise this particular waterfront, but it was obvious that they were back in Domum. There were a variety of fishing schooners moored here and there, hiding an array of colourful buildings that were all higgledy-piggledy along the harbour wall. People were milling about taking their time and clumped in groups of twos and threes, clearly enjoying the pleasant morning air. Now they were within the harbour, the air was almost completely still, warm and inviting. The sun was burning an uncomfortable patch on the back of Calir's head and he was sweating underneath all of his cloaks and blankets.

They bumped up against the dinghy pier and tied themselves on. Calir climbed out and shrugged off his blanket and cloak, unfastening the belt that had held them close all these days. Beneath these layers, he was still wearing the loose shirt and cotton trousers he'd been wearing back on the mountain path.

“I say, it’s sweltering here! What say you, my good man?”

“Mages do not feel the cold, or the heat,” the mage returned, “but it is warm in comparison to the ice continent we have just left, I grant you.”

Having stashed his excess clothing in their craft, Calir led the way triumphantly along the seafront. The first group of people they encountered seemed to be having an intimate conversation, because they were standing quite still and their voices were inaudible.

“Ho there, my good people! We weary travellers have just returned from a nightmarish adventure in lands distant. What news from Domum?”

Calir hailed them from a few paces away, but received no reaction. He paused in this stride, waiting for them to turn, but they didn’t. He shrugged his shoulders and walked up to them. Aevum hung back, watching the encounter unfold with a dark look on his face.

“Hello there, my good woman,” Calir began again, tapping the closest figure on the shoulder. She remained stolidly still and didn’t acknowledge Calir’s friendly advances. The group of three were arranged roughly a metre apart, the woman Calir had greeted on one side and a married-looking couple on the other. He glanced from one to the other, studying their eyes and their faces. The wife opposite was mid-blink. The man was part way through raising his head in recognition, his mouth half-open. The woman Calir had greeted had a hand raised in gesticulation and her mouth was forming a word. All three of them appeared frozen in time part way through a conversation that would never end.

Calir stood rooted to the spot looking aghast from one face to another as realisation dawned on him. Aevum walked up slowly from behind to stand alongside him.

“Is there no end to the horror of this? What is happening here?”

“The ways of the Dark Mirror are subtle and insidious.”

“The Dark Mirror? Here? I thought its power ended with the ice?”

“Indeed, her power reigns here no more than the power of Tharg, but she has sent two of her emissaries.”

Calir turned to face the mage at this, thoroughly confused.

“Two of her emissaries?”

Aevum inclined his head.

“Us?”

“Us.”

“But how could we be stopping time for these people? They don’t deserve a fate like that!”

“I do not know, friend Calir, but let us learn more and unravel the mystery of the Dark Mirror’s sorcery.”

With this, he strode away, with purpose this time, and Calir scrambled to catch up. They passed another two groups of frozen citizens before stumbling across a new phenomenon that stopped them both in their tracks, Calir especially.

“Do you smell that?”

“I do, friend Calir.”

“That smells like...like...baking bread!”

Despite having to dredge the source of the smell from his memory, he was sure that he could smell fresh bread being baked. It was as if he hadn’t smelt it in years and it awakened a hunger in him so powerful that he had hardly recognised the smell before he was running towards the baker’s shop. Aevum felt a desire no less compulsive, but managed to maintain a modicum of composure by following Calir at a swift pace.

Calir burst into Panem's Bakehouse, looking all around for the nearest loaf. His charge was checked, however, by the three people waiting in a queue at the counter and the baker himself, presumably Panem, serving up his produce. All four were like statues, caught in a scene of domestic simplicity. The two at the rear of the queue were clearly chatting amiably. Perhaps they were good friends? Or they have just been exchanging pleasantries about the day. The lady at the front of the queue was gesturing over the counter to point at this loaf or that and the baker had his left hand resting on a wrapped parcel, whilst with his right he was pointing in the same direction as the lady. The lady's face was obscured, since she was facing Panem, but his face held a smile under a closely trimmed moustache and gently greying hair.

The smell of bread was intoxicating and despite the frozen horror of the scene before him, Calir crept furtively further into the bakehouse looking for a fresh loaf. He snuck behind the counter, almost expecting to be caught red-handed at any moment. There were racks and racks of cooling loaves behind Panem - they had been baked recently by the looks of things and were cooling ready for the day's customers.

"It's like time froze for them an instant before we arrived," Calir murmured to himself. Aevum stood stoically in the doorway and said nothing. Calir reached out for one of the enticing looking loaves and, picking it up, tore a chunk off. It was warm in his hand and smelled delicious. He took a mouthful and chewed contentedly. He bit again and again, before passing the bread towards the mage. Aevum walked forward slowly and took the proffered meal, eating it slowly with delicate bites.

When both men had satisfied their hunger, they retreated from the bakehouse and sat on the edge of the harbour wall,

feet dangling out over the water below. Calir took a deep breath and sighed.

“Well, I’m full now, for the first time in what feels like years.”

“Hmm,” Aevum replied absent mindedly looking for something inside his cloak.

“But, somehow, it doesn’t feel right. Do you know what I mean?”

“Humph,” replied Aevum, pulling a pipe out from within and beginning to load it with some leaf.

“Its as if the bread is for them, not for us. Its funny - we can smell it and eat it, but it’s as if it too is frozen in time, along with them. What do you think?”

The mage lit his pipe and drew several long puffs from it before exhaling slowly and looking out to the horizon. He was still wearing all of the clothes he had been wearing when Calir had first met him and Calir couldn’t understand how he wasn’t sweltering in this heat.

“The ways of The Mirror remain a mystery.”

“Is that it? Is that all you have to say on the matter?”

“It is all I know, friend Calir. And what can I say, but what I know.”

A silence stretched between them then and Calir joined the mage in gazing out to sea. Despite knowing it was invisible now, Calir couldn’t help feeling that somewhere out there he could still see the edge of the ice looming ominously. He unbuttoned his shirt and rolled up his sleeves.

“I say, is it me or is it absolutely sweltering here today?”

“You tell me, friend Calir, this is your home.”

“Well, I’ve never been to this particular township before, but as far as I’ve heard tell all of Domum is as pleasant and mild as my home. But not this, this place is like being in an oven. I wouldn’t be surprised if that bread bakes itself!”

Calir looked to Aevum for comic effect, but the mage remained stoic. He gave a small shrug, yawned and stood up stretching.

“Well my good man, I don’t know about you but I’m just about ready for bed. What with all that cold and that walking and that fear and that rowing, not to mention the generous meal the two of us just had, I’m of the mind to find a comfortable little room somewhere and curl up for a snooze.”

Aevum rose to his feet as well.

“Mages of my order need not sleep, friend Calir, but I will meditate whilst you rest and guard you against evil.”

“Evil! There will hardly be any of that around here I should hope. There’s no-one able to do it! Hopefully we can find a quiet little inn and have a snooze whilst no-one is watching!”

He laughed at this, slapped the mage on the shoulder and set off again. Aevum watched Calir stroll away as if he hadn’t a care in the world and smiled, ever-so-briefly. He was warmed by how much the young man seemed unaffected by the darkly magical situation they found themselves in. Aevum had a deep sense of foreboding about the strange passage of time in this place, but he was pleased that - at least for now - young Calir seemed not to notice. With that thought, he followed in Calir’s buoyant footsteps towards an inn to rest at, at the end of their journey.

*

When Calir awoke it was a gentle, peaceful return from sleep. He was laying on a feather mattress, albeit with the covers cast off, with his limbs spread out like a starfish. He had been weary beyond belief when they had finally found

a suitable inn. All the ones along the seafront were full of rooms that were all in various states of occupation and they had to turn off onto one of the side streets to find one that had a vacant room. Despite the fact that everyone around them appeared to be frozen in time, Calir had felt uncomfortable sleeping in a room that someone else had paid to rent.

He lay there calmly for a moment before opening his eyes and staring up at the ceiling. The first thing he noticed was that it was still light. He felt like he had been asleep for hours - surely it must be the evening by now? The second thing he noticed was the unbearable heat. He felt like he was trapped in a tent on a hot Summer's morning and he wanted to escape to the outside to feel a cool breeze on his cheek.

Pulling himself off the bed, smacking his dry lips and rubbing his dry eyes, he made for the door. He found Aevum, still wrapped in his cloaks and shawls, seated in the middle of the landing meditating. At the sound of Calir creaking on the floor boards, the mage started and looked round. Seeing Calir, he rose easily to his feet and raised an eyebrow at Calir.

"It's hot, I'm thirsty," croaked Calir, "how long have I been asleep?"

"Almost ten hours, friend Calir. There is water downstairs."

Calir shook his head, confused by the time of day, and made his way stiffly down the stairs. He found a jug of water on the bar, with the innkeeper frozen mid-glass-wash, and took it and a mug outside. Mercifully the front of the inn was in shade and he seated himself at a small table. He poured himself a mug and downed it in one, before pouring another and drinking it more slowly this time. Aevum fol-

lowed a moment later bringing a tray of fruits and breads and seated himself next to him. The two men broke their fast looking out across the street to the casual passers-by frozen mid-stroll here and there.

“How is it still daylight?” Calir said after swallowing a gulp of water. “It was morning earlier, and if I’ve been asleep most of the day...why isn’t it dusk?”

“Look at the Sun, friend Calir.”

Calir followed the mage’s instructions and found the Sun just above the rooftop’s behind them - still in the East, but approaching late morning. He sat down again.

“But it can’t be more than eleven o’clock.”

“Indeed.”

“And you’re sure this is the same day as earlier? This isn’t tomorrow?”

“When Mages meditate, we can still see the world around us. It hasn’t got dark, the Sun hasn’t set. This is undoubtedly the same day.”

A thought struck Calir then and he finished his water.

“Let’s go to the bakers.”

“You’re not hungry stil, friend Calir?”

“No, but I want to check something. Come, my good man, let us investigate.”

*

Upon entering Panem’s Bakehouse the first thing Calir noticed was the lack of customers. His stomach flipped with a nervous feeling of horror. But where had they gone, those frozen statues waiting in line to buy bread? The baker was behind the counter, with his back to them, frozen in the act of cutting or slicing something. The rack of cooling bread they had seen earlier was empty, but the counter was piled

with fresh loaves. Calir walked over to them cautiously and felt them. Whereas the loaves they had chosen from earlier had been soft and warm, these were cool and crusty. Calir turned back to Aevum, who was waiting in the doorway, with his face contorted in confusion and fear.

“What’s happening here?”

“I believe I know the answer, friend Calir. Surely you have guessed it by now?”

Calir paused for thought and looked back to the baker, puzzling over their predicament.

“Time isn’t frozen for them, as we thought this morning. It just...slow. Its running slowly for them, for some reason. Maybe The Dark Mirror? I don’t know!”

“And the Sun, what of the Sun?”

“I don’t know...can she affect the Sun in the sky as well? What kind of magical trap are we caught in?”

The mage smiled grimly and re-arranged his cloak.

“It is not them, but us, friend Calir,” he said as gently as he could. “Time is not slowed for the Sun and the stars and the people of this place, but it is accelerated for us. A day for us is an hour for them. What we see as a minute, they see as an instant. It is us who are trapped, but not frozen - we are caught in the eddies of time rushing past the smooth, calm lake of this place. And we cannot get out.”

“Argh!” Calir exclaimed in anguish, “you mean to say that we are rushing around like sparks from a flame and that we shall live and die in the time it takes these people to see a year of seasons!”

“I’m afraid so, friend Calir, I’m afraid so.”

“Then her punishment is complete and we have not escaped her grasp after all!”

“Indeed, a bargain made with The Dark Mirror is a bargain to beware. She kept to her word and we did not say

that we wanted time to be restored to its ordinary pace.”

“Restored to its ordinary pace? What the devil are you driving at man?”

“It strikes me now that we may have been swept aside by these torrents of time from the moment we first found ourselves in that cell beneath the ice. From the very first I suspect that time was passing more slowly for the outside world than for us and that that was part of the price we had to pay for our escape - to continue to endure those rapids.”

“Then from the time I was cast into that pit....until the moment we arrived back at these shores...?”

“Very little time has passed at all, for the rest of the world.”

During this exchange, Calir had been unwittingly retreating from Aevum’s words towards the baker’s counter. With this last, he bumped into it from behind and sank to his feet. He sat there on the floor, bewildered and overwhelmed. He couldn’t take it in, what did it all mean?

“So that means...?”

“If you are thinking of your companions, friend Calir, as I would guess that you are - that means that they are still in the clutches of King Tharg and, for them, barely a few hours may have passed.”

This news broke Calir’s stupor and he was suddenly animated again, leaping to his feet.

“Why, that’s splendid news!”

“Splendid?” returned Aevum, for the first time looking confused during their conversation.

“Why yes! That means that- well, far from being beyond hope of rescue or recovery, they’re all right where I left them. And! Not only are they all still there, but when we return we shall be armed with the power of surprise and daring speed compared to those oafish thugs that Tharg was keep-

ing company with! We can storm that fortress of his, slay our enemies and rescue my friends. Perhaps we can break the Mirror to boot and return home by the same path that took us there! We may be saved!”

The mage was stunned by this outburst. Despite his clearer understanding of their current predicament, he could never have guessed that it would lead to these conclusions in the other man’s mind. He raised an eyebrow and gave it some thought. Retrace their steps to the palace of Tharg? Not easy. Rescue Calir’s party from Tharg’s clutches? Unlikely. Defeat the Mirror herself? Impossible! Still, based on the renewed look of hope on Calir’s face, the mage could see that he wouldn’t stop unless he had tried. And, for all his reluctance to embark on another quest into the interior of the Ice Continent, Aevum felt that his part to play in Calir’s fate wasn’t yet over. And so, despite his reservations, he resolved to help the man achieve his hopes at best and save him from an evil death at worst.

“Indeed,” he said, and Calir smiled in response. The smile of innocence in the face of great challenge and even greater darkness. The smile that only a child of Domum could wear at a time like this. “let us begin then, friend Calir, let us begin again.”

Chapter 5

The Call of the Mirror

Their little vessel bumped up against the icy shore like a toy boat. The humidity rising from the water had Calir sweating, even in just his tunic and breeches, so the cool air wafting off the ice was a welcome relief. He inhaled.

“Ah, smell that cool, crisp air, my good man! Hate to say it, but I believe I missed the clarity of it. The...freshness. Something pure about it, wouldn’t you say?”

“It is the air of the realm of the Dark Mirror and the smell of the Kingdom of Tharg. I am not as welcoming of it as you, friend Calir, and you would do well to remember the perils we are walking back into.”

“Just trying to look on the bright side, my good fellow, just trying to keep the old spirits up. Danger and darkness it might hold, but, truth be told, I was starting to feel a bit smothered by the thick air back there. Its not quite

what I remembered, I have to say. Must be a heavier climate...further South..."

Calir trailed off, looking slightly puzzled. He couldn't quite reconcile his feeling of relief at having gained landfall at the Ice Continent again. He ought be filled with dread. But, at most, all he felt was mild trepidation. Aevum stepped ashore, which knocked Calir out of his reverie. They scraped the small craft inland far enough that it was well away from the water's edge - just in case they needed to return this way - and then looked around to get their bearings. Off to their left, further away than when last they saw it, was the half-wreck of the leading galleon. The bow was still a rotting husk, more hole than plank, slowly collapsing into the virulent sea. The stern was still a frozen moment of majesty, speaking of pride and beauty and excellence, apart from its ragged sails and torn flags.

"Do you remember the way back, friend Calir?"

"I do, I do! Follow the ships until the ice rises up into the glaciers and then - trust to our instincts I suppose!"

"Indeed. I can probably help us there, friend Calir. You lead us to the ice and then we shall see if the Dark Mirror's ethereal sorcery leads us back to Tharg."

Calir paused for a moment to consider this. Then, deciding that he didn't understand it and didn't need to, he strode off towards the next ship, stuck in the ice on the horizon. Aevum watched the fellow walk away purposefully, filled with an energy that you might never have thought would animate him again, had you seen him two days earlier on this same stretch of frozen sea. A slight frown crossed the mage's face as his eyes flicked down to the bundle of material at his feet. Cloaks and shawls with a heavy belt and a pair of thick leather boots. All of these Calir had been wearing when Aevum had first encountered him in the sealed cell in

the bowels of the Dark Mirror. All of them Calir had shed when they had returned to the warmer climes of Domum. And, all of them Calir had carried with him in their little dinghy, with the intention of donning them again when they reached the ice. But, now, he was striding away bare-footed and open-chested, wearing nothing but his cotton shirt and linen breeches. Just days before, he was grumbling perpetually about the cold and the wind. Now, he didn't seem to notice either. Aevum had a deep sense of foreboding about this. It was normal for a mage of his power to remain unaffected by the shifting temperatures of the material world about him. He had been as comfortable in the tropical heat of Domum as he was now in the freezing cold of the ice. He wore his robes and cloaks either way, unperturbed. But Calir - he was a simple man of a simple people. His kind didn't walk about on the frozen sea of Gelida in nothing but their skin unless they were crazed beyond belief, or imbued with some dark sorcery. As eccentric as the fellow was, Aevum feared that it was the latter and that fear furrowed his brow.

"What devilry do we face now? The Dark Mirror follows us still..."

With this murmur, he hastened to follow in the jaunty footsteps of hope that Calir was laying down on the crisp surface of the frozen sea. Footsteps of hope that the mage could not repeat.

*

"Well, that was the last one!" announced Calir gaily, as they walked past the final galleon before the shore.

Ahead of them rose the ice sheets of Tharg's kingdom. Jagged blades of ice jutting out of the calm, glassy surface

of the sea, rising to form the ice continent. It was like something from a nightmare, except Calir had forgotten and now found himself eager to return.

"I'm eager to find my friends", he told himself, "I want to see them safely back to Domum, safely back home." He repeated this to himself like a mantra, but the truth was that he was excited to return to Tharg's palace. He wouldn't admit it to himself, and he didn't know why, but part of him was excited to see it again. It held an allure in his mind that could not be explained, nor denied.

"I shall lead us from now, friend Calir."

Aevum stepped forwards, gazing towards the fractured landscape of ice rising before them.

"It will take all of our skill and more than a little luck to navigate the mysterious interior of this continent. But! Fear not! A dark mage of my power and experience is a match for this challenge. We shall prevail. I shall return you to your friends."

"I have every faith in you, my good man. You've not failed me yet and I don't expect you to now-"

"However, when re-united you are, then I must leave you."

"Leave me? But why my good man? Whatever would you do without me? We're comrades, fellow prisoners, fellow journeymen on a quest!"

Aevum nodded in agreement and allowed himself the smallest smile. Calir thought he looked sad.

"Indeed, friend Calir, indeed. But, when the time comes, you will understand."

*

And so began the second great part of their journey. Except this was longer and more arduous than the first.

This time they were walking back into the interior of the ice continent, further than they had gone before and towards the source of dark magic that covered the land, not away from it. But, Calir found the trek easier, somehow. The mage had pointed out to him that he had forgotten his warm clothes and he had been surprised and amused to realise it.

“Oh! I suppose I have!” he chuckled, “Well, I must be getting a stronger constitution. All this cold air is good for a man, you know!”

He shrugged it off without a second thought, unlike Aevum who was deeply troubled by this change in his companion. As before, they needed little rest and rarely stopped for sleep. They ate nothing at all and, being full of bread at the beginning of their journey, suffered neither hunger nor thirst. Again, unlike their outward journey when this was a source of constant complaints from Calir, this time he didn’t notice at all. It was Aevum, who was used to this kind of thing himself, who noticed the change in Calir.

“Where is his good natured appetite? His thirst for good ale? Where is his desire to be home besides a fireplace?”

These questions and more he asked himself as the journeyed further and further into the Ice Continent. They walked for days and days, slowly picking their way across the shattered ice and between the jagged glaciers. Often they would have to back-track for half a day or more, because they stumbled across a great crevasse that was impassable or a shear cliff of brilliant, blue ice that was impossible to climb. However, they did make progress towards their destination and little by little, though Calir couldn’t have said by how much, they approached Tharg’s palace.

The mage was guiding them by an inner sense of the source of the Dark Mirror’s magic. Whenever he wasn’t sure what direction they should take, he sat down in the

snow and allowed himself to sink into a trance that had his mind ebbing and flowing with the currents of sorcery around him. After each of these trances, he had a strong sense of where the Dark Mirror's power was emanating from and could easily point them in the right direction. Without Aevum's powers, Calir would soon have been lost in the icy wilderness. But, as it was, he felt safe and confident in his friend's guidance and - missing neither sleep nor food nor ale - was happy to pass the days trekking in the mage's wake.

Through all of this toil and in the face of the icy blasts of air that pummelled them perpetually, the only change in himself that Calir was really aware of was his growing strength. Day by day, he seemed to find the walking easier. To begin with, when they needed to clamber up a rocky outcrop or climb down into a shallow crevasse, he did so with shaky knees and sweating palms, barely managing to keep himself from falling. But, the further into their journey they went the easier he found these sorts of things. Before long, he found he could easily jump down slopes he would have needed to carefully climb down before. He found himself vaulting up slopes that previously would have taken him half an hour or more to climb. And, whereas to begin with his legs would be tired at the end of the day and his feet sore (even if he wasn't particularly sleepy), now his muscles felt vigorous and strong and he felt that he could walk and walk and walk and never feel a thing. His leg and arms were strong, he was becoming broad-chested and his feet had become hard and muscular. He felt like a new man, and a better man at that.

He noticed all of this just below the level of his conscious thoughts. Whenever he did note this to himself, it was always something like, "I'm feeling good today, yes Calir, this wintry air is good for you!" or, "Nothing like a stretch of

the legs to clear the cobwebs and get the old ticker going!”.

All in all, by the time they reached Tharg’s palace a great change had overtaken Calir and the only one of the two of them who had really noticed was Aevum.

*

“Is that it?”

“You tell me, friend Calir, you are the one who was held captive there.”

They were peeking over a low ridge of ice at a sandstone fortress nestled amongst the glaciers. Its yellow stone looked almost warm surrounded as it was by the whites and blues of the landscape.

“Yes, but I didn’t see it from this angle before. We went in through some kind of entrance tunnel, with a portcullis I seem to remember, but this is quite different.”

From their vantage point, they were looking across and slightly down onto the fortress. It was surrounded by a high, smooth wall topped with ramparts which was roughly square, but easily two hundred meters along each side. Within the walls was a bulky, squat structure that had four square towers in each corner and a domed roof in the centre. It looked completely out of place, set as it was against a backdrop of eternal permafrost. It might have been more at home amongst the dunes of an desert city. Much like the galleon ships that they had followed across the frozen sea, it was if the ice had swept in around this palace, effacing all its surroundings but preserving the centrepiece as a warning to future generations.

“Whether this is the place where you and your friends stumbled across Tharg I cannot say. But, it is emanating waves of temporal power unlike anything I have felt else-

where. There is no doubt that this is the home of the Dark Mirror.”

“It must be the place then - the pit in Tharg’s palace was directly over the Mirror. They cast me right into it!”

“Indeed. Well, friend Calir. What is your plan now?”

Calir looked puzzled for a moment and then considered this question. Aevum felt a touch of sympathy for the fellow. He had clearly been so focused on getting here that he hadn’t given much thought to what they would do when they arrived.

“Well, come to think of it, I’ve been so focused on our journey that - it’s strange isn’t it? - I haven’t given any thought to what we might do when we got here!”

Aevum smiled to himself.

“But, I suppose the original plan still holds. Here we are, armed with the curse of the Dark Mirror, able to move for minutes in an instant of their time. We can saunter in, take the measure of the place, find my friends and then carry them out one by one - all before Tharg or his cronies have even noticed that we’ve arrived! What say you, my good man?”

“Your plan is indeed a good one, friend Calir. Let us hope it is as easy as you say.”

With this, Calir nodded once and crested the ridge they had been crouched behind. He led the way down to the small clearing dominated by the fortress and soon gained the wall.

“Let’s walk around it until we find the entrance I remember.”

Aevum inclined his head and followed the man in a careful circumnavigation of the palace. They’d made it around three of the four walls, when they came to a broad avenue carved out of the ice. It led from the wilderness of the ice

sheet straight to the wall and under a broad archway. The teeth of a portcullis were visible poking out from beneath the rim of the arch and light was visible beyond the tunnel's span.

"Ah ha! This must be it...yes, I'm sure of it. Well, come on then my good man, fortune favours the bold!"

Jogging off into the tunnel, he left Aevum in his wake to follow in a more dignified manner. Aevum wasn't sure what to expect from the interior, but he was certain it would not be what Calir was expecting. The magic of the Dark Mirror did not work in ways that could easily be understood by mortals, and Calir's measure of their situation simply felt too good to be true. The mage was on his guard.

When Aevum caught up with Calir in a large chamber into which the entrance tunnel emerged, he found the man looking around slightly lost.

"I was expecting to find them here - this is where I left them!"

"That was several weeks ago, for us my friend. Even for them that must have been several hours - days even. Courage, friend Calir, it is with evil sorcery that now we contend."

Calir nodded his head knowingly and looked around once more. They were in wide, tall, square chamber. There was a wall of sorts half way across, which reached about a third of the way to the ceiling. There was a stone balustrade across its rim and a small doorway half way along its base.

"Ah! That's where Tharg came from, it's where they took me!" he called over his shoulder with excitement, as he started walking towards it.

Reaching the doorway, which was open and without obstruction, he saw a line of steps leading up - he remembered being carried up these, his feet banging against each step

as his tormentors dragged him up. Throwing caution to the wind, he jumped up these two at a time, with the mage barely keeping up behind him. He gained the mezzanine level and glanced around. A few meters behind him was the balustrade with a view opening out onto the rest of the chamber. Ahead of him was a broad square that had the feel of a courtyard to it, except that it was covered by the vaulted ceiling and devoid of any plant life. Down each side ran a set of cloisters and on the back wall was a large, ornate door-frame, easily three or four metres high. From this distance, he couldn't make out much of the detail, but it seemed to be covered in carvings or statues. It was hung with a pair of giant oaken doors, gilt with iron fastenings. And, between him and this doorway there was a spot where the air seemed to shimmer and the floor was different. He paused and listened. Apart from the sound of Aevum patting up the steps behind him, there was silence. No voices, no raucous laughter, no screams of torture. Still, he thought, that must make sense. For the inhabitants of Tharg's palace, it would take a day to utter a single syllable. Of course he couldn't hear anything, he reassured himself.

"Well?", the mage had joined him.

"Nothing yet, lets investigate that," and he nodded towards the shimmering air between them and the back wall.

Aevum frowned but said nothing, following Calir at a distance towards the strange disturbance ahead of them.

When Aevum caught up with him, Calir was standing at the rim of a broad, circular opening in the floor. No light could be seen within and the sandstone walls lining the hole quickly disappeared into darkness. The faint sound of rushing air could be heard and, standing at the boundary, ice-cold air could be felt flowing out. Aevum joined Calir at the boundary and looked in.

"The Dark Mirror," stated Calir flatly.

"Indeed."

"Where is everyone? I was expecting them to be here, having a raucous feast, torturing my friends or...or...I don't know, doing something! But this place is empty, it's like a ghost town, it's like we're the first people to have been here in centuries."

The air continued to rush out of the opening with a faint hiss. For a moment, Calir thought he could here the whispering of a woman's voice beneath the rushing, but then it passed and he just gazed into the darkness beneath them.

"The Dark Mirror is the centre of an ancient, malevolent and cruel power, friend Calir. With Her, nothing is ever as it seems and is often a good deal worse than one might expect. But, hope is the bane of her power. You never know, your friends with Tharg and his gang might be just through that door," he motioned to the ornate doorway ahead of them, "or they may have freed themselves and at this very moment might be journeying home by the same path that brought you here. Anything is possible with this degree of sorcery in the air - anything and everything. Whilst the Dark Mirror's power is potent, it is not invincible. In the crack's between her spells hope breeds, and it is this hope that you must harbour, now that I am to leave you."

"Leave me! Why, not yet my friend! Let us find my friends first, then you may go your own way, but- well, I shall be lost without you! Why ever must you go now?"

"It is not I who choose, but She. She is calling to me, have you not heard, she will not let me leave her, not yet, she summons me back."

"Good lord, what is this devilry!"

"It is my curse, my friend - and my friend you are. I am sorry I have not been able to help you, but I will try - I will

continue to try.”

“But of course you’ve helped me, I wouldn’t have made it this far without you. But I don’t understand, my good man, can you not escape her clutches?”

Aevum smiled at this. A slow, sad smile and then closed his eyes. The out-rushing of air paused for a moment and then, with the slightest inward breeze, the mage fell forward and tumbled into the pit. He uttered neither cry nor scream, but fell in silence into the darkness and cold of the Dark Mirror. He fell and fell and Calir saw him no more.

Chapter 6

A Doorway of Doorways

Silence prevailed. The eternal exhale from the void of The Mirror seemed to hold its breath. Calir let out a singular sob. Without Aevum he was utterly alone, friendless and hopelessly lost. What could he possibly accomplish without the Mage's guidance? It was Aevum who had led them here. Aevum who had worked out what was happening to them. Aevum who had guided them safely across the Gelida sea. Aevum who had rescued them from the catacombs of the Dark Mirror. Without Aevum, Calir realised, he would still be a prisoner in that cell without windows or doors. He would still be buried alive. He sniffed and wiped his eyes.

"Don't lose yourself yet, my good man, don't lose yourself just yet. There are still folks who need you - your friends are still out there."

He stared into the opening with a drawn look of despair

on his face, before catching himself and forcing a wry smile onto his lips.

“And don’t forget the last words of the Mage - hope! Its hope that’s the bane of Her magic, so hope we must have!”

His words echoed hollowly in the wide, open hall and he shivered. His skin was still warm, despite the rags he was wearing, but he felt chilled to the bone.

“Come on, my man, what’s through there? Got to keep going!”

He was pointing towards the large archway ahead that he had spotted when he’d first looked past the shimmering haze of the mirror. More out of the need to do something than to follow any vestige of curiosity, he moved around the circumference of the Mirror and made his way across the hall to far wall. The closer he got to the archway - which was easily three or four metres high and two across - the more he noticed how ornate it was. The hall itself was built out of simple, flat blocks of stone with no adornment or pattern. But the doorway was intricately decorated and was covered in small sculptures and carvings. They depicted all sorts of scenes - a farmer ploughing a field, a warrior slaying his adversary, a water god rising out of the waves. Next to the bare, plain walls of the hall around it, the doorway was a cacophony of imagery. The doors were the same, now he had gotten closer. They were crafted from giant oaken beams bolted together with thick plates of iron, but they had been carved and sculpted until you could hardly see the grain of the wood at all. Even the iron had patterns and pictures engraved in it, so that you couldn’t look at a single point on the whole door or frame without seeing some kind of scene depicted.

When he was standing in front of the doors, he saw that they were very closely fitted into the frame and were shut

tight. From looking at them, he would have thought they were locked fast and that there was no way through, but he tried them anyway. To his surprise, with each palm on either door, they gave easily and swung silently and smoothly inwards. They were perfectly balanced such that the lightest touch moved them ever-so-slightly inwards. He leant forwards slightly and they opened enough for him to walk through onto the threshold.

On the other side of the doors was another room that, whilst still large, was much smaller than the hall he had come from. Unlike the hall, it wasn't illuminated by shining yellow stone and large, open window frames, but was dull and dark. Not dark like a dungeon, but dark like a bedroom at night with a single candle burning. Except, instead of the warm orange glow of a candle, there was a pale shimmer of blue. The blue had an ethereal quality to it that didn't make Calir think of the ice outside, but instead had him imagining that the light was somehow filtering down from the surface of a shallow, warm sea and into the room. Unlike the boundary of the Mirror, where he felt a deep sense of unease and dread, here he felt oddly calm and at home. So, without a hint of the fear he had felt not five minutes previously, he stepped forward and through the doorway.

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Inside, the room was wide and low. The stone of the walls was darker than the sandstone without and was marbled with veins of black and grey. The floor was paved with ill-fitting slabs, which sloped this way and that in an uneven surface that was a stark contrast to the smooth, yellow floor of outside. The stones themselves were dark and smooth, pitted and rounded as if they had been trodden by crowds

for centuries. Calir didn't need to be an archaeologist to see that this room was much older than the rest of the fortress. This was its inner sanctum and it was almost as if the palace outside had been built around this room as a temple around a shrine.

Now that he was inside, he could clearly see where the other-worldly light was coming from. Arranged along the wall he had just stepped through, facing back towards the hall he had come from, were a set of eight doorways. There were four on either side of the intricate entrance through which he had come, although each was much smaller - barely large enough for a man to walk through. Each was built out of simple, black stone, with blocky frames that spoke of an ancient construction. However, the most interesting thing about the doorways was the doors themselves. Rather than housing aged wooden beams like the entrance to the room, each door was suffused with a blue glow that emanated from its edges and spread out into the room. In the centre of the doorways, the blue glow gave way to a slightly transparent scene that was different from door to door. Calir approached the first of the doors, on his right, and squinted into the light that was at once bright in the dullness of the room and hard to see at the same time. In the centre of the door, he could just make out what looked like a meadow. He looked closer and saw that the field of wild flowers seemed to be swaying gently in a breeze that he could not feel.

"Incredible!"

He reached out towards the doorway but, before touching it, checked himself and moved on to the next door. This next one was a stark mountainside - rocky with patches of snow and ice and not a hint of vegetation in sight. The next was a bustling town square with people coming and going, seemingly oblivious to his vantage point from the doorway.

And so it went on. Each of the doors depicted a different scene except that, unlike the images carved into the entrance to this room, each of the scenes was alive and in motion and - from what he could make out from beneath the glowing light - looked perfectly real.

On the back wall, immediately opposite the great doors through which he had entered, was a single, solitary chair. More like a throne, he thought. It was raised on a dais and had wide arms and a tall back. It was built of the same aged and smoothed stone as the rest of the room and, when Calir investigated more closely, even had the imprint of a seated man worn into the seat.

Calir looked around quickly, suddenly feeling as if he shouldn't be doing what he was about to do, and sat down quickly in the chair. He felt like a child surrounded by the great arms and the back that rose behind him above his head - not to mention that he had to lift himself up on to the seat so his feet were no longer touching the floor. But, it was comfortable and he relaxed, leaning back into the chair.

"Ah! Not bad for a seat made of rock! Not bad at all!"

A sly smile crossed his face and for several moments he forgot his current predicament and his entire reason for being there. He was filled with a satisfying mix of pride and arrogance, as if he'd won a mighty battle by sitting on that throne and was waiting for his courtiers to pay their respects. This feeling had barely begun before it was gone again and he was left feeling small, embarrassed and even more alone than before. Just a small man sat in a big chair, with not a soul to comfort him and not a friend in sight. With this sudden up-welling of self-pity, he pulled up his bare legs and curled up in the middle of the seat. He closed his eyes and hugged himself and for the first time in weeks - months even - he fell soundly asleep and knew no more.

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When he came to, it was to the sound of a shuffling and scuffling. As soon as he realised what he was hearing, he started and jumped out of the throne. He had become so accustomed to the silence of the place, that this new sound was threatening and dangerous. Beneath him, about halfway between himself and the wall of doorways, was a goat. It was licking at its side and was the source of all the noise.

“What the devil!” , he exclaimed.

“How-how did you get in here?”

The goat looked up at the noise with an ambivalent and calm look on its face. It was clear that he was more frightened of the goat than the goat was of him. Before the goat had a chance to answer, however, something caught Calir’s eye. In the doorway behind the goat, a figure seemed to be approaching the wall. It looked to be that of a young man and it was calling someone’s name. Whoever he was, he was getting closer and closer to the doorway, until he seemed to be standing right outside the room. And then, with a small pop which made Calir jump out of his skin, the young man stepped through - out of the blue haze and in to the dull light of the low room.

Having stepped through from the prairie he had been strolling through into this dark, low chamber, the first thing he did was to raise his hand as if he was about to call out again and then stop. Confusion and fear crossed his face and he lowered his hand again. Then he caught sight of the goat.

“Millie!” he called and crossed over to the goat in two or three strides. Bending down onto one knee, he cradled his charge and then took stock of his surroundings.

The first thing he noticed, was the imposing figure in front of him, standing in front of an enormous stone throne. He was easily two metres tall and was a muscular and dangerous looking man. He was dressed in rags about his shoulders and waist, exposing his pale - almost translucent - blue skin stretched over thick muscles and powerful joints. He had a shaggy mane of albino hair and a short, unkempt beard. His eyes were wide, with rims of white surrounding pale, pink irises. His lips were red. More than his sudden dislocation from his fields to this strange room, the sight of this man put the fear of death into the young man and he cowered before him.

"Who- who the devil are you?" came the deep voice of the man in-front of the throne.

"I'm just, just, silly old me, I'm just Capra, humble shepherd and simple farmer, my Lord, I'm terribly sorry for interrupting your peace, your majesty, terribly sorry, terribly sorry!"

All these words tumbled out of him so fast that Calir could barely understand a word he said.

"Its alright, calm down my good man, calm down. Tell me where you're from- friend Capra."

"My Lord is merciful, very merciful, yes, thank ye, thank ye," and he dropped to the other knee and bowed fully forwards until his face touched the floor.

Calir wasn't quite sure what to do about this, so he said the only thing that felt right under the circumstances.

"You may rise, my child, now, tell me what you know."

"Why of course, of course!"

With this, Capra the humble shepherd launched into a tale of his farming life, in the distant province of Pratum. Every day was the same for him, tending his flock, working the fields, but today his favourite goat - Millie - had been

missing at the end of the day and he'd set off in search of her. He'd been crossing the meadow where she normally grazed and had stumbled through this mysterious doorway and had ended up here.

"I just hope that my story is good enough for you, your majesty, 'cos I've not left out a single detail, I promise! I'll show you my farm if you like, if it would please you my Lord, or anything else you command, just let poor little Millie and I go free!"

This boy seemed to have an odd idea of what Calir might be about to do with him and the goat and Calir couldn't understand why he was so afraid. Apart from this rubbish about "my Lord" and "your Majesty", which Calir was going along with to be polite, they were quickly become fast friends - Calir thought.

"Very well, very well, good Capra, I believe you, and your home sounds like a pleasant and gentle place."

"It is, it is, my Lord!"

"And I may well take you up on your offer," Calir continued, "but I'm afraid to say that you may be trapped here now, just as I am!"

"Trapped? Oh no, please don't trap me here my Lord, I'll just be taking Millie home and I'll be out of your way!"

"Of course, my good Capra, you may go as you please...but if you find things not quite as you left them...well, you know where to find me."

"Yes my Lord, of course my Lord, thank ye, thank ye," grovelled Capra as he backed towards the door, tugging at Millie to follow him."

Calir smiled benevolently and watched as the young man retreated nervously to the doorway, pulling his goat through with a small pop. Almost as soon as he'd arrived, he was gone again. The smile on Calir's was frozen suddenly with

the realisation that he'd just dismissed his only hope of company in this desolate place.

"Hope," he murmured to himself, "where is my hope now?"

He seated himself back on the throne and waited. He calmed himself and sat still. He waited.

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Calir sat and he waited and he waited and he waited. His movements stilled, his breathing slowed and before long he looked like a silent statue carved out of the ice surrounding the fortress. He felt as if only moments were passing, but the truth was time was running through him like the neck of an hourglass. It could have been hours, it could have been days. He sat in the throne, staring out at the doorways to other worlds and waited. Silently, hopelessly, he waited.

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Capra was frantic, running this way and that in the meadow. He had to escape this horror, he had to make things right, he had to find the King of that place again. Everyone he knew, everyone loved, frozen in a moment time - untouchable and unreachable, beyond help forever. He had to reach the King of that place again.

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"-ere is it?!", cried Capra as he burst through the doorway, crashing to his knees panting and sobbing.

His sudden appearance, shook Calir out of his reverie and he stood suddenly out of the throne.

"My Lord, my Lord! What is this place? What has happened?"

“This? This is the Kingdom of Tharg, the home of misery and the centre of the sorcery of the Dark Mirror. It is her that has happened and I’m sorry it has happened to you. Welcome my brother, be welcome.”

Chapter 7

The Kingdom of Tharg

“My Lord, newcomers have arrived!”

Calir looked down at the man with disdain. From his vantage point atop the throne, he always felt like petitioners were bowing. This one wasn’t, although he should be. Nomen or Nescio, or some such name, he couldn’t remember. There seemed to be so many subjects in his palace these days.

“From where? No-one was arrived through my doors in days, weeks!” he roared, spreading his arms wide to take in the eight doorways in front of him.

“Not from within, but from without my Lord - they entered through the front gate!”

This time the man did bow, as if in apology for his statement.

“The front gate! Hmph, the front gate...”

Calir felt an odd stirring in his breast. Something was familiar yet unusual about this. Of all his subjects, not one had entered through the front gate. All had appeared out of his ethereal, blue doorways. But, somehow, the idea of people arriving from the outside was familiar.

“Take me to them at once!”

He marched out across the mezzanine, passing the familiar cool rush of air emanating from The Mirror, and down the steps to the atrium. He following the extended arm of Capra, who leaned back from over the balustrade leering. He padded down the stairs and into the wide hall, taking in the ragged band of men disarrayed before him.

He paused and his heart leapt. He saw his friends, all of his friends, just as they were, somehow magically restored to him after all this time. He smiled in welcome to each of them, and then his eyes stopped on the one in the centre. He was looking at Calir with dread in his eyes, a dread that Calir recognised. Impossible, it was impossible!

All of a sudden though, he realised that it wasn't impossible, it was inevitable, it was the nature of the magic of the Dark Mirror and this was her final flourish - a flourish that had been years in the making. Something moved inside him then and he burst out laughing. Laughing with despair and disbelief, a hearty, fearsome laugh. He laughed into the silence and suspense of the crowd in front of him. When he stopped, he faced himself and announced:

“I am Tharg! And I welcome you to my Kingdom, my Kingdom of Ice. And, I welcome you to my troop of mercenaries and marauders. I'm sure some of you will fit in quite well!”