

# Forge of Stones

by Vasileios Kalampakas

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*with special thanks to my  
editor  
who should have acted  
more like the City of Pyr*

Αφιερωμένο στη μητέρα μου.  
Μπορεί να αδυνατεί να διαβάσει το βιβλίο,  
αλλά άς διαβάσει τουλάχιστον την αφιέρω-  
ση.

‘Θαρσεῖν χρή, φίλε Βάττε· τάχ’ αὔριον ἔσσειτ’ ἄμεινον  
ἐλπίδες ἐν ζωῶσιν, ἀνέλπιστοι δὲ θανόντες’

- Θεοκρίτου Ειδύλλια, Νομείς

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**Part I**

**Ex Principia**

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# Prologue

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It is by fortune alone that man maintains his bountiful existence, unhindered by the forces beyond his grasp, unaware of what lies beyond. Once that veil is lifted, who can foretell the future?

-Hilderich D'Augnacy, *Visions of The Aftermath*

## The hunter



HE hunter felt the air thicken. He ventured a look towards the gathering storm. The wind started to gather into brief furious gusts, fallen golden leaves dancing around him. Fleets of scurrying animals could be heard, running for refuge, burrowing in whatever shelter the forest could provide.

His prey seemed indifferent to the coming weather though. The tracks were heavy-laden, and steady, even purposeful. It wanted to be found. It was as if it was challenging him.

He crouched low amidst a thick cluster of bush and peered into the ashen wall of birch trees, his senses on the edge, everything around him pulsing with intensity, his mind focused on his prey. He emptied

his thoughts, and closed his eyes. He reached for the small pendant around his neck, a golden tipped arrow felling a silver eagle. With a silent prayer to God and a fire burning from within him, he darted off into the trees, the shadows they cast over his hooded figure almost failing to touch it.

His feet carried him on a galloping pace, fast and steady, swiftly cutting through the forest, following the clear, fresh tracks. The scent he traced was still strange, neither like any animal or man he had met or heard of before. He paused to sample the soil, feel the ground with his hands. He tasted copper and a tingling sensation lingered on his tongue. He strung an arrow through his bow and felt exhilarated, brimming with a confidence he deserved well. The deeper he went into the woods, the stronger the expectation for the kill became.

As his breathing became faster so did his pace, his form blending in with the forest like a blur. His chest and leggings in brown and dark green leathers, with the coppery scale mail overlaid made for perfect camouflage in the autumn woods. Silent, swift and deadly, he had the advantage. He had smeared his exposed flesh with fresh dirt and his bodice was treated with boar fat, to preserve the leather and cover up his human scent.

As stealthy as possible, he followed a small stream that led to the east, to the Hollows. The tracks started to become faint, the soft dirt heavier and crisper. The scent grew mellow, the metal taste in his mouth waned. He was losing his prey.

He lay still for a moment and took a westward look, towards the clearing from where he entered the forest. Above the forest ceiling he could make out the grim blue and black of the stormy clouds. Lightning flashed the scenery alight, the trees around him casting shadows like the fanged mouth of a terrible behemoth, menacing and inescapable.

The trickle of the stream was drowned under an ominous thunder. The first drops of rain fell on his cape. He felt he was now losing the advantage. The scent of his prey would be washed away, his vision would be of little help in the chaos of a storm, the forest would be filled with distant shadows and all noise would be lost under the thunder and the falling rain.

Without a hint of sight, sound or smell, his chest caught fire. The



hunter frantically searched for his foe, but then a second and third fiery sting brought him to the ground. His face was contorted with a soundless expression of pain and amazement. It felt like arrows had pierced his armor but there were no arrow stalks or heads. It mystified him, that he should die in such a fashion, never once seeing what or who took his life. The world around him became gray and he felt a rush of pain before his senses finally failed him. His breathing stopped, and with the forest ceiling occupying his view, the hunter exhaled laboriously and silently prayed to God for the last time.

## The dancer



HE reveled in the darkly lit chambers, her form that of a swirling dervish, the locks of her hair mirroring the precious light with an intoxicating sheen of honey and brown, ethereal smell of roses and lavender pouring out of her skin. She moved as if the ground was a mere illusion to be disregarded, her arms faintly bent upwards as if praying, or caressing the lithe forms of young gods, and her face had the impression of unborn awe, mesmerizing to see, inviolate to the touch.

She danced to the sounds of incessantly beating drums, in patterns and rhythms deep and rumbling that thumped her very soul, following a melody of strings as clear as a mountain spring erupting, a fresh dew engulfing the chamber, and a band of flutes calling out to unseen spirits, as if a ritual of old was being performed for her pleasure alone.

The music reached a crescendo, a ground-shaking climax and she became frenzied with passion, exhuming a mystical air of love, a beacon of a haven for all the unloved ones, an unseen contract with a muse behind each tempting gesture.

Her faint gossamer dress swirled and failed to contain her ethereal form in such a breathtaking way, that even the flames of the brazers

around the chamber flickered in tune with her dancing form to cast shadows that seemed to have a life of their own.

The crowd around her was silent and still, wearing almost identical masks of brass, the few flames that illuminated the chamber adorning them with golden hues of honey and a glimmer of sunlight.

A single man stood at the edge of the dancing stage, robed with heavy linen, his face unmasked for everyone to see, tears running down his cheeks, welling under his chin in an unwavering steady flow, his face a painful mix of sorrow and awe, his eyelids closed shut in a vain attempt to contain his tears.

At the climax of her dance, she laid her body down, planted her feet and hands to the stage, her back forming an arc. And then she convulsed in a familiar but unspoken way, the way of ecstasy, her pelvis moving to the rhythm of the drums, faster and faster, as if an invisible lover was being forced upon her.

The music came abruptly to a stop and utter silence filled the chamber. She sagged to her knees, her hair concealing her face completely. The silence was deafening, the only sound her ragged breath. Then the unmasked man spoke while bowing solemnly:

“Celia, I lack the words. The Chorus weeps in adoration. Let everyone be witness to this moment: Celia danced the Edichoros, and the Gods were pleased. So says the Chorus.”

In a transient moment of still time, the crowd of masks said in one voice: “Aye”. As soon as the word was spoken, the masked men dispersed as if answering to a silent summons and melted into the shadows, as if they were never really there, as if they had been a mirage, a background for this dance alone. The dancer and the unmasked man still remained.

He extended his arms, palms facing upwards, a gesture to the dancer or mayhap the Gods themselves. She stood up on her bare feet slowly, her hands touching her thighs over her gossamer dress, strands of her hair upon her bare shoulders. He spoke more softly, as if not to be overheard, even though there was not a living soul around in earshot.

“Celia, my love. Come.”

At his words, she touched his palms and drew closer to him. She looked upon his face, wet with tears and lit by flickering flames, her

hazel eyes still glittering with ecstasy, alight with enthusiasm, and yet forming a wizened look that belied her years.

"Amonas.", she uttered his name with a feeling of relief.

"It is done. You need not worry anymore. Men and Gods alike will remember this night for all time.", Amonas said sweetly while gently caressing her head.

"And you, will you cherish those tears?", a faint smile forming on her mouth, a playful expression and a gleeful look on her eyes.

"Need you ask?", his eyes darting all over her features, to her smooth hair, her sculpted nose, the lobes of her ears, her slender neck, her measured lips and back to her stare.

"I am only a woman, Amonas. I have to.", her neck craning to meet his lips, as tall as he was.

"I'm not worthy of such a gift.", said Amonas as he stood still, black eyes peering through her closed eyelids.

"Speak no more.", Celia said and hushed him by touching his lips with hers, then embracing his neck with both hands, softly but steadfastly guiding him towards her.

Afterwards they made love on that very stage, the silence of the chamber broken only by the sound of sputtering candles and braziers.

## The Curator



man dressed in dark crimson robes and a sky blue sash made haste up the keep's long winding staircase. Perspiration covered his craggy old leathery face, his gray bearded chin still awash with the wine he had spilled only moments earlier.

"Not now, not here. Damn the fools, damn them!", he kept repeating to the deaf, heavy-set stone walls, with almost every breath. The flickering flame of the torch he held cast his form in shadows over the stones of the stair's steps, on the dank walls. The form of a stumbling, muttering old fool. Even the shadows seemed to mock him, crouching

even lower than him as the staircase finally unwound onto the roof of the keep.

"Why now, while I still draw breath?", said the old man as he caught his breath, and started off to find what it was he came looking for. As if long ago forgotten, he fumbled around the roof, while a lukewarm dusk gave way to a chilling, gloomy moonless night.

He kept straightening his beard with one hand, while his eyes were closed, and his other hand was raised, a pondering finger waving in a hazy, uncertain rhythm. As if trying to catch up with a silent tune only he could hear. Suddenly, he opened his eyes and set off with his head intently searching the floor.

The air smelled of liquorice and the burned wheat stalks of nearby farmsteads. Planting season. He looked annoyed, trying to pick up a loose cobblestone from the roof. It gave no purchase, and try as he might he could not so remove it. He grumbled a mild curse, unfitting of his Office, status, demeanor, or personality. But to hell with all that. It wouldn't matter soon, none of it would, he thought.

Standing upright, he folded his arms and breathed deeply, his elbows sagging slightly, his chin almost touching his chest. He sighed, and then abruptly erupted with a flurry of curses, kicks, punches and stomps again quite unseemly for a person of his stature.

A Curator. By mutual assent among his peers, not a very prestigious one, but nonetheless, a Curator. Forcing himself to calm down, he drew a few deep breaths before standing over one ledge from the roof and shouting, almost in a screech:

"Hilderich!!Hilderich!" An answering shout came from somewhere below: "Over here master Olom, over here!" The curator leaned over the ledge, searching for a face to direct his ire at, to no avail. He shouted once more, throwing his fists wildly into the air.

"Hilderich, you mongrel! Fetch the keystone from my study, run like there's no tomorrow!", said the curator and Hilderich complied smartly to the best of his abilities. A few moments passed then, and a lot of things happened at once. First, a few steps behind where the Curator stood, the air twisted and reality gave way to nothingness, where a large kind of slit formed suddenly and the world seemed as if made of a paper tapestry badly sewn together. The Curator felt a strange rush of stinging air, turned about slowly, and had time enough to yell one

last time at his pupil: "Run now! Find the one I dared not!"

As Hilderich ran outside the small keep, his gaze locked with the despairing eyes of his master, whose last look implored him silently to live. A hooded form seemed to grab Curator Olom from his neck with a single armored hand and lift him over the keep's parapet.

Hilderich stood there for a moment transfixed, overtaken by the speed and incredulity of what was taking place. When the hooded figure turned its head slowly towards him, fear pierced his heart. When the Curator fell down to his death, it was still looking at him, only now Hilderich was running, eyes wide with horror, hands gripping the keystone with white knuckles.

The hooded figure stood where the curator had been standing only moments earlier, the slit behind it now gone, as if it had been a trick of the eye. With scarcely a thought, it jumped off the keep's roof and landed on its two feet, barely registering the 60-foot drop. As it turned to run after Hilderich, it paused instinctively after feeling the bloodied hand of the dying Curator tugging at his plated boot.

"Had to make sure first.", said the curator through agonizing pain and a broken jaw while clutching his pendant, when himself, the keep, and the figure that had appeared out of thin air became a thing of the past, bright white light suddenly filling the dusky plains accompanied by an eerie, unnatural, unnerving silence.

Hilderich only felt a haze of feat and a tingling at the back of his head. He dared not stop or look back, he simply ran. And prayed.

## The jester



THE grand audience hall was fabulously lit through grandiose arched windows on either side. Sunlight glistened off the brass and gold etched everywhere around the hall, from chandeliers to decorative ornaments, marked with the livery of the Castigator. Crests and banners engraved with family mottoes, finely crafted from materials of the highest

quality, hung in carefully positioned places around the hall, denoting their respective family's status, lineage, and nobility.

Sweet aromas of burnt incense, cinnamon and musk permeated the air, bouquets of freshly picked flowers from young maidens with the colors of the rainbow were abundantly strewn around in neat vases and edifices all around the thick marble pillars that supported the magnificently painted dome, depicting wondrous scenes from the history, mythology, and tradition of the Outer Territories.

A ruckus of tingling bells and a limerick tune of chords echoed in the vastness of the audience hall, a single tinny voice singing along:

Five pieces of gold that shone, and the sight of her alone  
Another man atop his throne, how will he ever atone  
Bloody hands reach for the tome, will he ever dare to come home?  
This ballad may remind you of lore, I might even sound a bore  
The heart of it still remains, all will always be the same  
As long as clouds grace the sky, as long as He will die

The jester played out the last part of the tune, merrily dancing around the main hall, a wide smile seemingly permanently carved on his painted, multicolored face. As he hit the last of the chords, he ended his performance with a wide curved bow towards the man who sat in the center of the audience throne, his sole spectator, and waited there, for a few moments, until he heard a morose voice:

"I tire of you too easily these days, Perconal. You used to be more, ah.. Fun.", said the voice that belonged to the Castigator of the Outer Territories.

"I could do the leap-frog again, sire.", the jester countered with a hopeful proposition.

"That only seemed funny at the time since you leap-frogged onto the Patriarch and the Procrastinator Militant. Never saw a Procrastinator Militant fumble for his sword before.", the Castigator responded absent-mindedly, his head resting on his left hand, a goblet of wine on his right one.

"No crowd today, sire. Who could I leap-frog onto then?", the jester insisted while fumbling with his crown of bells, his smile turning into an ever more persistent grin.

"No crowd indeed. I believe I tire of crowds as well lately."

“Perhaps .. an orgy?”, proffered the jester, shamelessly making a rude pelvic thrust in the air, his hands mockingly grasping at an imaginary waist.

The Castigator seemed to offer a little time to the idea, but a disapproving nod of his head made the jester suddenly wear the face of a crying, hurt man, shoulders slumped, hands knead together, as if pleading.

“No, Perconal. I’m not in the mood.”

“Then games sire! Games are always fun! And a challenge! Or are you, afraid? Surely not!”, the jester said in a booming voice, and then exploded into a series of mock athletic gestures, like running, jumping and javelin throwing, flexing pitiful muscles, kneeling and offering an invisible crown to the Castigator, looking as solemn and expressionless as a grave.

“Games, you say?”, the Castigator seemed briefly intrigued, and now rested his head on both hands, his voice slightly muffled.

While he seemed to ponder the idea, the jester scurried soundlessly near the table where the goblet of wine lay, and with a wide grin forming on his shallow face once again, he mischievously reached for it. The Castigator took notice, but said nothing. Eyes darting to and fro, the jester sipped some wine off the goblet, painted lips smearing its bronze, delicately decorated surface, with white powder and red and violet paint. As the jester closed his eyes and savored the exquisite vintage, he felt icy steel hard against his throat.

“Feuillout usually leaves too dry an aftertaste, don’t you think?”, the Castigator said to the jester, in all seriousness, his knife in hand, set against the jester’s throat, edge flashing bright from the sunlight.

“Sire. I transgressed.”, replied the jester, any hint of grin or smile cast out instantly.

“That you did, Perconal. I hate it when you do that. I thought more of you.”, said the Castigator in an emphatically disappointed tone of voice.

“I was tempted sire. I haven’t tasted wine, any wine, since .. I really can’t remember. Truthfully.”, the jester almost cried out the last few words, his head bowing in submission, his hands fumbling with his chordus, careful not to touch any strings lest he make a note.

“Well, no matter. Tomorrow you will be castigated, forty lashes

should be enough. People have been hanged for less. Water is so scarce, yet you would risk your life to indulge in wine tasting, no less. I think I'm growing a soft spot for you, Perconal."

"Thank you sir. Can I at least have another sip, sire? It is so sweet.", said the jester with a half-formed smile and hint of a gesture towards the goblet.

"Another sip? Ha! There you go Perconal, you actually made me laugh. Ha ha!", a loud laugh and a smile formed on the Castigator's usually bored, flat face, before throwing the goblet on a nearby column, wine spilling all over the black, shiny, green veined granite floor.

"There you go! Lap it up, you fool! Leave none for the maidens!", shouted the Castigator, a furious laughter welling up, unable to contain it. And Perconal, the Jester, helplessly ran about the marble floor, trying to sip as much of the spilled wine as he could, his bells and jingles ringing and echoing in the empty hall.

## The boatman

**O**NE of my business, young sir, but given the chance and all since I don't get many passengers through here this ferry, so far away from the Basilica Road and all, might I ask where do you come from? Beg your pardon.", the boatman ventured in a fast talkative manner, his sight affording his passenger a casual gaze, his hands on the boat's rows beating them in and out of the water in a calm, slow rhythm.

"Nicodemea. Up north. Is this safe? The fog, I mean.", the young passenger answered in an absent-minded fashion, his question trailing with a hint of worry and nervousness, his eyes averted from the surrounding fog and water, focused instead on the boat itself, as if an invisible wall made such an effort mundane.

"Why shouldn't it be? The water's dead still, and there no rocks on the other side, just green grass, young sir. You carry nothing more than your person, so missing the platform shouldn't be a bother. A



simple matter, no worries, be there before you know it too. Looking for a mule or a horse, any chance? Long way ahead, ain't I right?"

"But the fog. Isn't it .", the young man hesitated with a sour face.

"Thick? Damn thick fog this time of the year, lifts at around noon, sets in before dusk. Pretty normal lad, come to think about it, didn't catch your name now. Care to share in a friendly discussion? Reilo's the name", the ferry man interjected with a smile, part glossy silver, part cavernous lack of teeth.

"Ahem, I'm Molo. Thessurdijan Molo.", the young man said after a small pause and some fidgeting with his cloak and belt before revealing a gloved hand and proffering it to the boat handler.

"Can't right now lad, kinda caught up rowing, remember? But very much obliged to meet you, young sir. I'm Reilo, Reilo the boatman. Don't get many nice people like you around here.", the ferry man nodded in acknowledgement, underlining the fact he was rowing by enthusiastically flapping the rows ineffectually above the water's surface, before he added with a note of apprehension:

"Not to sound too promiscuous sir, but what's a nice gent like you doing crossing these no-good-parts for?"

"Well you are quite talkative a fellow aren't you, Reilo? I'm a student, on an errand, that's all.", the young man rearranged his cloak, and peered past the boat man, through the fog, without success of glimpsing anything else than a gray oozing atmosphere and a thin shiny sliver of murky water.

"Must be quite an errand to travel that far,eh?"

"That, it is indeed.", said the young man sounding suddenly grave. The fog started to lift about then, as a light breeze rushed around them, the feeling of chilled clean air a welcome change on their cheeks.

"There you are Molo sir, fog's lifting. Clockwork, eh?", the gaping mouth of the man lending little of the associated perfection to the word.

"If you say so Reilo."

"And once you're on the other side, how 'bout a getting some rest for your aching feet, eh? I got a cousin, fine lad, comfy bed, real straw and all, sensible prices mind you.", the boat man pressed on the advantage while rowing the last few yards towards the shore.

"I'm looking to keep on moving, thank you.", Molo answered politely.

“Then a horse might come in handy? Got a nephew has a couple o’ fine workhorses, could sell you one off cheap if I put a word too.”, Reilo blinked one eye in a way that offered one too many wrong connotations.

“I won’t be needing any of that, thank you Reilo.”, said Molo, stressing his expressed gratitude as well as his gentle patience by accenting his thanks.

“Alright sir, hope no regrets later on.”, said the boatman, somewhat disappointed his sales pitch didn’t hit off as planned.

“Believe me, no regrets.”, answered Molo, and stepped off the boat and onto the river’s shore, his one hand on his knapsack, a walking rod in the other one. He picked up a brisk pace and soon he met the road going east. He checked his few belongings one last time as a late afterthought and set off once again.

## The Pilgrim



His feet were sore. Cold air rushed to meet his face, the flimsy cloak offering a little less than adequate protection. Tall grass grew on either side of the rocky path through the hills. The cries of a crow accompanied the howling gusts of the wind, the sky a bleak gray, just like the days before. He looked around, searching for some kind of shelter at least until the wind died down. He knew he had to rest soon, his body ached and his legs felt like lead.

He spotted a large bark of a tree, a large oak, hollowed out, grizzly and old. He made a rush of straining effort to reach it quickly, further up the hill. A little more pain and then he could sit for a change. Perhaps even sleep, cold wind or not.

The oak was a perfect fit, large enough to lay down with only a small opening a lean man had to go through sideways. He was lean. And hungry, cold, tired and groggy. As he put down his knapsack, he grimaced with pain from stiff muscles. He lay down, on the ground,

and felt like all his cares and troubles in the world were suddenly lifted, he felt light as a feather, numbness encircling his senses.

He stretched his feet and looked up, a small crack on the bark letting the sky seep through. His sight wandered to the clouds passing overhead, gray tints on blue black mattresses, like forlorn shapes running through a twisting, foaming river.

He closed his eyes, and muttered a prayer, thanking his God for the timely shelter, feeling he was being looked after, cared for, like his pilgrimage was an extraordinary thing, a matter of grave importance, a mission he had to carry out, a mission worthy of every little help. All he had to do was have faith, and he would persevere, and his God would keep a watchful eye, and provide.

Soon, he fell asleep, laying there seemingly dead as the wood around him. He dreamt, but he would remember nothing when he would wake up. His chest rose and fell in a slow, laborious rhythm. And all around the oak, the grass bend where the wind blew. And the crows had stopped their crying, some of them perched on the very same oak.

A few drops of rain started falling, and pretty soon it turned into a drizzle, thin and almost refreshing, a gift of shower the earth accepted eagerly. He was dry, and he was warm. He thought to himself, “God always provides” and fell into a dreamless sleep.

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# The City of Pyr

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“It is the will of the Gods for man to live as such, to be humbled by his misgivings and sins, to be laid low. For it was man’s destiny to live free as he desired, he would sooner rather later turn upon his own, his desires a fatal trap, a wretched condition any man worth living strives to keep in check daily, with prayer and the Law as his guide. For without the Law, what is man but a cunning animal?”

- Arch-minister Feinglot XXIV, *Porfyria Voluntas*, Vol. II

## Dangers of the trade

HEfirst thing that assaulted Hilderich’s senses were the smells. Lost in a smelting crowd of city people, the smells were overpowering: the acrid sweat of unkempt horses mingled with rosewood and cinder scraps from the carpenters’ workshops, heavy spices like cinnamon and uwe flared his nostrils while an essence of oils and meats wandered through the air, the smell of filthy beggars waxing and waning around every corner, its temporary absence filled in with incense from close by temples and

intoxicating perfumes from passing, illustrious carriages.

The mix of sounds though felt familiar, reminding him of bees buzzing through the meadows back home, whole swarms feeding on the nectar of roleva flowers, over a golden carpet swaying gently under the evening gale. Now and then some voices stood taller than the rest, hints of selling wares and the ever present and watchful Ministers announcing laws, edicts and verdicts, punishments, and religious texts, all for the good of the people. The cacophony was further accented by the clacking sounds of hooves, pig cries and beggars' pleas.

Tall arches overhead cast angled shadows everywhere, the encircling walls of the buildings like sheer cliffs towering over the palpitating mass of people, animals and all the rest that could not readily fit into either category. Blue-gray rock and lime mortar dominated the market's landscape, the wear-torn cobblestones of the streets a hazy washed white wherever the grit and mass of people allowed a small glimpse. And street after street, wall after wall, bronze engraved plaques embellished with holy texts and iconography hung on arches, balconies and posts, in favor of the Gods, in memory and glory of the Castigator and the Pantheon.

If the market was the heart of the city as its inhabitants claimed, then what was said of Pyr being a heartless bitch seemed at once both right and wrong. Every single cast, class and type of man was to be found here, buying, selling, begging, stealing, killing, blackmailing and dying. There were parts of the market where the suns had never shown upon them since the city was built, dark corners where those who entered usually did not reappear, and when they did, blood not their own had been spilled.

The beggars had become part of the landscape, blinds, invalids, all sorts of castaways and society's detritus, tugging away at embroidered hems, pleading with sore voices and grotesque faces. Those of them who bothered the wrong people time and again were soon beaten or stabbed to death by lackeys and guardsmen, left for dead on the spot, attracting the ire of honest, hard working merchants and artisans for not having the decency to crawl away from near their workshops and stalls and die someplace else where they would not put off potential customers.

But this was at the same time the place where everything of import

came to be; this was where produce from the surrounding fields and indeed neighboring territories was gathered and sold to those who could afford it. This was where artisans created common everyday wares, materials and tools as well as delicate, commissioned works of art, this was the place where deals and partnerships were entered and broken, contracts signed and carried out, where everyone, whether a layman or a noble, had some kind of business.

This was the place where the Ministers' chants were heard every day, preaching, teaching, and enforcing the religion that is Law. The market, in that sense, was a living representation, a miniature of where and how the people of Pyr lived their lives, and even how some of them lost them.

Hilderich was drifting along the current of people flowing incessantly through the market, occasionally bumping onto variously indifferent or protesting men, taking care of the treads of carts, running heralds and practicing pickpockets. He could hear the Minister from the next street calling out a long list of names, and his eye caught two men in an unlit alley cracking another man's skull, their shadowy outline briskly contrasting with the lit background of the large street behind the small alley. It seemed dishearteningly clear that this was business as usual here, that some code of practice had been followed and the formalities obeyed, killing a faceless man hidden away from the light of the suns.

His almost random course took him closer to the Minister's spot, an elaborate fountain made of granite, engraved with scenes of an historic battle from the Heathen times he could remember learning about as a child, but could not immediately recognize. The Minister held a distaff on one hand, heavy-looking and oblique, and was still reading names off a long unwinding scroll fitted in some kind of extensible hook on the distaff that seemed purposefully designed. He wore a long robe made of violet velvet with a gold embroidered hem and a silver-lined crest of the Outer Territories on his chest, a small black cap with a single emerald denoting his office, and both of the robe's arms were filled with holy texts written in *Lingua Helica*, stitched in purple silk.

The ministers Hilderich had known made offerings to the Gods, upheld the Law and taught it. These holy men seemed somewhat distasteful, one might even call them pompous. He wondered what Master

Olom's remark would have been and he was reminded of the duty he had yet to fulfill. He ignored the small mass of people gathered around the Minister as well as the rest of the still unfolding list of names, and lost himself once more in the throng of people, his senses acutely attuned by now, searching for a sign that would bring him a step closer to finding the one man he was searching for ever since that fateful night.

The thought of the word conjured in his mind a brief glimpse of that night, an almost morbid recollection of what had happened. He had barely had time to stop and ponder the minutiae, while trying to get to Pyr as fast as possible, the place where he had to start his possibly vain search. The more he thought about what had exactly happened, the more he failed to grasp how everything had come crashing down like an avalanche, one moment of perfect stillness followed by sheer and utter terror, an unavoidable terrible fate. Such was the end of Master Olom.

Even though he would not admit to it, he felt he somehow cheated death on that night, that it should have been him rather than his Master, or at least he should have had the same luck, at least as a matter of principle. Thankfully, wise Olom, though considered a relative unknown, with a handful of friends and none in high places, thought otherwise.

Never pausing in his stride, Hilderich closed his eyes and clutched the keystone his master had entrusted him with, ever so tightly. He had taken extra precautions ever since he had to carry the strange artifact with him. He always kept it on his person, and had fashioned a small metal holder with a small but sturdy chain fastened to his thick leather belt, resembling more the small cage of a sparrow, made of thin sheets of metal he had scrounged off the stables of an inn, the second day since he ran away from that explosion.

That inexplicable explosion of light and heat, like hundreds of oil barrels and steamers going off at once, only neither was to be found even a day's ride away, much less unaccountably stored there at the keep. It could be something Ancient, it must have been something Ancient. But his knowledge of the Old People and their ways and artifacts was still little, and as far as he knew, no such examples were in master Olom's care, nor had he seen or heard any hint of such awesomely destructive or powerful items during the last four years. But, what else could it be? Unless the Gods had revealed themselves in blessed fury

and might. Wouldn't they have spared his master?

He let out a sigh without noticing, his head slightly slumped, his expression sour. He had been so deeply engrossed in thought, that when he ventured a look he found himself utterly lost with no sense of direction, in a part of the market conspicuously calm, lacking the overwhelming mass of people that offered a false sense of safety that was nevertheless more welcome than none at all.

The distant din of the market proper could still be heard, but he had walked quite a distance and the crowd of people looked a little more than a milling sea of garments and bustling feet. With the corner of his eye he glimpsed a pair of shady figures was stalking him, probably had been for a while, and were just about to gang up on him.

Hilderich was not a stoutly built fellow, and did not consider himself neither a man of action or capable of putting up a serious fight. But he had faith in his master, and his quest preceded everything else. He had to preserve his life in order to preserve the keystone, so he chose the most viable and logical course of action under the circumstances: he ran like hell.

He suddenly darted off towards the direction of what seemed to be a large bell tower, and ventured a slight look over his left shoulder to get the bearing of the figures behind him. They were just beyond hand's reach when he started running, his heavy cloak waving wildly, feet scurrying on the cobbled street.

One of them cursed profoundly and the other one shouted at him to stop, then both of them went on a chase after him. Hilderich went right and left through alleys and larger streets, sometimes under shadow and others under light, trying to keep the tower that somehow seemed a safe place in sight, while at the same time trying to give his pursuers the slip.

The sound of boots on stone was still unmistakably behind him, and sweat had started to pour out of his body. He went past small houses, inns, and squares, while fleeing for what seemed his life, and curiously enough his mind registered that not a housewife or elder man ventured more than an indifferent look at the chase taking place in front of their eyes, only the children paused in their play to look, point and giggle excitedly.

His feet started to ache and his breathing became short and almost



painful, fire welling up in his lungs. He knew he could not keep this up for long, and the tower he had set out to reach did not seem much closer than earlier. He ventured a slight look over his right shoulder, and couldn't see either of the figures chasing him. He listened intently for a few moments and could not make out the distinct noise of chasing boots, only rather his own two feet galloping achingly. He allowed himself a drop in pace, easing his breathing, coming to a slow stop near a shadowy wall, bent over with hands on his knees, throwing scared looks around, hoping that the chase was over now.

"Don't ever run off like that again.", the man's gruff voice seemed to come through the wall of stone, but he was only hiding deeper into the shadow of an adjoining alley, Hilderich instinctively turning around, seeing a flash of light hinting at an unsheathed knife or sword, its wholeness under the cover of dark.

For a moment he drew enough of a breath to dart off again in another random direction, slipping away at the last minute like before, but then he noticed the other man, a red-haired bearded brute, pieces of armor showing underneath his shabby clothes, a jagged knife in hand, standing a few paces to his right, steadfastly covering both ways out of his predicament.

With no real options left, Hilderich suddenly leaped on the nearest man, blade or not, in what could only really be a selfless last act of defiance, thinking he was soon about to die, failing his master for the last time. Nevertheless, he would give his all, and while he leaped his gathered his fist aiming for the man's head, trying to deliver as much pain as possible. The punch never connected.

The man still standing inside the shadows expertly and calmly took a step back and bend his back slightly, with Hilderich's wild effort going awry, hitting nothing but air, losing his balance and making a counter-step. Just as he could feel his face freeze in astonishment, he brought his other hand backwards in order to try and have another go at punching his assailant. He did not manage that in any event though, because he winced and doubled-up at the paralyzing pain from the knee that had firmly and powerfully connected with his belly. He felt his stomach empty itself of its contents and his sight go blurry, a hint of red clogging his sight, his feet going limp and heavy, his breathing shallow. The last thing he saw before he passed out, was a grinning

mouth and the icy clear flash of a steel blade.

## Night veil



HE woke up with cold sweat on her forehead, her temples damp, locks of her hair smack against her face. She drew the bedsheets against her body, curling up onto the empty side of her bed. She felt the unborn child inside her stir uncomfortably, as if awoken with terror by the same dream. She laid her hands on her belly, gently caressing it, feeling the child inside calm down, freely flowing in an inner, warm sea of love and protection.

The unborn fell silent, his tiny heart barely stating it was alive and well inside his mother's womb. The mother on the other hand, was still visibly shaken from her vision. She saw rivers of blood engulfing her and her child, and fires bright as the sun all around her. She saw Amonas' head on a pike, along with hundreds of other men's heads, hellishly put on display in a gory show, seething masses of animals rather than men cheering with voices that echoed like the very pits of damnation.

The hair on her back was raised and she felt as helpless as a thawing flake of snow, unable to comfort herself and lay back to sleep, the shocking images of her sleep having burned through her waking heart and mind. She stood up with some effort, and with slow attentive paces, made it to the balcony. The night was invitingly chilly, offering a crystal clear sky, the few clouds overhead like thin gossamer webs the Gods might have woven to catch a falling star.

She peered out over the never-sleeping city, its market always alight with torches and large common pyres, strange shadows flickering on walls, fleetingly illuminated faces with blank expressions, as if in a haze of ecstasy, whirling in the rhythmic dance of the city like strands of cloth spun in the air.

The Ministry Tower and the Disciplinaryum were lit as bright as day, proud banners flung high and wide, a procession of ministers underway, and another festivity in the Disciplinaryum's garden that sported tricks of fire and light was taking place, washing the rest of the city with golden red hues and splashes of green and blue light, as if there was not a care in the whole world.

The rugged brown stonework of the balcony felt rough under her

smooth touch. She moved her hand unconsciously across the stone while gazing at the city, vainly searching for her loved one among the sands of men. Her hand seemed to dance, ebbing and flowing to a melody even she herself couldn't hear, like conducting an invisible chorus of spirits of old inhabiting this very stone.

She closed her eyes momentarily and the image of Amonas' head haunted her, his blood still pouring hot. She held her breath and moved her lips in silent prayer, wishing her dream was nothing more than simple fear of what lay ahead. Her faith should not waver, she must be strong enough for Amonas' sake, and for their unborn child. Let the Gods carry them forward and all will be as it should be.

Her child stirred once more, soothing her soul and bringing a faint smile to her face. She went back inside, laid herself on her bed, her hands resting on the still empty side, and slept in peace, her face a statue of serenity. She dreamt no more that night.

## Inescapable Reality

**H**ILDERICH knew he was still alive. The men's voices echoed faintly in his throbbing head, pain stabbing him in the back of his neck, muscles stiff from prolonged unconsciousness. He opened his eyes and blinked furiously, his eyesight adjusting to a brightly lit chamber, sunlight pouring from tall arched glass windows and a radiant dome above.

A small table occupied the middle of the room and a flimsy looking cardboard adorned the opposite wall. The two men that had attacked him were looking at him, the bearded brute standing up with his hands in his pockets, the man with the gruff voice sitting down at the table, a beam of light partly obscuring his face, dust motes whirling silently in the air.

Hilderich lay in a small stone cot carved into a recess of a far wall. The cot felt uncomfortable, his body protesting slightly to his efforts of movement. He flexed his arms and legs momentarily, and realized he was not bound or restrained in any way. Puzzlement showed on his face, and then the man who had bested him addressed him:

"You were out for almost a day. I am sorry we had to take somewhat extreme measures, but we had to make sure you disappeared properly. Giving us the run did not help, so we had to make it look like you were being mugged. Hence the headache. I apologize for being rather rough.", the man's voice gruff but genuinely polite, almost friendly, his words followed by a faint smile and condescending nod.

"Dunno if that put any sense in it though.", the bearded man grumbled under his breath audibly enough, regarding Hilderich with a look akin to contempt.

"Philo..Please.", said the man in the friendly voice, who appeared to be the better of the brutish red-haired man.

Hilderich noted the brute's name was Philo, and watched him for moment as he made a snorting sound and then crossed his hands across his chest, leaned against a wall and quieted down, as the other man had requested. The polite man continued:

"My friend here thinks you are somewhat dim and unforgivably naive for a place like Pyr. That remains to be seen. I think you will

prove very useful indeed.”, said the man, eyes level with Hilderich’s who was now sitting upright on the small cot.

“Who are you people? I thought you’d kill me. Why make me disappear? Why am I here?”, the look on Hilderich’s face was contorted, eyebrows bent together, his puzzlement even more evident than before.

“You mean why did we not? Again, I apologize. My name is Amonas, and this, as you know already, is Philo. Let’s leave it at that for now. There are things I can and things I cannot explain to you, at least for the time being. You had to disappear because you were at risk of being found by people with a different agenda. Once I make myself clear, you will understand it was necessary for more significant reasons, as well as for your protection. Soon enough, you will have to reach a decision.”

“What kind of decision? Am I being threatened? You did not bind my hands. Am I a prisoner?”

“You are in no way a prisoner. We just needed to talk to you in safety. Please, hear what I have to say first. It is a matter of grave importance, and it involves the keystone in your possession.”, Amonas’ tone carrying a hint of pleading and urgency, his words almost jarred against each other.

At the mention of the keystone, Hilderich was left wide-eyed.

“Aye, we knew.”, Philo added, a sever look cast upon Hilderich.

They knew? Since when? Thoughts kept rushing through his mind, what he should ask and what he might reveal that he should not. Was there indeed real danger here? Were they telling him the truth? Was he being safeguarded? He instinctively reached for the chain on his belt but it was not there. They had taken the keystone. Had he failed already? Was there a point to all this? His face took on an expression of silent horror, mouth frantically opening and closing with no sound coming out, like a fish out of the water, the spasms of death upon it.

Hilderich shouted in a trembling voice that could have been mistaken for a shriek:

“Give it back! Thieves! You are common thieves!”

He was standing upright now, his head frantically turning from Amonas to Philo and back, casting looks of urgent accusation, wide-eyed and tense. He regained a measure of self-control, and clasped his hands together and closing his eyes said in a clear, level voice:

“Please. Give it back.”

Amonas and Philo were exchanging dumbstruck looks, Hilderich’s outburst having caught them by complete surprise. When there was time enough for them to answer, all they could do was break into a hearty fit of laughter. Philo, while still laughing managed to speak:

“Thieves! And the.. ‘Please’? Listen to yourself, lad.”

Amonas cut in and took a beleaguered Hilderich by the arm, a calming, reassuring voice issuing from his mouth:

“Fear not. We mean no ill. We consider you a friend, and if you’d choose so, a brother. The keystone is safely with me, I have it on my person. Here.”, and Amonas unclasped his cloak to reveal the keystone and chain safely tucked away in a pocket on his leather bodice, the chain safely attached to a ringed metal belt.

The sight of the keystone calmed Hilderich somewhat, but he still protested, eyes darting around, a feeling of hurt in every look:

“What kind of friend hunts you down, knocks you out, and then robs you of your most valuable possessions?”

“Your new ones do, at least the first time around. Please, listen. We know about what happened to your master. It pains me as well, I knew Olom personally.”, Amonas let that sink in a bit, recalling pleasant memories, and then carried on:

“There is trouble brewing ahead in the Outer Territories. What happened that night at your keep was not a singular or chance event. The keystones of all Curatoriums are being gathered, with or without their Curators willingness. In some cases, like yours rather violently. And the timing is too perfect to be a mere coincidence. We cannot yet ascertain exactly who is orchestrating this, but we have a pretty good idea.”, Amonas glanced sideways at Philo, who nodded in agreement.

“You knew my master? Do you have proof? Who is ‘we’? Are you some sort of group? Organization? A cult?”, Hilderich did not like what he was hearing, and the people in front of him were not making much sense, what he heard felt very thin indeed.

“I knew him and loved him dearly. I’ll show you proof, soon enough. We are not a cult. Especially not a cult. You could call us a group. We call ourselves Kin. Or Brotherhood of Old. Or Old-folk. We come by many names, some intentional, some unintentional. Some to help us stay hidden, some to help us raise support. Yours, for

instance.”

“You want my support? And this is how you go about asking people? Ganging up on them in the middle of the street? Support for what? Clubbing people in the head?!” Hilderich’s tone was incredulous and he was about to go into a fit of hysterical laughter. Philo seemed especially displeased with his tone and remarks, while Amonas stayed calm and resolute, determined to make his point.

“We want your support in order to claim back our lands, overthrow the tyranny of the Castigator and expose the hateful lie that is Pantheon.”, Amonas words came out like the rush of an unstoppable river, ready to wash away everything that might dare to stand in its path. He sounded earthly solid and unyielding, and Hilderich was too impressed to actually register what he had just said.

“Well, that is.. Did you just.. But, that’s heresy! And high treason!”, Hilderich almost stammered the words aloud, unable to contain his shock.

“Heresy is nothing but the leash that binds our blind brethren. Treason is the act of paying tribute to false gods, letting our Kin of Old fade like ghosts with nothing left to haunt..”

Amonas was in an instant transformed in Hilderich’s eyes. What seemed like a calm, reasonable person, yet mysterious to the point of incredulity, had given its place to a fiery zealot of some misguided cult of heretics, hot embers instead of eyes, a fanatic with an untenable goal.

Hilderich wasn’t sure of what to say to such a man, but he settled for what felt like the truth of things:

“You’re crazy then? Deranged. Or just very misguided. But no. You would have to be crazy for all that to run through your head without bursting at the seams.”

“Am I Hilderich? Or have you been played like a fool? Like I was before I saw truth, and righteousness. Like Philo was when he was still a killer for hire? It is shocking, I admit it. But by the end of the day, I promise you you’ll see the truth of things as well. If you place any value in it, you will be given sight and hearing anew, and you’ll be ready to decide for yourself. Become brothers, or stay just friends.”

“You seem too confident in what you say, and maybe you are a special breed of crazy. But I cannot even begin to imagine how you can



prove that these aren't the rumblings of a madman, that Gods forbid, our religion is a lie. I might confess, I find some of the Castigator's and the ministers decisions and punishments harsh and unfitting, but I dare not judge their wisdom, or the Law as we have been taught it. It is one thing to doubt the people that uphold the Law, and quite another to judge what is Holy Law, inviolate and heaven-sent."

Hilderich was now exuding an air of authenticity and oratory skill, dressed with a rarely exhibited confidence, resembling an almost staunch belief. He seemed like he knew he was right, and Amonas wrong.

Amonas grinned, nodding his head to Hilderich, then looking up to meet his almost defiant gaze, and telling him in his gruff, steady voice:

"The seed of doubt is already sown in your soul, Hilderich. Tonight it shall spring to bear fruit at last. It is a good sign, for I believed you would be too unwilling to see the truth, but this may yet prove not to be the case."

"I still think you are madmen. Suppose it is true, the Law and the Gods are a lie? What then? What is the truth? And if you, for the case of argument, succeed in your purpose? What replaces everything we live by every day? Are you going to just blink and overthrow the Castigator, and the army and all the nobles who will stand against you? Or do you cherish a fantasy where all but a few will join your cause, and no blood will be spilled in your day of triumph?"

"You are more of a thinker than I had believed, Hilderich. Above all, a man of logic. Your own questions will be answered in due time. A bit of patience will go a long way. And in any case, we can't allow you to leave just yet, not before you witness what will invariably change your opinion, for better or worse. You will come to see that we are not crazy, and that we know that chaos and mayhem will erupt once we decide the time has come to act. I have no fantasies and will bear no misgivings: blood will be spilled inevitably, but not in vain. These are not the endeavors of bloodthirsty warmongers or power-hungry dissidents, Hilderich. We are hope incarnate."

"If you say so, it must be true, then.", Hilderich's tone mocking beyond the point of insult. That remark made Philo move and fidget with suppressed anger, shooting pleading looks at Amonas, clearly intent at putting the audacious little man in his place by way of mild violence.

Amonas would have none of that and dismissed Philo's silent protests with an outstretched hand, replying in a serious and honest tone of voice:

"I can only force you to remain until that promise is delivered. Then you can freely go your own way, but the keystone will be kept with us."

"So not much of an offer, but rather a blackmail. I can go, but the keystone stays? And you ask me to trust in you under these conditions? Would you think differently if you were in my spot?"

"I have been in a similar spot, and no, I did not think differently. And that is why I believe you'll be our brother by the first light of dawn tomorrow.", Amonas smiled heartily for Hilderich to see, but his expression remained distant and withdrawn.

"You place too much on belief and court with arrogance, Amonas. I don't like all of this one bit. But I seem to be at your mercy, as a matter of fact."

"You will prove more valuable and insightful than I had imagined, Hilderich. It is exactly that false belief and that vaunted arrogance that we seek to expose, and since you place no value in those, I consider you a brother already, a man free of those poisons."

"We shall see, but don't bet on it."

Hilderich sat down on the cot once again, hands on his knees, seemingly resigned to his fate but showing a somewhat proud stand over his beliefs, his body stance and facial expression emitting a message that he would not succumb to such underhanded tactics, if not in essence, as a matter of principle.

"I am not a gambling man Hilderich, you need not worry. There is still some time ahead of us. You must be famished. Do you wish to eat now? I know we have been less than welcoming, but the circumstances got the better of us. Please, indulge us."

Hilderich pondered this for a while and in his mind dismissed the idea the food would be poisoned, since if they wanted him dead, they wouldn't have bothered with all this. It seemed somewhat of a concession to the man effectively holding him captive, but the inescapable reality of not having eaten for more than a whole day struck home in the end. He nodded in acknowledgement and then added verbally:

"That would be nice."

Amonas smiled politely and gestured to Philo to get some food and water for the three of them, and promptly Philo vanished behind a rather small wooden door, his steps faintly audible as he seemed to traverse a staircase.

“I’m told our most hospitable friends here have prepared a delicacy today: lamb stew with uwe and knop leaves. Should be rather tasty.”

“I still think you are crazy, Amonas. Just a very curious, strange kind of crazy person, apparently with a culinary taste to match.”

“Hilderich, I confess, I have a soft spot for uwe. It’s an acquired taste.”

Hilderich just shook his head in disbelief, a small sigh escaping his lips. Amonas smiled ever more broadly at that particular reaction, and pretty soon the strong smell of boiled uwe wafted through, hinting at Philo’s return. Amonas seemed rather expectant, and could not help asking Hilderich:

“If you don’t like uwe I believe a different arrangement can be made, something like ham or bread-pie.”

“Uwe lamb stew will be fine. I can manage.”

Hilderich caught himself being actually irritated at Amonas’ inexplicable insistence on food, which he found rather childish, further enhancing his opinion that the man was, indeed, deranged if not completely crazy.

“Oh well, I had to try and steal that extra serving.”

Philo returned and entered through the door with some difficulty due to the fact he was trying to balance two plates of stew on one hand and arm and a large bowl on the other hand. He precariously managed to reach the safety of a nearby table, putting the bowl down first, and then unloading the plate off his arm. Seeing that no one cared to assist him he threw around a few looks of mixed hurt and mild anger, before pulling a chair and sitting at the table, then proclaiming:

“If you gonna join the table be quick about it.”

Amonas sat excitedly in front of the bowl of stew, and Hilderich guessed the other plate was laid out for him and sat accordingly, but couldn’t help noticing and asking:

“Shouldn’t there be another plate for Amonas?”

Amonas had already dug in with a spoon, and seemed quite indifferent at anything else that went on around him and rather focused at

enjoying his substantially rich meal.

“No point in using a plate if he’s gonna eat a whole bowl. So I brought the bowl. Now, eat.”, Philo said with a hint of retired disapproval.

Hilderich nodded slowly, shrugged and dug in like the rest. He took a careful taste, and then munched and gulped eagerly. It tasted delicious indeed.

## Darkly lit night



HE Disciplinarium's large audience hall was exquisitely decorated with fine tapestries, hung from the columns and walls with golden ropes and aggrandized with silk laces, freshly picked fragrant flowers and all manners of highly luxurious pomp and ceremony.

Though night had already fallen, giant ornate silver and brass chandeliers hung from the high ceilings, illuminating the grand hall with the light of thousands candles, their beams of light enhanced and mirrored by the all the brass, gold and silver decorations strewn around almost every object in the hall, making them glitter and shine, magnifying their splendor tenfold.

Delicately detailed lifelike oil paintings adorned each wall, previous Castigators and Arch-ministers, Procrastinator Militants and Patriarchs, noble supporter families of the Castigator, every last important person that was notably recorded in history books was to be found here in the form of awe inspiring portraits, paintings and sculptures from the most talented artists of each generation from around the lands.

The mass of people was still flowing slowly but steadily into the hall, and for a time it would seem like the small swarm of men was going to swell to inelegant numbers. But the Castigator's people who were in charge of the eventful night, those who orchestrated and planned who was to be given the praise of summons, also decided the place and time of his appearance as well as whether or not he should have the privilege of being able to dine at the same table as the Castigator, albeit always at an innocuous distance, a table seat that implied an immense increase of status and almost unrivaled political power.

As the time for the opening ceremonies for the grand festive night grew closer, all needed preparations were being doubly checked, and the gathering of guests efficiently monitored. Everything seemed to be in place, refreshments and drinks served in silver plated cups, and sweetmeats, fruit, and fine pastries circulating among the crowd in golden platters by busy servants, dressed in fine cloth wearing the green livery of the Castigator's office, a white eagle bearing a book and a key, a snake held in its beak.

People were chatting in low voices, politely exchanging greetings and news when being personal acquaintances, though some of the more brazen guests that either lacked the knowledge of etiquette or were in a position to ignore it as a whole or in part, were already laughing heartily at jokes or anecdotes between friends and close acquaintances.

Everyone attending had been careful to dress as stylishly as possible, and according to wealth and status, there were examples of extravagant overdressing, with some people resembling moving heaps of a treasury or jewelry shop.

Others preferred to overstate their presence with exotic cloths and tailorings, usually uncommon and outlandish, suggesting time and money spent just for this one occasion. Indeed, everyone was wearing the best and brightest they could afford, and maybe some had even took on a loan to have something special tailor-made in order to try and stand out in the crowd, in a bid to improve their fame and fortune.

The atmosphere in the hall was generally convivial though mildly restrained because of the premises and significance of the night. The festivities were taking place in order to commemorate the Castigator's 25th Term in Office, which coincided with the Pacification of Zaelin, the last of the Territories to be enlightened and brought under the Law of the Pantheon.

Rumors circulated among the nobles' elite and people in the army and the Ministry that the Castigator would be announcing a decision of major importance that would stir up the relatively still affairs of the Territories, perhaps ushering a new era of glory to the Gods.

In any case, it would be an eventful night, with dancing troupes of wondrous abilities, unsurpassed technique and airy grace performing for the duration, bards of worldly renown and enchanting voices singing the Mythos in praise of the Castigator and the Pantheon, a telling re-enactment of the Pacification of Zaelin and the striking down of the last Heathen, Parnoth Larthiel, the Last Ignorant.

The re-enactment would also offer a kind of prize to one of the guests who would be lucky enough for his name to be drawn amongst hundreds: he would have the chance to play as the Castigator in the final duel with Parnoth, the unclaimed role filled in by a lawbreaker due for execution. The honored guest in killing the lawbreaker-Parnoth would be spilling heretic blood in the service of the Ministry, the Cas-

tigator and the Law, possibly the highest service to the Pantheon possible, save sacrificing one's self while enforcing or upholding the Law.

A huge oblong platinum chime resounded by the stroke of an ornamental ram swung by two Protectors, the Castigator's personally hand-picked guard, and judging by their imposing physical builds apparently chosen chiefly for their brawn. The sound of the chime drowned out the chatter of the milling guests, reverberating with a majestic effect in the audience hall, and signaling the official commencement of the festivities. Acoustics was one of many things not left to chance when the grandiose chamber was built.

The crowd of guests went silent and ushered by dutiful servants and thick-set expressionless Protectors, gathered on two opposing sides of the hall, leaving a wide stretch of room where the Castigator would soon walk on. Indeed, the voice of the Chief Functionary boomed like a cannon in the night:

"All kneel or be chastised, for now enters this hall his Holy Piousness, Olorius Menamon the IV th, Deliverer of Aconia, Pacifier of Zaelin, Proxy of the Gods, Procurer of the One True Law, and Castigator of the Outer Territories. Kneel or be chastised!", the last words uttered with the gravity of a holy commandment, the obvious threat to be carried out with ruthless deliberation if needs be.

At once and in concert, the whole of the crowd, including servants, Protectors, Ministers, the whole of the Disciplinary's staff, any and all figures of authority, military, civil or religious, including the Chief Functionary, knelt on both legs and bowed their heads deeply and solemnly, as if in wholehearted prayer.

The workings of some kind of large mechanism involving gears and other mechanical contraptions rang through the audience hall, and the massive copper tinted Gates of Leor opened slowly but steadily, revealing the radiant form of the Castigator, breathtakingly dressed in the formal robes of his Office, a deep crimson color dyed in the blood of heathens and heretics, solid golden runes written in Helica Pretoria adorning the hem, and the Book of Law covering its surface with silk threads so fine that the artisans went blind from the effort.

And above the robes, an immaculate platinum breastplate, with no carvings, etchings or any decoration whatsoever. On one side, hung Urtis, the Mace of Judgment, the Castigator's long ago chosen tool

of enlightenment and battle, that was said to have cracked as many heretic skulls as there are stones in the walls of the Disciplinaryum. Indeed, some claim the very same skulls have been used in building the majestic building, as a morbid reminder that All is Law.

The Castigator strode with a steady pace down the central lane where a raised block of marble floor had appeared in sync with the opening of the Gates. The only audible sound was the sound of the Castigator's boots, a simple, utilitarian set of metal plated boots a soldier would wear, finely polished, but otherwise quite common. When he reached the dais on which the Seat of Office stood, he surveyed the crowd momentarily, sat down and clapped his bare hands once.

"Stand and confess!", the Chief Functionary bellowed sharply, and the crowd complied smartly and fervently:

"All is Law!"

And the Castigator echoed back the mantra in solemn ritual, his voice carrying unusual depth and mesmerizing melody for a single man, however powerful and unique he may be.

Those that saw the Castigator and had not been granted such an honor before in their lives, were immediately left awestruck, and some of them broke down weeping, pious fervor instantly occupying their hearts and minds. Those that had been so blessed before, did not immediately stand but rather silently prayed with tears welling in their eyes, before being able to stand upright. The people that kept closer to the Castigator, his immediate entourage, the Ruling Council, and his guard intoned the holy mantra reverently and resumed their places and functions.

The Castigator then addressed the crowd which stood there reverently, their excitement and waiting evident in their glittering eyes and tense faces:

"I shall call you my children, for I am like a father unto you. I guide you, protect you, offer you learning and sustenance, like a father for his child. I ask you: Does not the Ministry keep a daily watch for the heretic, the heathen, the lawbreaker? Does it not preach the Law daily, for the continued enlightenment of all? The Army, does it not safeguard our lands, from enemies from within and from without? The Procrastinators, do they not wisely guide your every day lives, always watching over you, less you stray to a horrible path with no redemption



in sight. I ask you again, am I not like a father unto you all?"

The Castigator's voice turned from a sweet melody into a harsh pragmatist's staccato tone, then back in a wavering, almost pleading tone, evoking sympathy and familiarity. The Chief Functionary struck down his distaff on the granite floor once, and spoke aloud while nodding condescendingly, bearded chin almost touching his chest: "Aye!"

The crowd followed in check, the audience hall reverberating from the loud voices of what now seemed to be almost a thousand people.

"This then I tell you as a father, for the betterment of us all, for the glory of the Pantheon, by the start of the new moon, in two weeks time, the Holy and Righteous Armies of the Outer Territories shall march into the Widelands, to bring enlightenment, cleanse the land, and finally make the Land of the Gods whole, as is their mandate."

His voice rang true and clear around the chamber, his message inviolate and final, a decision that was to be carried out, not thought upon or discussed, but a matter of fact that he had set in motion with but a few of his words.

Most of the Ministers, Generals and other officials of the Disciplinary, were apparently surprised, though they instantly recovered a measure of composure and if one had not been eying them constantly, they would have looked easily unperturbed by the announcement and its implications.

The Procrastinator Militant in his exquisite armor and fine silk sash was at a loss for words, and opened his mouth wide-eyed as if in protestation but his disciplined service and training so far kicked in, and barely managed to save himself from embarrassment by nodding in the last minute and simply saying "His Piousness has spoken".

The other members of the Ruling Council, the Arch-minister, the Patriarch, and the Noble Representative had their gaze locked on the Procrastinator Militant, as if waiting for a sidestep or slip that would bring him crashing down in a most shameful and undignified way, an affront to the significance of the night.

The Noble Representative, dressed in a simple green robe of the practical sort, his chest adorned with the signet brooch of House Remis, suppressed a grin at the nearly unforgivable blunder that would have definitely incurred a public lashing and a year's donation to the Ministry, let alone probably kill the Procrastinator Militant's career.

“I have indeed! Now feast, enjoy and praise the Gods!”, the Castigator raised his arms in jubilation and smiled broadly, the atmosphere in the hall warming up in the blink of an eye, people starting to shuffle around, seeking food, drink, or whoever they had been talking with before the Castigator entered the hall. The announcement of setting out to pacify the last wild region, the Widelands, was definitely going to spur debate, however hushed, controlled, and unchallenged.

Lord Umsepyre Remis, the Noble Representative, was seated in the council in order to speak on behalf of the noble families of the Outer Territories. His was a purely consultatory role, expressing current views among the noble houses, informing the Ruling Council of the ebbs and flows of power, wealth, and status, as well as the reactions and thoughts of the nobles on affairs of state, religion and Law.

Even though he had no voting rights in the Council, his input was often quite impossible to receive otherwise, any network of informers too crude in comparison. The Castigator seemed to consider him a quite valuable asset, judging by the special dispensations recently attributed to House Remis. In return, Umsepyre Remis was the best insightful eye and ear the Noble houses had concerning the inner workings of the Ministry and the Castigator, and solid knowledge of what went on in the Disciplinaryum sometimes could buy things money could not.

His was a unique position where he could not be accounted for practically anything since he was not part of the decision making process, but was amply able to exchange information and insight as he saw fit to better suit his House's, and person's, continued survival.

He smiled brightly at the still uneasy Procrastinator Militant, and made a gesture to straighten his shoulder-high long black hair, in an almost too bland demonstration of cool confidence.

The music that would accompany the dancing acts had started with a brass fanfare, and soon settling in a soft string melody, oddly scented here and there by flutes and bass drums, the dancers performing choreographed scenes from the Mythos, reliving the handing down of the Law from the Gods to men.

The Patriarch noted the interest on Lord Remis face who was more than visibly enchanted by the dancers' performance, while the Procrastinator Militant had hurriedly called for his chief aide, more so in or-

der to look busy and industrious, rather than because actual operational planning could be done at this time and place. The Arch-minister was indeed busy on the other hand, a trio of scribes jotting down notes and letters to be sent immediately, notifying key personnel of the imminent rush of preparations that needed to start as soon as possible.

“Lord Remis. A patron of the Arts should be more circumspect in his admirations, don’t you think? Some may misinterpret your artistic admiration for mere lust. And lust is a sin, Umsepyre.”

The Patriarch’s tone was precipitously balanced between the whimsical and playful and the vehemently dangerous and cunningly suggestive, his mouth and face a rigid, expressionless mask. The man was an almost complete mystery to Remis, he had to confess, his remarks and suggestions always leaving a hint of sourness.

Remis was not incisively put off, and managed to respond appropriately, though the effect on the Patriarch seemed to be minimal at best:

“The day we look upon the Mythos with lust, Your Reverence, is the day all sin will be revealed.”

“Ah, quoting Law. I see. Am I making you uncomfortable, Noble Representative? Is there a reason you would care to share?”, the Patriarch was now smiling genially, an almost fatherly expression, eyes darting around over Lord Remis face, genuine worry apparent on the craggy old man’s face.

“No, not uncomfortable Patriarch. I would say, curious.”, said Remis, without looking directly at the Patriarch.

“Curious? Of the coming, final campaign?”, the Patriarch ventured, raising his eyebrows and hinting he knew better than that.

“No. Of you, Your Reverence. You are always, shall I dare say, fleeting.”, Ursempyre turned and look the Patriarch directly in the eyes, seeing cold pinpricks of blue that reminded him of icy death and men disappearing in a watery grave.

“Oh well then. Don’t let me spoil your idea of me.”, the Patriarch answered, head and gaze locked in front of him, and walked into the crowd, his figure soon blending in to the point of disappearance.

Remis was left trying to ponder what went on in that man’s head when the Castigator’s voice reawakened him into reality:

“Ah my dear Ursempyre, is the Patriarch causing you trouble?”,

the Castigator touched one of Remis' shoulders, a rare gesture of unmatched camaraderie. He must really be the Castigator's favorite to ascend. Ursempyre turned and bowed slightly, careful with his words as his body language.

"Trouble is what a drunkard might cause, or a hapless wife. The Patriarch feels like a man who causes death, Your Holiness. He seems always to be, so detached."

"Ah the toils of the Church. Holy Communion with the Gods can be too much sometimes. However gifted and trained. You say he reeks of death? I say if the Gods will it, I shall follow. Won't you, Remis?", the Castigator's look had been transfixed on him, awaiting a sure and clear answer, all doubt dispelled. Ursempyre indulged him accordingly.

"All is Law, Lord. Unto death and beyond. For the glory of the Pantheon.", Remis recited the last phrase of the Oaths, and crossed his hands over his chest, further reaffirming his loyalties.

"You are a good man Ursempyre. Now, drink! It is a night of feasting, and joyous celebration. Won't you join me?", the Castigator's eyes suddenly turned ablaze with fear and wrath, menace under his voice. Ursempyre was taken aback, only not visibly, and simply bowed and said:

"Of course, Your Piousness."

The Castigator broke into laughter, as if having heard a joke no one else could, and started the rounds of the audience hall, like a perfectly good host.

Ursempyre followed close behind, not so happy of his singular position as he would have normally been. He took a silver cup filled with mead and drank it in one go. It would be a long night.

## The marble road



A new moon filled the night sky. It was hunting time for owls, wild dogs and wengals. He sat down on the cold, humid grass, legs crossed, walking stick leaned on his left shoulder. He rummaged through his ever lightening knapsack for something to eat. With little fuss, he managed to come up with a meager meal: worrain berries and a piece of goat's cheese, still fresh and spongy.

The people in the village he went through last were the usual sort in these parts: animal herders mostly and a few wheat farmers. Simple people that prayed solemnly to the Gods, every day, wishing not for riches, power, lands and wives or other things of vanity beyond their grasp. They wished their child be spared of illness and harm, their herds be still whole by nightfall, the snow be light this year, and the rain plenty before harvest.

Fools then. He could feel sympathy like a man with sight feels for a man in the dark who has never seen golden fields in springtime and the piercing depth-less eyes of a young maiden, but no more. Even blind men wish for light to shine yet before their lives are ended. These folk, just tread on, and never think otherwise. He wouldn't spare them more than a passing thought.

His road was about to take him through the Widelands, an unforgiving place. Few had made the passing, and even fewer were left sane and unscathed in body, soul and mind once they did. There were stories and legends about the Widelands, that were passed down from generation to generation, in many languages of many folk.

Most of them he determined, were the superstitious tales of simpletons and madmen, mere fantasies for common people to spent the grinding, toiling days, thankful of their safe, ordinary, almost pitiful lives. Some were invariably twisted second and third-hand tales of those who ventured into the accursed place and came back, surely not wholesome and well.

Fact and fiction were interwoven tightly in such accounts, but some probable, shared truths could be distilled from the broth of rumblings, mutterings, and assorted hearsay that permeated the inns and taverns

all across the Territories. There were even a few written accounts by people who seemed to have genuinely made the journey, and live to tell the tale and become rich and famous in the process, but most of them seemed to be very talented liars and writers, the distinction in their works of little significance.

Only the Tale of Umberth could be counted as less than nefarious, since he set out with a hundred-score of men, of whom barely three survived: Umberth, his esquire Esphalon and a woman, then only a child, who Umberth claimed was found wandering alone, mute and dark-skinned, almost pitch-like.

Umberth spent the rest of his days and sizable fortune trying to organize further trips into the Widelands, his few unsuccessful efforts presenting the girl as living proof of his sayings of underground cities, height-defying towers and huge arching constructs, but the girl could not even speak her name. Her skin color was a singular phenomenon that more often than not provoked the wrath of the Ministers and the aversion of crowds, speaking of heresy against the Gods and the bastard offspring of heathens and beasts of old that the earth unveiled from time to time to test the faithful and attract the blasphemer.

Not long after the Ministry declared her as well as Umberth heretics, an unrelenting manhunt together with the watchful, ever pious and dutiful believers of the Pantheon bore fruit and Umberth and the girl were beheaded and their bodies burned to ashes in Pyr, in the winter of the third pacificum, 153rd annum, 51 days before the Solstice.

Esphalon, his esquire, was sentenced to silence unto death and exiled, never to utter a word in his life again, his tongue cut out. He then wandered the northern lands, surviving on little more than worms and lichen, possibly wishing death for himself. In those lands, he came upon a small tribe of nomads, wild men that knew not how to herd sheep and work metal or clay, with wooden spears and no command of fire.

From what Esphalon later describes, when he was trapped and caught like animal prey, probably destined for a savage death, perhaps a sacrifice or plain and simple cannibalism, the savages noticed while they searched his clothing a small plaque of metal, hand-sized, with no discerning characteristics other than a circular notch in its center, a

memento from the Widelands. When they noticed that, Esphalon was greeted among them as an equal, a member of the tribe lost and found.

He soon realized the importance of that plaque, and was further mystified. The savages used it to produce light and heat, by placing an ordinary stone, even a pebble, inside the notch. Pebbles and stones were the most widely used since they could be found in abundance in the northern rocky steppes where these people seemed to roam unhindered. Sometimes they used animal bones or pieces of wood, mostly whatever was handy at the time.

Invariably, the said item slowly seemed to shrink and then vanish into thin air in a matter of moments, and then pleasant sunlight and radiant heat would emanate from the plaque for hours to come.

All this and much more is written in Esphalon's memoirs, a corroboration of the things he saw and experienced in the wild lands coupled with what little time he spent with the savages. The plaque remained with the savage men who would not part with it in any way, and Esphalon reached an isolated fishing harbor facing the Pangalor Sea, half-dead from starvation, exhaustion, and lost a leg and three fingers from frostbite.

It was there where he wrote the Pangalor Scrolls, the single half-consistent work that contains enough about the Widelands to make it useful in crossing it, and perhaps uncovering more about this mysterious land and living long enough for others to know as well.

His reverie was broken by the cries of a nighthawk swooping in to catch his prey, somewhere out in the star-lit fields of short grass and poppies swinging gently in the night breeze. He marveled at the arrogant precision and expert flying of the nighthawk, which made no effort to catch his prey unguarded, but instead seemed to announce indifferently it was about to kill and then feast on a helpless, doomed, animal soul.

He smiled thinly and then got up, fastened his knapsack, picked up his walking stick and set off down the marble road. He looked overhead and saw the nighthawk soaring triumphantly, a small snake writhing in its death throes, captured in its beak. The nighthawk cried into the night once more, and then disappeared over the distance, its faint silhouette mingled with the starry blue and black sky.

## Under a livid sky



WHEN they had eaten, after Amonas conferred with Philo, the burly man said he would be back soon. Hilderich had relaxed somewhat, but he could not for the life of him fathom the two men. It might be just as well. When he had seen whatever it was they wanted to show him, perhaps they would stick true to their word and release him, let go and consider him a friend.

He wasn't sure how exactly a person who planned overthrowing plots of heresy could afford to just tell people then let them go and trust their good souls to tell not, but he had a feeling it involved some kind of pain, extortion, or good old fashioned fall-assisted life removal.

It just struck him odd. He felt he could trust this man, but his mind reeled at the prospect. I must be going slightly mad, he thought to himself. He was starting to think of ways he could snatch that keystone and make a run for it, but the more he thought about it the more stupid he felt. They had already outran him and outsmarted him once. Certainly he was no match for either one of them in single even unarmed combat. He now belatedly wished he had taken some time to practice his body rather than spent most of it knee deep in curatoria.

What mattered was that for now, he decided his best chances lay in playing along, and seeing what it was that they promised would change his mind and heart forever.

The faint dusk had just given way to a pure, clean night. As he lay there in his cot, he noticed Amonas had lit a large candle, and was reading what seemed to be letters. He noticed the man had been rather drawn into his reading material and decided against indiscretion on his part. Amonas through the corner of his eye though was aware of Hilderich mild scrutiny and without lifting his head from his reading, he said to him in an inviting, conversational tone:

“From my wife. She's with child.”

“I didn't mean to intrude, I just noticed you were very much occupied.”, said Hilderich almost apologetically.

“Still thinking of how and when to escape Hilderich? You are more lively than you already know, friend. There will be no need.”,



Amonas looked him levelly, his gruff voice adding an air of authenticity Hilderich hadn't noticed so far. Perhaps he was being afflicted with a disease of the mind, something in the food.

But he felt alright otherwise, he did not believe he was poisoned or otherwise tampered with. He just could not believe he was having a normal conversation with a person who was either mentally deranged or emphatically dangerous, a heretic nonetheless!

Hilderich's thoughts were interrupted by Philo who entered the small room, hood still on his head. He nodded to Amonas, who in turn said to Hilderich:

"Come. You shall see for yourself soon."

Hilderich stood up and Amonas offered him a hooded cloak, somewhat more fine and more elegant than most. As soon as he wore it, Amonas was instructing Philo to lead them on and out into the city. Amonas would be trailing, and Hilderich would be in the middle, evidently a small precaution on their part should he feel a sudden urge to run like hell.

Philo lead them through somewhat shady alleys, light from far away lamps barely reaching them. They angled left and right, as if evading unseen stalkers. Perhaps there were some indeed. He would not be able to see them or smell them until too late in any case. So he trudged along. His knowledge of the city streets was perfunctory at best, but even he could discern that they were walking towards the Disciplinaryum's hill. Even from a distance, the sounds of music and festivities could be heard, and a light show of fireworks seemed to be underway as well.

Hilderich mused in spite himself:

"Are we invited then?"

Amonas smiled wryly and urged him forward, while Philo turned his head around and stabbed Hilderich with his eyes. His attempt at humor went unanswered.

The more they approached the Disciplinaryum, the more care they took in their approach, triple checking alleyways, hunching over shadows, their feet as light as cats', not a sound other than shallow breathing.

When they reached the base of the Disciplinaryum's hill, Philo signaled them to stop dead in their shoes. He let a guard patrol vanish

behind the curve of the hill's base before urging them to rush for a certain part of the slope, where the shadow of the aqueduct overhead would conceal them.

They did so with a dancer's grace and reached the grassy part of slope Philo had indicated. He took out a small knife from his belt, and Hilderich watched in still surprise as he dug out a small piece of tuft. A metal dial was to be found underneath, which then Amonas proceeded to twist left and right accordingly to some whim or unknown turn.

Without a sound a small tubular opening appeared above the dial, large enough for a man to fit inside but only in a prone position. It led into a shiny metal pipe or tube of some sort with a downward inclination whose other end was obscured in darkness, and judging from the light stream of air wafting through, it was a long pipe indeed.

Philo nodded to Amonas and said, "I'll go on ahead."

Amonas patted him on his left shoulder and grinned:

"Are you sure you'll fit?"

Philo was already sliding inside the mysterious and intriguing metalwork, and muttered in a low voice what must have been a friendly obscenity, if such a notion exists. Amonas then ushered Hilderich inside, imparting a word of advice:

"Arms glued on your body. Count to thirty and then take a deep breath and hold it. You're not afraid of water are you?", Amonas' low gruff voice barely revealing of hint of worry.

"Water? Why? Count to thirty? Fast or slow?"

"Go on then!", Amonas had to shove Hilderich inside, his protests becoming dangerously loud.

"You really plan to kill me!"

Hilderich's terror was evident in the shrill quality of his voice. It had all happened too quickly to try and hold back, so when Amonas pushed him down the tubing, he tried to follow his advice, held his arms stiff to his body and started counting to thirty.

The tubing angled downwards pretty soon and Hilderich felt he was riding a children's slide, with the slight difference that the end of the slide was nowhere in sight, and mad, possibly delusional, quite certainly heretic thugs were shoving you down into one.

Hilderich heard a splash echo dimly in the metal tubing, and was suddenly reminded of Amonas instruction. He wasn't sure if he had

counted past thirty or not, his terror and anxiety mixed with his confounded thoughts a recipe against keeping calm and cool-headed. He filled his lungs with air as long as there was time anyway, and just when he started to think he had grievously mistimed his breath, he splashed into water.

The feeling was one of quite shock, the cold water encircling his whole body, seeping through his clothes, assaulting his ears and nostrils, as if trying to enter his body without his will. His eyes had closed instinctively, then he opened them slowly, searching for the open surface, his hands wobbling uncertainly, before a small primal fear of running out of air urged him to swim upwards, towards what seemed to be a faint source of light.

Within moments his head was clear of the water. He exhaled momentarily, then breathed in gasps until he could find his normal breathing once more. An outstretched hand seemed to be offering to help him out of the water. As soon as he realized it belonged to Philo, he heard another splash of water roughly behind him, and turned his head to look even as Philo pulled him to somewhat dry land.

It was Amonas, who seemingly more accustomed to the area, needed no help and within seconds was among them, tiny rivulets of water still running down his leather vest, thick drops of water falling from his forehead.

“Let us move. Hilderich, I would beg your silence. We are relatively safe as long as we are silent.”, Amonas said in hushed tones while holding Hilderich by the arm, in a friendly gesture.

“As if I’ve been screaming my lungs out. I’ll keep my mouth shut. Are we near whatever place you think will change my mind? Are we below the Disciplinary, by any chance?”, said Hilderich, while vainly trying to squeeze off some of the water.

“We are. But we still have some way to go. Come now, you will dry yourself later.”

They had fallen inside a natural cistern in a small rocky cave. Strangely enough, light seemed to seep through some cracks in the walls. With a closer inspection, Hilderich saw the cracks were more akin to lichen, faintly wet to the touch, but rough like sand as well. A sort of crystal formation seemed to lie underneath such spots. Philo nudged him onward, cutting his examination of the peculiarity short.

It reminded him of some lesser kind of curatoria, that his master was not particularly interested in, and thus were only lightly studied.

But the light they gave off was indeed enough, even though only barely, to walk the gently curving twists and turns of what seemed to be an extensive network of caves, an almost ant-like structure, deep underneath the Disciplinary's hill.

He noticed the steady, purposeful stride of Amonas before him, and the dim blue and violet light that imparted a grim hue on everything around and including them. A feeling of eerie wariness started to seep in Hilderich. At length he tapped at Amonas shoulder, who paused, turned and looked directly at Hilderich, an expectant look on his face but not a sound coming out of his lips. Hilderich asked in a low voice: "Are we lost?"

Amonas did not answer, but rather resumed his walk, taking them through caverns small and large and paths that could not be retraced unless with a map. The further down they went, the warmer it felt, and soon walking in the caves felt like a warm summer trip in the country. Hilderich had by now lost track of their approximate depth, direction, or distance of travel.

Perhaps they were not lost, but he essentially was and thought he would be unable find his own way back if the opportunity presented itself. What good would it do though, since the tube was meant to go down, and not up? Just as he let out a sigh of hopelessness, he could discern light pouring out from the next corner, and feel their slight descend leveling out. By now his clothes felt almost dry, a slight feeling of dampness remaining in his feet and arms.

The light grew more intense, a clear intense light like sunlight. But sunlight, so deep under the earth? Not to mention, it was still night outside. When they were only a few paces away from the corner that shone with light, Amonas threw up one arm, palm open, indicating a halt. He leaned over the corner of the rocky cave, and peered carefully for almost a minute, making sure they were safe. Hilderich was not in a position to know what he was keeping them safe from, or whether or not the possible threat was imaginary or real.

Amonas nodded that everything seemed as it should be, and walked out into the light. He blinked his eyes flinching as they adjusted to the brightness, and then gestured with his hand to Hilderich:

“Come. We are here.”

Hilderich stepped forward as well, the bright light forcing him to instinctively cover his eyes with his right arm, the small peep of its shadow the only shelter against such sudden illumination. A fragrant waft of air rushed around them, as Philo joined them as well, and all three of them were slowly walking towards the light. As Hilderich's eyes finally adjusted to the light, he could see the rocky cave all around them give way to a smooth white surface, much like porcelain at first glance.

These strange walls seemed to extrude themselves from the strata of cave rocks, as if totally alien and utterly old in origin. Then Hilderich's eyes wandered a bit more and then his gaze rested on the center of a huge chamber apparently made from the same white-ivory material. The chamber was cylindrical in shape, and from top to bottom a wide pillar which incredulously seemed to be made of pure light stood, a sight that defied Hilderich's senses and logic.

“What is this place?”, Hilderich asked Amonas, awestruck, gaze still locked on the pillar of light.

“This is the first pillar of truth, Hilderich.”, Amonas said while edging closer to the pillar, Hilderich a couple of steps behind him, his face brightly illuminated, but his eyes unflinching. Philo stood at the rocky entrance to the chamber, with his back indifferently turned to the wondrous sight in front of their eyes.

“The truth? What is this, Amonas? Is it Ancient?”, Hilderich's tone had a far-away quality, as if he was mesmerized, his mind off to some deep trench of thought.

“It is my friend. A working piece of technology of the Ancients, buried deep under the Disciplinarium. What does that tell you, friend?”, Amonas was looking intently at Hilderich's calm and entranced face, his every word glistening with expectation.

“What it should. This must be preserved. Documented. Studied. A Curatorium be built around it, scholars from around the lands should visit and..”

Amonas grabbed Hilderich violently from both arms and attracted his total attention, his voice free of constraints:

“Studies! Scholars! Can't you really see what this means? Think of your Mythos! Think of your precious Law!”

Hilderich was visibly shaken as if coming around from a waking dream, eyes rolling around trying to come to grips with his surroundings and the man with the gruff voice in front of him, shouting at him and looking ready to snap him in two if he said the wrong thing.

He asked him to think of the Mythos, and the Law. The Law was the established religious canon that had replaced traditional secular law thousands of years earlier. The Mythos was the recorded history of the Gods handing down the Law unto the forsaken race of man, to save it from destruction and withering, to help men reach their Gods at the Time of Conjugation.

The Law instructs man that those he knew as Ancients were the manifestation of evil. That any tool or work of art or science whose workings cannot be seen with the naked eye or touched by naked hand are containers of evil. That there is only this land, and none other. That the lights in the sky were put there by the Gods, to make nights more bearable. That death is irrevocable and permanent, and those who do not uphold the Law, will be shunt forever, their souls kept away from the Gods.

That any man, woman or child upholding belief in the Ancients or their works is a heretic, a vessel of corruption. That the Ministers, uphold and teach the Law to the people. That the people, in turn, devote themselves and their lives to abide the Law. That the Patriarch declares additional Law as he sees fit, never in contradiction to the basic tenements, and he alone chooses his successor. That a Castigator rules, a man of wisdom and strength to lead the people, protect them, enlighten the heathens, punish the lawbreakers and the heretics, and offer praise and glory to the Gods.

That is what the Mythos and the Law say. Hilderich, though he did not consider himself the religious type, had always been careful not to attract the ire of the Ministers. He had memorized the Mythos and the Law, as part of his training and education, as is the case with most who are fortunate enough to be allowed to read and write, since he was apprentice to a Curator, a guild of men with special dispensation to hold and maintain approved artifacts from times past, some of which have nefarious origins, keeping strict indices of what is stored where.

Only ministers and certain officials of the Disciplinaryum or the Army, and then again only after special permission is granted for ex-

pressed purposes, can be allowed to even view a Curatorium from the inside. To think that he was so honored. And to think that now, he is looking at what seems to be a working example of heretical, evil, technology.

“They know about this? The Disciplinarium?”, Hilderich asked feebly.

“Of course they know Hilderich! They have always known! Do you think this is the only place they have access to with such an artifact?”

“But, what does it do? And what proof do you have they know about things such as these? Much less use one?”, Hilderich was argumentative, but slightly unsure of his words, his voice wavering as if he was shaking from the cold.

“Always the hard way, eh Hilderich?”, said Amonas and shook his head in silent disappointment, nodding to Philo who winked back an acknowledgement.

Hilderich was considering the magnificent simplicity and awesome sight of the pillar of light in front of him, a bright pillar of sunlight not as blinding as the suns, with a hazy rainbow of all colors on its edges, a pulsating haze of tiny pin pricks rushing through some sort of invisible shell. He was interrupted somewhat violently by Amonas who neatly but decisively pushed him towards the pillar of light.

“What are you doing? Is this safe?”, Hilderich seemed to protest in principle only, his mouth voicing concern, but his feet offering little resistance.

“Don’t really know, it’s only my second time.”

At that answer Hilderich’s face took on an expression of exacerbated disbelief, but only for a moment, because an instant later, both his and Amonas’ figures were vanishingly thin and elongated ghostly forms, and then all that was left of them was a smooth scent of uwe stew.

Philo turned and looked at the pillar of light, gave a derisive rough kind of snort, and continued his vigil, unperturbed.

The first thing that Hilderich felt was a sinking sensation, like the inevitable pull and grasp of a whirlpool, the dreaded voids of the sea that claim ships and men alike. Then he saw an explosion of light,

swirling walls of light running up to meet him face on, and then nothing for what must have been less than a heartbeat.

Then light filled his senses totally, even his smell. He could have sworn, he could smell light. Then his eyes somewhat adjusted to the radiant sea of white enfolding him, and he could make out the outline of his hands. The first thing he heard was the strange chirrup of birds probably. The second was a gravelly voice with serious undertones, Amonas' voice.

“Take a step forward Hilderich. Don't be afraid now.”

He did and was left standing there. His eyes insisted that he was outside, on what seemed like a clear summer sky. How he could have in an instant walked past an underground cave as well as the grasp of night, he was unable to answer, not without gibberish coming out of his mouth. After a few more moments had passed, while playing back what had just happened, Hilderich was finally able to ask:

“Where are we?”

Amonas smiled as he was pointing at the single yellow sun in the sky, and simply said:

“I'd love to find out.”



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# Fulcrum

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“A man with no purpose in life is like a river without a sea to lose itself in. Such is the meaning of purpose, hard and defining, to lose oneself completely. Immerse one’s essence in a journey with no visible end in the distance. Anything less is bound to bring about ennui, the crushing realization of our discrete physical form and its inadequacies. Anything less than steering oneself through life like the only real obstacle is death itself, leads to early death of the mind and the soul. I ask you, would you live life or stand by idly waiting for death? I chose to vanquish death altogether.”

-Thessurdijad Molo, *A journey through my life*

## A long and winding path



HE mountain grew ever more unkind. Its many bare faces looked down upon a lonely figure, slowly but surely making its way through rock, gravel, low grass and loose dirt. His hood was down, revealing a stern but humble face.

Care lines dotted his forehead, and one could easily spot he was not a man prone to laughing easily. His face was adorned by a beard grown out of necessity, not choice, and his thin long hair was unkempt, a few wild strand jutting in strange directions.

The wind and the rain were thankfully absent on this day, awarding him the leisure of trudging along the mountainous path with only his sore feet and stiff legs to distract him from his effort. Indeed, he paused once again to rest for a moment, let his blood flow freely in his legs and feet, and take a moment to pray to God for his good fortune.

He sat down on the naked rock, his buttocks well used by now to such discomforts. He touched his forehead with one hand and brought out a small piece of knotted string with the other. His lips then moved in a silent orison, asking for more of the same good fortune, and perhaps a bush or nut-bearing tree from which to gather some much needed food.

He had not seen or heard signs of goats or other mountain-dwelling animals for days now. There was still some grass on these slopes, so there should have been herds or families of animals feeding. Perhaps there were many more richer plains and slopes far below, or in plateaus his path had not taken him through.

Perhaps it was pure chance that he had not seen a living soul, neither a bird or lizard and certainly not a goat. Perhaps it was his God, testing him for purity of heart and strength of purpose, to steel him further in order to come through the always perilous journey of Pilgrimage.

He was living on certain kinds of insects that were still to be found if someone knew how and where to look, and a few roots he had been able to identify as edible. The further deep inside the mountain range he trod, the stranger and more different the life he met became. At first the trees started to become bulkier, more water rich, taller and greener. Then the animals, he noticed, were more stout, fatter, their meat sweet and richer in flavor, its color a vivid red, not like the dark, stringy meat of the animals he was used to.

It was a sign, he decided, that with every step closer to God's Lands, the land was graced by his favor, and the animals were fat and felt no hunger, the trees and plants grew tall and proud, the birds soared high and their voices were sweet as honey running down a child's

mouth. It was His work, all that was abundant, and all that was good.

This part of the mountains seemed to have fallen from His grace, whether as another trial, or for reasons only He could entertain. No matter, since his wisdom permeates the earth and the sky, he thought he could only accept and never wonder, for that way lay madness, and the fall from grace into pits of despair and malevolence.

He felt he was attuned, resonating with the earth below, the sky above and the stone all around him. He reached into his small sack, and with no effort produced a small circular pendant, a thin slice of white marble or porcelain cast around a black mat surface, smooth and cold to the touch.

He held it firmly with both hands for a while, looking intently at its black surface and then a thin sliver of green started to pulsate on the black surface, a green line starting to form from one edge of the small black circlet, and ending on another, to form a straight path, like the invisible brush of a painter kept stroking the same line, always in the same direction.

He looked at the thin, green line of light, and then looked at the faint mountain path that zig-zag through the ever rockier slopes. His path was true, that much he knew. His pointing stone had not failed him before, and neither would it fail him now, not on his Pilgrimage, not while his faith was strong, and his prayer warm of heart and soul. That he knew, and little else would come to matter.

He took a moment and gazed at the lands resting below him. The great northern plains could be seen far away, a faint gray haze slightly discernible under a thin sheet of fog. And then rolling hills of auburn slowly lifting off the ground as if the very hand of God had touched and pinched the lands, his hand print faintly echoed in the timid, graceful slopes.

Between the foot of the mountains and the hills, lay a deep gorge, a wild river running through it, twisting and turning as far as the eye could see further to the east, its flow coming from somewhere deep inside the mountains, further up north, further than the lands where his people roam, where the snow never melts and the suns always hide behind the clouds, where neither man nor beast can endure for long.

A fleeting sensation of wonder filled him, for the works of God were magnificent to behold, and his Pilgrimage a unique journey of

faith, beauty, wonder and duty. The honor he was blessed with was indeed so great he could have never thought it possible, much less aspire to it. Nonetheless, he was on a Pilgrimage to the Land of God. He was the Pilgrim, the one honored to pay homage to the Land of God and the final resting place of their forefathers.

To him lay the duty of bringing back a Holy Forge, to pluck one out of the very famed Garden of Wonders! His eyes were suddenly lit at the very thought, even as his body still dully ached from the many hardships his peregrination had knowingly brought upon him and would bring him still. But he ignored all that which occluded his mind and he imagined himself, standing amidst the Garden of Wonders and quenching his thirst from the Unending Spring.

It would all be more than worthy of the pain, the cold and the rain. Just to lay his eyes on the Veiled Gates, he would willingly give his life. But he cannot, and will not, until his Pilgrimage is complete, and his people have their Holy Forge renewed. Oh, the joyous wonders he is yet to behold, not just the earth and the rivers and the mountains all wrought in unquestioned wisdom, but the craft of God Himself, right in front of his eyes, at the touch of his hand, from silver, and stone, and sand that never crumbles, or faints, and never shall.

His senses brought him back to the cold reality. He still had some good light left, and he should not waste it. Every day without a Holy Forge was a harsh day for his people. His journey was still many days and nights away from an end. Tarrying here in the middle of the mountains, daydreaming like a young selfish brat was not at all what any would expect of him, the one so honored. His shoulders suddenly felt a bit heavier with so much resting on them: the future of his people, the life of the land, the children yet unborn.

A gust of the mountains cold and wholesome air seemed to have infected him with renewed vigor. In seconds, he was already steadily climbing up the steep, winding path that would take him between the two dominant mountain peaks, and afterwards probably on a shallow descend to the Land of God.

Those who had gone before him had followed the same path, and had passed on word of their travel and their journey. What mountains and ridges to pass, which rivers and springs to drink from, what strange growths and roots to eat, where to feel safe and sleep unhindered, as

well as where to keep one eye open and your knife in hand. More than a few had perished and left traces of their demise for the next ones to follow, and more than a few times the people had almost been extinguished, their last footprint upon the earth carried away by the winds that know no sympathy or heed no pledge and care not for the lives of simple men.

But God provides, and always will. As long as we have faith, as long as we live our lives like we were meant to, taught to from father to child, as long as we go on the Pilgrimage when time and God mandate.

These thoughts occupied his head as he toiled onwards, even though under his thick pelted boots his calloused feet could feel every last jut of rock and bit of gravel. This was him now, this described him wholly. He was Pilgrim, meant to walk the earth until he reached the Holy Place, and then whether or not he would go back to his people and his previous life, that meant nothing. When he performed the Rites, the Holy Forge would be with his people. And then he could walk back, and live the rest of his days having witnessed the glory of God, teach those that would come after him, and if it fate would have it so, help the next Pilgrim prepare for his own difficult journey.

Perhaps, he thought, I am getting too far ahead in my thinking. My journey is still far from over, and yet here I am, feet dead as wood, legs heavy like rock, once again on the climb, all I've loved and known left behind perhaps forever, and I am let myself be fooled by visions of a future yet to unravel, me at its center.

Selfishness. Ego. A sign of malignancy, a precursor to evil thoughts and desires, accursed manifestations of Them. May God watch over his people and lend him strength and clarity of mind and purpose. To think such thoughts, when God was already pointing to the true path, when everything so far had proceeded along according to his divine plan, when the auguries had said it was a good time for a Pilgrimage. That he was a good man, that he would be a true Pilgrim, one tat God would accept.

He felt he had to cleanse himself with birch and water, pay obeisance to his God with an offer of personal sacrifice. But he was already on his Pilgrimage, what could he do now that would not interfere with his holy purpose? He had no inkling yet, but he felt blood rushing through his veins, feeling guilty, shameful, almost soiled.

He pushed harder, the slope turning into an almost sheer wall of rock. The small, narrow path had degenerated into a granite crevice with pockmarks and surfaces of chipped rock that one had to climb with hands as well as feet.

In his mind, it mattered little, because he felt like he would grow wings if he had to, if the earth was without warning removed from his feet. He felt like he would grow gills and scales, and swim the oceans of the world if the skies suddenly opened and poured all the water of the world and the earth was covered in it.

He steadily put one hand after the next, hoisting his lithe and supple careworn body slowly but surely, every step of the way a small death for Them and their venomous influence that seeps into the hearts and minds of the weak-minded and unfaithful, spreading over the people of the earth like a rotting disease.

Perspiration glistened on his forehead, the small of his back was damp as well, every muscle and joint burning from effort and protesting at every leap and move. But he kept going, his mind focused, his soul shielded and armed, a searing force of pure light stabbing through a heart of darkness, a pestilence of lies, deceit and wrong.

He was fighting Them, even as he climbed, and sweat, and toiled. His whole Pilgrimage was a Holy War, he now knew, and this very climb a fight. Like the War between God and Them, at a time before man. The same war, a million fights, a million more, until God prevails, until the faithful have had their share of blood, toil, and fighting. Until then, he would climb for his people, His Faithful. Until then, he would endure the forces arrayed against him, be they nature, men, or Them, in one disguise or many.

He would endure and he would prevail. Not to become a revered one among his folk, not to serve some delusional idea of a grandiose self in a small world and an even smaller land, an even fewer people. It was true, their numbers were dwindling, their women bore less children, and their liver were becoming shorter. He would endure the hardships of his path and the machinations of the enemies of God, for the good of his people and the will of his God.

He reached out with one hand blindly, his face wearing an expression of determination, a resolute, stout mask under which nerves flickered furiously with jabbing explosions of pain and anguish, though for

no one else to know apart himself and God.

He grasped for a handhold in the rock, a fissure, a jutting piece of granite or lime, but all he could grasp was thin, cold rushing air. With another leap, his face was caught in the stream of air, his hood wildly fluttering about his neck, sweaty locks of hair caressing his face. He had reached the neck between the two peaks, and he could now see a wide stretch of plain-like ground extending before him, grim patches of grass, rocks and dusty gravel for days worth of travel ahead of him.

He could feel the touch of God as he took the final step onto the plateau, his soul drifted away by a divine wind, his aching body forgetful of his aches and trappings. He felt light as a feather, in body and soul. He remembered then the words of his Guide, his people's master of lore and faith, their holy man: "And once you step onto the wide, gray mesa, a gust of wind will greet you and lift your soul. It will be God whispering in your ear, it will be a sign from God, that your path is true."

Indeed then his path was true, one of many perils left behind. He let out a laugh, in spite of him, a laugh he would look down on with contempt as blasphemous, but it was a laugh that welled from the soul, a liberating act, a cry of thanks to his God, his protector, his ever watchful Father. He started walking with a steady slow pace once more, with what little light of day remained guiding him to a cluster of rocks where he might find shelter for the coming night. Once he lay down, he would pray to God and offer him his gratitude for saving him from disgrace and keeping him on his true path.

And then he would sleep and dream of goat's cheese, berries, honey and mead..

## Gossamer Twilight



faint aroma of cinnamon and rosebuds permeated the bedroom, a thin, comely sweetness lingering in the air, inviting nothing but warm memories and cherished moments to those it happened to touch. The first light of dawn had just broke, the sounds of early morning in Pyr resounding as ever.

The Ministry Tower rang once, then twice, for the people to wake up timely, and offer their daily prayer to the Gods. The scurrying feet of water sellers and milk men could be heard from the balconies, running through town, their carts filled dangerously with bottles and oversized clay or wooden containers, selling their wares to those in the city who could afford to.

Celia woke up as the beam of sunlight characteristically bounced off the gleaming, copper-skinned Ministry tower, as was usually the case. Her long golden brown hair, tangled as it was from last night's fretful sleep, resembled a flaming bush when the copper-tinted light cast off the ministry's tower shone upon her. Her visage was one of a fiery, avenging god-maiden of fury and destruction, an avalanche of wrath rushing down upon the wrongdoers and evil-makers that dared incur her retribution.

But that was only a fleeting impression, for when she touched her grown belly and felt her unborn child still soundly and safely asleep, her smile was like heavenly orchards grew and bore ripe honey-sweet fruit in the blink of an eye, all the goodness of creation coming together in a still moment of time, a mother's smile, a power beyond reckoning and imagination, all that in the creases of a beautiful face and two comely lips. And she who had seemed as a terrible force had been wondrously transfigured, into a mother bathed in sunlight, radiating warmth and love, any hint of terrible awe a mere phantom now in the eye of the beholder.

After a few moments of silent contemplation, as if communicating with the fetus growing inside her, and some moments of simple indulgence in smelling the morning fragrances and hearing the first sounds of day, Celia threw her sheets away playfully and got out of bed to follow her usual routine: she took her morning bath, and then offered her



own prayer to the Gods, thanking them for sending a man like Amonas to her, thanking them for conceiving her child, carrying it this far, and praying for her husband's safe return, and her child's first cry into this world.

She was then startingly taken by the fragrant smell that had gently occupied her senses ever since she opened her eyes, and felt almost strange for not immediately taking notice of such a beautiful scent. With a familiar way, she tried to trace the source of the fragrant smell that seemed to seep through the walls and pour from balconies and windows. She peered over her stone balcony, more and more people starting to wade through the streets, the day starting off in its usual rhythm.

The bakery on the corner of their street had only begun to unravel steaming loafs of bread from its oven, no sign of sweets and caramels and other sugar treats. It was only to be expected, on a Watchday. Who would dare cross arms with the Law? Much less for a little taste of sugar. And Cerpiem, the stall vendor, who sold almost anything from thin sheets of writing paper for the rich and affluent, to small pieces of gum for the children. He had nothing of the sorts laid out.

Who was the mischievous rascal then? And even more so, ignoring the proscriptions of the Ministers? Her curiosity and her happy, playful mood took over. She would set off to find this little rebellious soul, and why not, share some of the forbidden fruit if he would share it.

She put on her simple flowing green dress, the silver hair-band Amonas had fashioned for her once she had known she was carrying his child, and went down her stairs and onto the busy street.

She knew Amonas would be somewhere here in the city of Pyr, but it was much safer for both of them if she knew not exactly where he was and when he would be coming back. It was for the best, that was what he had told her, and she felt suddenly saddened by his absence, staying away from each other while he could be so close was stressful and felt plain wrong. Like a child instructed not to play for fear of falling down and hurting.

She was suddenly brought back to her immediate reality in a breathtakingly surprising way: a hefty slice of cinnamon bread-pie was standing right in front of her, and old lady Rovenia was holding the outlandishly little plate, a knowing smile written across her care-worn

face, bright green eyes that had seen more than a lifetime's worth of sadness and happiness twinkling with a child's mischievous glee.

"You! Shame on you lady Rovenia! On a Watchday too?", said Celia as she took the offered plate with one hand and ushered lady Rovenia through the footstep of her house's door, which she had barely walked out from herself only moments earlier. Lady Rovenia said nothing, but kept on smiling, and Celia thought she could perhaps hear a little snort or giggle as the old lady came inside the house, with a bread pan full of hot sweetness and fresh aroma carried under her arms.

"I knew you had been spending the last few days all alone, poor woman, husband away working for hard earned coin. He is working away, is he not? Dear Gods, I hope it's not some fiendish tale to fool you and damn your family in brothels and gambling houses?"

Celia broke down in laughter which was not easily contained and as an added trouble, a morsel of bread-pie still being chewed was inadvertently stuck between her stomach and her mouth, prompting her to start coughing fervently, but at the same time, folding herself across her belly as much as her situation permitted, laughing, choking, and coughing at the same time, if that was at all possible.

Lady Rovenia was dumbstruck at Celia's reaction but she was quick to act as well. She found a small alcove on Celia's kitchen wall to set the still warm bread pan, and then hurried to the drinking bucket, and poured a large cup of water for Celia to wash the troubling piece of food down.

Celia, still trying to recover from her attack of hysterical laughter, and still coughing, took the proffered cup of water, and drank in large gulps. Some of the water ran down her cheeks and neck, some of it she spluttered while coughing, but most of it washed the bread-pie down, and she could safely breathe again, now laughing because of the way she nearly choked. Lady Rovenia seemed terrified, a pale look of worry drawn all over her small wrinkled face, but managed to say in a quavering voice full of concern:

"For the Grace of the Gods, girl! I only brought the pie to sweeten your life, not end it like a candle blown away!", and lifted the cup away from Celia's smiling lips.

"Lady Rovenia, had I known you had such a roaring imagination I would have kept you company more often than not! Amonas, in

brothels, and gambling? Perhaps you'd suggest he was a drunkard too?", Celia said smiling widely, pulling up a chair for the old lady to sit in first, and then one for herself, back straightened out and carefully managing the space between her belly and the kitchen table.

"You thought it funny and a product of wild imagination but in my many years I have seen the like of what you should never believe possible, probable or in any way imaginable, but I have, and there is one thing men can be trusted for: trust them not!", the old lady said while waving one finger wildly as if casting can-trips with an invisible yet powerful wand of magic like the one in fairy tales and ancient stories.

"I have nothing much to say to that, my good lady Rovenia, only that Amonas is not just any man, and had he been such a one, I would not have loved him for once, much less marry him or carry his child.", her voice sparkling with admiration and notes as if made of honeydew clinching her every word.

"If that's what how you feel alright, but men change. Be wary girl, that's all I say. How are you coming along?", the old lady smiled heartily and touched Celia's belly lightly, delicately, with hands that had offered the same kind touch perhaps hundreds of times, over the years.

"I can have no complaints. The child is mindful of me, I can sense it. It sleeps mostly when I do, and his kicks and restlessness are but tiny nudges. Some mornings I feel sick, and no amount of clean air helps. But I gather that is only natural."

"It is girl, but tell me? Do you eat for two? Do you feed yourself properly or do you think an appetite is woeful feeling? Do you sleep well enough?", the old woman's voice sounding loud in a preaching tone, almost scolding the young mother to be, her one hand slapping the table surface mildly, in time with her little less than accusing questions.

"I eat well enough, dear Rovenia. I eat as much as I feel full and then some more. And then I can hardly breathe, and have to pace around the house or go outside for a little walk for my stomach to settle down properly. Have no worries about me or the child.", said Celia, clasping the other woman's hands in her own.

"I'll worry if I like to and you can say none otherwise. How are you sleeping now? You seem like you had a troubled sleep, your hair

is tousled and your skin has an off tone. You're not sick are you?"

"No Gods forbid, no. I was twisting a bit in my sleep, and then when I woke up I smelled that bread-pie of yours and came rushing outside to find out who.. Oh dear me, I'm such an awful host! Should I start a fire, boil some water for uwe or keplis right away?"

"No need to rush dear. I'll help you along. I might be old but I'm not an invalid, not yet Gods forbid."

"And we'll munch some of that nice bread-pie of yours. Tell me then, aren't you scared of the Watchday's proscription? What if someone with malice in his heart goes and gives your name to the Ministers? And with such a strong smell, perhaps they'll smell it of their own accord, down to the Tower itself!"

"My lovely girl, if I was scared of such things, I would have died of fear a long time ago. As it is, I couldn't care less what they think of me and whether or not there are rats above the sewers as well. And what would the Ministry do to a poor old lady like me, for baking a sweet bread on a Watchday? Lash me like the heretic I am? No, child. Their mind works like one of those steamers, all brawn, power and rashness. Let them think the world can work like one of their machines, all steam and air. Arrogant and self-important. Dear me, I can feel my blood rising in my ears."

"Now then no need for your blood to gorge like that, you are safe here in our house, I promise you, I swear in my unborn child, what I cherish most. Calm yourself, and have some of your lovely bread-pie to sweeten your sour taste.Come.", Celia said to Rovenia in her most calm and assuring tone, the one she felt really calmed Amonas and brought him peace and serenity.

"I'm fine girl, I'm fine. Let's forget about them, since they can't appreciate a fine bread-pie. Now, eat!", said the old woman with a disarming smile and they happily ate away.

And with that they passed the time until the evening arrived, exchanging stories and tales, but mostly Rovenia telling her the story of her life in many small parts, whatever little story she felt most appropriate at any time, whether it be funny, sad, or in some curious circumstances, both.

Celia was drawn to the old woman's tales like a kitten to warm milk. At first she sipped them slowly, and then drank them all in as

if catering for an insatiable desire to listen to everyday tales of an old midwife and caring neighbor. Celia thought old Rovenia would be quite fitting for the task, and the old woman lovingly knocked her door from time to time to check how she was doing, if her health was anything less than adamant, and if the baby kicked and felt lively enough.

From time to time she scolded her for not taking good care of herself, not eating enough quality meat, and there never seemed to be enough greens in her kitchen for that woman's taste.

She insisted on Celia eating lots of eggs and milk if she could cope with it on a daily basis, and drink lots of uwe, said to be good for everything, from the blood to the bones. And when the child would stir troubled, the best medicine would be to sing to it, sing from her heart, whatever soothed and pleased her.

When the old lady finally left the house, it was more from polite awareness of the time that had melted away from the hearty discussion, almost like one between an anxious soon-to-be grandmother and her pregnant daughter.

Celia had never known her mother, and her father was killed in the Pacification of Zaelin, little enough to understand almost nothing around her, but old enough to remember her father kissing her goodbye for the last time, his kiss at once somber and warm to the touch. She had grown up with her grandparents, who loved her more than possible and raised her better than a daughter. They had died before they could see her wed.

Celia offered the old lady to stay for the rest of the day, provide her valuable insight and experience in cooking the next day's meal, but Rovenia said it was unhealthy for the baby to stay inside for long, and that she should definitely go on a walk while there was still any sunlight left, since nighttime in Pyr was less than a proper place for an expecting woman, the light of the lamps leaving more to the shadow than seemed wise and proper.

So, like most ladies at her age, she would retire in the warmth of her small house, and pass the time weaving jedomons and other pieces of cloth that might come in handy, or not. And then she laughed briefly but genuinely, and went next door, leaving Celia to tend to her own household in peace.

She did just that for some time, idling away at brooming and clean-

ing the house as much as her straining back allowed, and then she brought firewood from their small cellar, and paused for a while before starting a fire anew for tomorrow's meal, perhaps some stew, perhaps a broth of beans and greens, a recipe Rovenia had suggested while they were idly gnawing at her bread-pie.

She stood with a few small pieces of firewood cupped into her arms, when the thought flashed in her head unwanted: she was out of uwe, again! She left the tiny logs aside on the small kitchen table and went upstairs to fetch her small purse of coins.

She then made sure she hadn't actually started off an untended fire, drew her broadly-hemmed cloak around her and darted off towards the market, light waning, the falling dusk painting the distant encircling hills in an orange and purple hue, some of the rooftops in Pyr shedding a brown-yellow sheen.

The city crowd on the streets was shifting towards its nocturnal aspect, the ones that rarely venture outside if the suns still abound, and rarely crawl back to their domiciles before dawn is about to break. Loud song and cheers, sounds of merrymaking and laughter could be heard at least once in every street that she passed on her way to Ves, the farmer she knew was her kin, a cousin in fact, and tried not to fool her like others in the market did.

She wasn't sure if she would make it in time, for at this hour Ves as well as almost everyone else with farms or animals to tend, had to leave for his farmstead, eat and rest, before getting up in the middle of the night, watering whatever plants needed so, then harvesting those ready for the market, and then loading up his cart and off he would be to the market once more to make some coin, for his wife and children not to beg like some who were cast adrift in the unfathomable torrents of fortune.

She could see them, disheveled beings, sometimes indistinguishable from animals, sometimes bringing a sore tear to her eyes. Some she helped as she could, a loaf of bread or her daily bottle of milk. Sometimes she would leave a plate of food for those that drifted throughout the city and did not just await their end at some dark corner of the market, either stamped upon, trodden by mistake or not, sometimes hunted as a pastime by men drunk enough or too clearheaded to care as they ended their horrid lives, bringing on a fate only fit for

nightmares.

As she turned the last corner before she reached Ves' usual stand, she could see she was too late, Ves as well as everyone else having departed for the night, leftover fruit and vegetable stalks amassing on the cobbled streets, a sour acrid odor wafting all around her. If nothing else at all, she had indeed taken a walk, though at an inappropriate hour, and she should be getting home before long.

As she turned around to start walking back towards her house, she was frozen where she lay, when a mailed hand seemed to stretch from utterly nowhere, some shadowy crevice, some chasm in a wall she hadn't noticed in her dimly lit surroundings, a surreptitious figure that seemed well-disposed towards her, or else she would be already lying in a pool of her blood, for what little coin she carried in her tiny purse, or things worse than an untimely death that she dared not imagine while carrying her child still in her womb.

"Lady Celia, be still and fear not. I am Kin, and I bear news for you: Philo has been arrested, but your husband has not.", the man's voice steady, straightforward, serious and business-like.

"And Amonas? What of him? Is he dead?", she managed to utter in total disbelief, a well-practiced phrase in her head, her moment of fear given body through her quivering low voice, a stutter barely avoided, her lips trembling, her eyes narrowed down to small ovals, what little blue was left exposed to the light of the lamps, flashing with terror. Her hands had instinctively gone to her belly, hugging it closer than ever, as if she feared the child would be needlessly drawn away from her, a life unborn for a life given.

"Hush milady, we know not. But no body to be found, or a trace of cloth, we can be sure. Have hope, Lady Celia. And let not a soul know of this.", the man left a hint of consolation in his voice but none of that would be enough for Celia now.

He was gone as silently and instantly as he had appeared, through the unseen folds of the night, a messenger in the dark, grim and hollow thoughts in his wake.

She ran back to the house, tears running down her pale cheeks. Blood had left her face, and coldness crept in like endless tides of water running under a door. The laughing crowds became a sorrowful noise in her mind, a weeping in her heart. She ran up to their bedroom,

feeling the baby stir uneasily, as if it knew something was amiss.

She lay down on their bed, put on her wedding gossamer tiral, and wept until she could weep no more and her tears dried and her numb mind sent her into a merciful sleep.



## Of the Sun and Moon



E will get back.”

“Well that’s what you keep saying. Is it that difficult to accept the fact we are now, thanks to your efforts, terminally lost?”

Hilderich was picking ineffectually at the withering bark of a large oak-like tree, swarms of ants running up and down its length, tiny flecks of dead wood on their backs. The tree was turning into ashes, returning into the dirt, one very small piece at a time. Hilderich was quite fascinated by what he was seeing all around him and that was probably why he had not broken down in hysterical cries because of their mishap.

Which was also why he could blame Amonas for their predicament, in a steady, calm, matter-of-factly and somewhat detached, distant tone of voice. Half his mind was infuriated, close to bursting actually, because Amonas seemed to have had inadvertently stranded them on *somewhere*. The other half of his mind was trying to make connections between the flora and fauna of this general area, place, whatever one might call it, and the various curatoria he believed he remembered having some kind of relation in part or in whole.

Indirectly, this was Hilderich’s way of coping with the problem in hand, partly to offset his mind and unburden it from stress, anxiety, and generally what he had learned to consider counter-productive emotions.

And on top of that, he was actually trying to help in his own lateral way, by trying to identify anything he might be able to, based on whatever curatoria he had studied or seen in his unfortunately short and, recent events notwithstanding, uneventful apprenticeship. It seemed that apart from superficial resemblances and some generic common traits, he had arrived at no particularly useful conclusion. For the time being, he reminded himself silently and thoughtfully.

Amonas was sitting at a partly exposed root of a gigantic kind of a tree he had trouble accepting that was real, even though he had been sitting right there, on the same spot, for the better part of an hour, silent, thoughtful and certainly perplexed, even though Hilderich had spared

little of the last hour discussing with Amonas, or simply looking at the man's face, which would be enough for the even the most socially inept, slow-witted and sentimentally detached human to understand the man was deeply troubled, almost morose, and not without good cause.

Insects abounded in this humid environment, the likes of which he had not known existed, not even in the southern-most bogs and marshes. Sweat poured from their bodies incessantly, making their every movement a sticky, messy business. It was the heat. The heat of desert combined with the water, the moisture, of a lake or river.

They had seen no river whatsoever from the top of the hill where they had emerged, and had come upon no body of water in their blind search so far. The humidity and heat of the place was overwhelming; Amonas thought they should devote most of their time and effort into simply staying alive for the time being. That meant finding a source of clean, fresh water, preferably by nightfall.

Amonas' mind buzzed incessantly with the same thought; it was indeed his fault. Hilderich had been right. His initial purpose when pushing Hilderich into that infernal pillar of light, that machinery truly in its makers image, was to force him to see the truth.

The first time he himself had stepped through that beacon of light, he had been instantly transferred into a huge, deep cavern, walls of solid metal jutting out of the bedrock, an incomprehensible labyrinth of large metal pipes, interconnections, spines and all manners of weird machinery and constructs the likes of which he could not believe were made by mere men, but rather by Gods, or their offspring or servants.

He had seen words in High Helican he had not seen before, dangling in the air around him as if stamped with thick light on a giant spider's gossamer web. He had seen visions of gruesome death, savagery and bloody toil, endlessly replayed as if it all was a theatrical stage, and he was a lucky viewer.

He had seen so much more he needed to forget as well, but could not, in fact, dared not forget, lest the hatred for their jailers, captors, these madmen, would diminish, ever so imperceptibly as to make one think that it was still raging as blistering as ever. The words he lacked to describe the sickening mob of rulers who moved freely about like a sickle does unto stalks of wheat.

No such euphemism of words like dictator, or killer, would really

suffice to describe them completely. He felt like he would have to leave that to someone else, since in the end, he might not even be able to slit their throats in person.

Without knowing, he seemed to have been gripping his knife from its blade, so intensely he had cut himself, a small rivulet of blood and sweat running down his wrist, droplets of rosy red falling down onto the constantly wet ground. Ever thirsty and never quenched, be it blood, water or both, these new lands seemed to feed on desperation and sweat. His focus returned to the immediate reality around them and felt the sagging weight of the situation.

He had to have faith in himself: he was a man of action, and he had already decided to forfeit his life if it came to that. Others were capable of carrying out the same mission as he was supposed to. If he could not do so in the end, he only felt it was wrong for Celia, and their unborn child. Lovely Celia..

He looked up to the alien looking sky, so familiar but so different at the same time. He could remember his days of ignorance and blissful youth, riding in the countryside, galloping fast and hard as if the world's end was rushing right behind him. And the sky had this strange quality, a light blur, a haze of wonder, looking as if it was a mere ceiling he could reach up and touch as long as he wished it hard enough.

He would not perish here, he decided. It was as simple as that. He would keep his promises and find his way back, to make things right. To free his fellow men. To live life anew, reborn. As fresh and innocent as his firstborn would be. It was time to act, secure any means of survival in this strange land, acclimatise themselves quickly, for who knew how long their journey back would take, and have faith, in themselves, and their purpose.

It should be Hilderich's now as well, even though he cannot yet grasp the extend of the lies, deceit, and exploitation. He should be able to put Hilderich to some good use as well; the man who was a little older than a mere boy had good qualities. He was smart and perceptive, suspicious but not predisposed, simple but not simple-minded. He would be fine. They would be fine. After they worked out some of the issues involved, though.

The suns were wrong, for starters. There was only one sun here,

and it seemed brighter than usual, but smaller, the hue of its light an almost lime green. And then there were the towers, or spirals, he wasn't sure how to describe them. Hideously tall and thin towers in pairs, a low crescent shape adjoining them.

They kind of reminded him of bull horns, if he had to describe them more plainly. Far away in the distance, were the haze allowed it, they could make out not one of these monumentally proportioned constructs, but a dozen or more, in regular intervals. They were fascinating, but largely irrelevant at this point.

He had thought about broaching these matters to Hilderich, but he decided against that for now. The detailed intricacies of their whereabouts, their actual location, the climate and topography of the region, were merely academic issues if they would not provide a small shred of actual information that would lead them to somehow going back to Pyr, or any recognizable place for that matter, in the Territories or elsewhere in the world.

He was still absorbed in thought, eyes piercing the tall canopy of thick foliage, the huge volume of the surrounding trees standing like rocky pillars between two worlds: their own earthen cradle which defined them by preventing their return, and the other, the heavenly shell of a world that they were yet to reach, the world back home, their haven.

Hilderich literally slapped him back into the real world, the palm of his hand wet and sticky, his cheek flush from the hit.

"Are you listening? Are you here? Gods help me, he was insane to begin with now he is catatonic! Amonas!"

Hilderich was shouting now, still thinking Amonas was daydreaming or far worse, had finally lost his, so he thought, fragile mind. As he swung his hand back once more to deliver another slap, Amonas turned his head ever so lightly and looked him straight in the eye, and simply said:

"Don't. No need. I must thank you, actually. I was thinking. I was, overly engrossed in thought I must admit. Were you calling me out for long?"

Hilderich was genuinely surprised at such behavior. Had Amonas been catatonic, he would never really respond and then he would be left alone, and with his survival skills and his latest round of luck, perish

in this steamy cauldron. If he was indeed mad, he probably go berserk and snap his neck like a twig if he was lucky enough. It seemed now that he was neither. He was simply, as strange as it seemed to Hilderich at the time, hard at thought.

He sat down in front of Amonas, on the leaf strewn ground, wet and muddy, a continuous hint of rotting vegetation waxing and waning from the faint wisps of air, a fitting reminder of what happens to idle life. Hilderich cleared his throat and while still looking at the ground, toying around with a small branch, idly looking at the ground, he asked with some reluctance:

“Amonas. This is real, right? This is not a trick, not some very elaborate way of forcing me to join whatever it is you meant to in the first place? Is it?”

Amonas bit his lip and answered, palms outstretched, an ornate ring of silver and copper catching the eyes of Hilderich for the first time. He seemed to draw some breath, then pausing briefly as if he intended to say otherwise before nodding in acceptance and telling Hilderich:

“It’s real Hilderich. That is what has dragged me down in thought. I am sorry Hilderich, my intentions were quite different, and certainly did not involve getting utterly lost, especially at such a moment in time. I know I have failed you so far Hilderich, so I will promise you nothing. I can only offer you my help in order to find a way home. Preferably, while we still draw breath.”, a bitter smile forming on his lips, his head turning to look once more at the thick foliage, hoping to catch a glimpse of the strangely immaculate, perfectly cloudless sky.

When Amonas looked down again, he noticed Hilderich had fallen on his back giggling almost maniacally, his knees bent haplessly in a comical angle, arms folded across his chest, hands clapping with the whole of his palms. Amonas frowned quizzically, Hilderich’s bizarre reaction to his statement leaving him unable to understand or much less respond at all.

“*You? Offer to help me?*”

Hilderich sat upright, legs sprawled in an uncomfortable position, his hand pointing at his own face in sheer disbelief, his voice a falsetto. His face looked suddenly harsh, unforgiving, out of place with his normal self, and then he raised an accusing finger at Amonas, saying to

him in a calm and studied manner, as if lecturing a man of lesser intelligence:

“Not to insinuate that you have done a very poor job so far, but please, indulge me. How can you, help me, find a way home. Are you perhaps a magician of the old tales? I think not dear friend, since then you would be in possession of a cone-shaped hat, talking gibberish even while you sleep, though I cannot yet vouch for the verity or not of that particular supposition. Another possible way in which you might be of help would be that you are, in fact, a fallen angel of the Gods, who has yet to use his superlative powers in my favor because he is as ever trying to teach me a lesson in humility and religious awe, lest my soul is eternally condemned in Catharteria, Damnation, the Twelve Wheels of Fire and so on. You seem to be missing your wings, shield, divine aura, and angelic face, so I would say no, you can’t help me like that. I briefly considered that you might actually own this particular piece of land and are indeed *dying* to offload it to a dimwitted fool like myself who might mistake the extreme humidity, unbearable heat and overflowing vegetation for marshlands suitable for cotton, or something equally senile. Without trying to hurt your feelings or vested interests in a manner most ungracious, I regret to inform you I find your selling points lacking and will not be following up on your offer. Now, unless I am mistaken in all of the above, and unless you have some button or pillar of light that does the opposite of what brought us here, I dare say we are properly doomed, and good as dead and finished. Other more vulgar expressions pertaining to our present unfortunate situation come to mind, but I will not bring myself down to such inestimable depths of bad taste and linguistic ineptitude to use them like a debased wretch of lesser stature. I will now honestly state my predilections, one, that I wish to hang myself at the nearest opportune moment in order to escape further unneeded physical torment under these circumstances, and two, that I wish for my remains to be burned, as is customary under Law.”

All that Amonas could do, was blink, wide-eyed and at a loss for words. Hilderich was resting his hands on his knees, cross-legged on the wet ground, an air of finality around him, as if a holy avatar had announced the end of the world.

Amonas shattered the uneasy silence with a question, uttered in

complete fascination, a glazed look of mock awe on Amonas face, his gruff voice adding tremendously to the intended comical effect:

“Are you sure you weren’t studying to become a Minister?”

And with that, they both broke down in hearty laughter, the strain of their situation and the accumulated fatigue almost vanishing as if washed clear away. An invigorating smile graced Hilderich’s mouth before he answered in kind:

“Actually I had been thinking about it, but though I can handle the dramatics, I am not too keen on handing people over to the procrastinators for spilling oil or eating sugar on a Watchday.”

Amonas thought there was a lot about Hilderich to muse over when time and circumstance would allow it, but there were other more pressing matters to attend to first.

“Hilderich, I’m sure we’ll have quite some time to exchange more tales. But we have to attend to our survival first. We will need fresh, drinking water. And something solid to eat, surely. Something that will not easily spoil in this heat and moisture, this unlikely combination of marsh and forest. But our priority should be water. At the rate we sweat, we will surely suffer the most from its lack. And too soon for comfort, I would wager. Speaking of which, have you noticed? The shadows, they are strange.”

Hilderich nodded, then looked carefully around them, at the barks of trees and small rocks and hanging green overgrowths. He looked at what one would call a glen if it weren’t for the awfully wrong conditions and the green overarching roof made from ostensibly ancient tree branches. The canopy was a mosaic of green and brown hues, the greenish light of the sun adding an emerald glare to the columns of light that shot underneath, where Hilderich could see, the shadows stood still.

Indeed, he noticed that the shadows had moved little or not at all since earlier. He couldn’t be sure, but he knew it was at least strange, and probably another indication that they were very, very, far away from home. He pointed at a broken log with his right hand, a tall outstretched branch casting its shadow on a peculiar half-gray, half-bleached stone.

“What time of day would you say it is, Amonas?”, asked Hilderich while still pointing his hand in that particular direction.

After little deliberation Amonas answered casually:

“I would say about noon. But I could be mistaken. A few hours ago, before we reached this place, night was well under way. And then when we came here, it seemed like a bright summer day, the sun still rising proudly. My body and mind long for rest, my sense of time should be in disarray. But if I woke up right this instant, I would’ve thought I overslept into noon.”

“That shadow was there when we went down from that hill and sat here first. I remember because I imagined pouncing your head on that rock.”, Hilderich added matter-of-factly.

Amonas frowned, but did not press the issue. Instead, he nodded in silent agreement, then said with a careful choice of words, as if musing on a worldly matter (which was perhaps on this particular case, not an overstatement):

“Then.. If shadows stand still.. Does time as well? Is this a limbo of sorts? A jail.. for our souls? If we return, will it be as if no time has passed?”

Amonas seemed troubled by these newly found thoughts. Hilderich on the other hand had no qualms in throwing Amonas interpretation of facts out the window.

“That’s nonsense! Even ministers would find that assumption idiotic! At best! Master Olom would have you scrubbing the horses for a week for even pondering such a connection! I mean, scrubbing! Flayed brush and murky water for a week! Grooming a horse is no occupation for an aspiring Curator, mind you! And especially the horses’ parts where..”

Amonas had the decency to interlope and cut Hilderich in mid-sentence, offering his timely excuse:

“I trust you will be more forgiving than dear Olom was and should the opportunity arise, I will be more than happy to be accordingly reproached for making such extravagant extrapolations. So what do you think?”, his voice finely and expertly tuned to defuse Hilderich’s probable ranting and almost concede in a sincere fashion that he was out of depth here and it would be more wise to let someone who knows better find out what is going on.

“The shadows during the day are cast because of the suns’ light. So, when the suns move across the sky, so do the shadows follow in



hand and move accordingly. Would the suns stay still, so would the shadows. It is not entirely without logic to postulate that since we have witnessed only one sun, this is perhaps the reason for its inability to move, and hence the standing shadows and the continuous moon. There it is, a much more simple explanation which, as my late master would have said, is usually the right one. The sharper, the better."

"Like a razor then, Olom's razor?", Amonas grinned to show he remembered the old man fondly as well, a shared memory they had yet to explore.

"You could call it that, I guess. It might prove to apply in more subjects of interested."

"I hope it does. To me, simplicity is a virtue."

"Indeed."

"Now we know it will be noon for an inordinate amount of time, is it not wise to assume that it will never be nightfall?"

That had not immediately dawned on Hilderich, and the revelation left him looking worried and puzzled, more so because he had not followed out his own train of thought completely.

"If that comes to be, then the heat will not dissipate, and this will go on until we are able to return, the half-light, half-shadow under this monstrous canopy, sweat and grimy mass of rotting leaves stuck on our bodies. Or then again we might never leave this place. The prospect of spending days or weeks in such conditions, whether or not we will be able to go back, makes me want to once more consider adopting an inherently expeditious approach to making oneself go away."

Hilderich was seemingly more humorous than before, and his words were not to be taken for granted, but Amonas had to admit to the fact that this strange sun and taxing climate would make their efforts even more strained and difficult than he had calculated. And still he feared, they had no solid idea of how to get back home. Survival would have to take precedence. And that meant finding water, not sooner or later, but immediately.

"Come, we will find water.", Amonas said decisively, and picked up his pace towards a seemingly random direction.

"Under different circumstances that would involve my absence, I would be impressed by your optimism, but I would have to point out that water is abundantly present, the problem being that it seems to lie

on either our own sorry selves, or the ground and the slowly rotting plant life it supports. How do you plan to go about doing that, pray tell?”

Hilderich was already on his feet, following Amonas from close behind, careful with his steps, avoiding what seemed the most grisly pathways and wet spots that held soft matter of dubious origins underneath.

“We’ll start searching where the plants look thicker, greener and more lively. There should be some source of running water, at least underground, like the places where we would look to dig a well back home. We’ll take it slowly, the more we exert ourselves, the worse it will be in the end if lady Luck keeps running out on us.”, Amonas said while plowing on ahead, working his knife in one hand, hacking away any lush growths that proved to be obstacles in his path.

“I’m not very excited at what you are suggesting, but I cannot think of anything better right now, so I’ll just trudge along.”, Hilderich admitted with a small hint of grudge in his tone, and an almost imperceptibly condescending sort of nod.

A few hours passed, Amonas grinding their way through ever thicker vegetation, now stripped naked to the waist, the heat and humidity insufferable to bear with his leather vest and chain mail underneath that. Hilderich wondered at how the man had suffered to carry all that weight at all, never mind wearing all that in such conditions, and only choosing not to when after they had been walking for the better part of an hour.

It seemed as if the man had grown literally attached to his set of armor, or that its prolonged use had left indelible stains on his body. None of those reasons, it seemed, stood to reason. Amonas had simply not taken them off because he hadn’t felt inclined to. That probably spoke volumes for the man’s tolerance threshold, and what he was capable of going through if pressed, but Hilderich thought he had no desire to learn, since he believed this whole experience would be if nothing else, extremely educational and vividly remembered if there was any afterwards to be had.

Amonas seemed to indefatigable. He had trod on through thick-set lush overgrowths, greens and all sorts of wild vegetation using his indispensable knife, and had complained neither for the steaming heat

or the breath-clogging moisture. Hilderich had refrained from asking questions about the reasoning behind their apparently random course through this probably impossible to map land, lacking great physical characteristics easily identifiable, used as points of reference.

Except those twin towers, or bull horns, or giant forks or whatever one might wish to call them. The name would be indeed useless once one laid eyes upon them. Such majestic structures, in the middle of this chaotic spread of plants and everything else that should better be left unmet. They were roughly headed towards the general direction of one of those structures. Structures that mere men could not have wrought, but would have had if they could.

Hilderich's concentration was broken by Amonas triumphant voice, a hundred or so feet ahead of him, still clearly heard over the distance:

"Water, Hilderich! I told you we will find water! Come! It might not be cold, but it's not lukewarm either! Come!"

Hilderich felt Amonas was not unreasonably excited about his finding, but he could not readily share the joy. His feet though he did not complain were hurting, and his feet were a soggy affair, not the least bit dry. His light boots had let all the moisture in, and their path had guided him through many mud-soaked footings. He could feel his skin was not up to the task, and he looked miserable to the bone.

Still, finding water was the first good thing that had happened ever since that fine uwe stew, and that previous day seemed like another age altogether. He managed a defiant smile which he hoped Amonas would not misunderstand, and carried himself to the small trickling water source where Amonas was washing his face.

"Finally then. My mouth feels like a Ministry's rug, like everyone's trod on it!", Hilderich said jokingly, cupping his hands under the small trickle of water running down through an old tree's bark, like someone had fashioned it specifically for that purpose. Luck it would seem, hadn't run dry just yet.

After they had managed to wash away some of the sweat and grit, and more importantly, quench their thirst and fill their belly with more than water than it could handle, Amonas took Hilderich by the arm and suggested to him that they should try and make some sort of camp here, near the water. The rain would be coming, he said, even with the

sun above, since there can be no water with no rain.

And they would have to keep dry, since that was how many folk in the sea died, their bodies found almost dried out, dessicated, husks rather than flesh. It was because water was attracted to water, and the water in the body, the blood, the piss, the spit, all that water was drawn away, to the river, or sea, or whatever larger body of water you happened to be in. The rich got richer, even in nature, perhaps even in this weird land as well.

In any case, Amonas had convinced Hilderich that it was wiser to stay dry, and it would be indeed a welcome change in any case. They would have to build a fire to do that, and with all that humidity everywhere, he could not for the life of him figure out how, but they had found water, so they would build a fire too. Or so Amonas said. He was very convincing, Hilderich reassured himself before feeling unmistakably hungry, his stomach sounding like a cauldron on fire with nothing inside the broth but water.

“We need to eat too.”, Hilderich admitted frankly to Amonas, who nodded knowingly.

“I haven’t seen a breathing thing yet, only biting insects and that’s no good if they drink your blood and you try to get back at them. Besides, it wouldn’t be worth it. No real river or stream to try and find fish. We’ll have to rely on you then, Hilderich. Try and find some kind of root, stem or plant in general you think might be safe to eat. I don’t mean taste good, Hilderich. I really mean, eating it won’t kill us, not right off anyway. I know I can leave you to it while I gather what wood and fiber I can manage to start working on that small tent of ours. Have faith in yourself Hilderich, we’ll get back.”, said Amonas in his usual gruff voice, a friendly tone that suggested and inclined more rather than ordered and pushed around. It was the voice of a leader, Hilderich realized, a man fit for the task at hand: keeping people basically alive.

Hilderich nodded, accepting the task though as with most tasks, not knowing if he was really up to it. He turned though once before starting to rummage through the thickset leaves and lush bushes all around, and asked Amonas:

“I noticed we were roughly headed towards the structures we saw from that hill. Do you have something in mind?”

“You noticed, eh? I thought you would. I don’t have something

particular, just more of a feeling, an urge if you like. And to be honest, what more is there to look around here? If there's some kind of a device similar to the one that brought us here, we're better off looking at one of those things, before scouring the whole damned land hoping to blindly stumble upon one."

"That's true."

Amonas went about making a make-shift tent, and Hilderich finding something edible. Within less than half an hour, Amonas had laid down a few logs, half rotten and half dead, but good enough for the job in hand. He had stacked them so as to make a simple crude roof, and then covered that simple skeleton with snapped off fresh branches and twigs, and overlaid huge thick leaves from the innumerable plants available.

He hoped these would suffice, and once he had massed enough pieces of wet yet not soggy wood, he piled it down neatly in a fire stack, wishing his flint and stone would be enough to get the fire going. He called out to Hilderich, to check if he had found anything. While he received no reply for a few moments, the moment he started to feel worried about his whereabouts, Hilderich popped out of a cluster of bushes, with what seemed an armful of fine large mushrooms.

"There's more! Fantastic really! Of all places, renia mushrooms this size, here! My grandfather would have a fit!", Hilderich shouted enthusiastically, walking over the stacked wood, looking for a good place to leave his priceless armful of mushrooms, but displeased with all available options decided to just stand there, a load of mushrooms twice the size of his fists carried on his arms.

Amonas smiled, greatly pleased and mildly surprised, both for their luck as well as the gleam in Hilderich's eyes, a genuine expression of happiness, however transient and irrelevant in the long run, it was good for morale. Hilderich's and his as well.

"Put those down and help me get the fire going.", Amonas nodded over the stacked wood.

"Oh no. I've never started a fire in the woods before. I'd be useless. Always used a bottle of .. Oh, you might be inadvertently correct in your proposal. I'm telling you though, you will be eating the ones that touch this sorry excuse for a ground."

Hilderich indeed lowered his body, almost in a squat position, to

put down the load of mushrooms as intact as possible, a somewhat neat pile that did not immediately crumble when he let go of his arms. He then searched through the numerous pockets in his vest, and procured a small metal flask, which he proffered to Amonas with a radiant, beaming smile.

“Gin. Fine grain, citrus taste. A distill of mine, from time to time. Well, frankly, more likely when master Olom would be away on important business. But, I insist, my distill. He never touched the stuff.”, Hilderich’s voice playfully mischievous.

“Well, you are more than meets the eye Hilderich D’Augnacy.”, Amonas grinned while taking the small flask and dabbing with it some more or less dry cloth from his own garments, then placing it where the fire should be lit.

“Which reminds me, Amonas, you seem to know my name, though you haven’t yet very well met me. You told me only just yesterday, that Amonas was the name I needed to know, and the rest would be revealed to me in due time. I believe, the time is long due, wouldn’t you say?”

“You are right, friend. I do owe you that and still more.”

Amonas was busy with his knife and nicely shaped and sized rock, that seemed to spark properly. With a couple of more efforts on his behalf, sparks flew into the gin-soaked piece of cloth and the fire leaped out as if beckoned by a spirit of old, rushing, blazing like it should.

“Amonas Ptolemy, friend to those that wish it, enemy to many. Husband to one.”

Hilderich could sense the sorrowful note in his voice, his wife understandably a part of him, part of his name.

“I’m sure she’ll be quite happy to greet you on our return, will she not?”, his tone uplifting, playful, a smile forming on his face even as he put a nice whole piece of mushroom through a stick, getting ready to roast it over yet undone coals.

“I am sure she will, just not as sure that she will be as happy as I will.”, Amonas answered in kind, he too, skewering a mushroom head cut in slices with his knives through a stick of handy size.

“Well I’m quite happy around these lovelies here.”, said Hilderich amusingly, gesturing at the small pile of mushrooms, with the hint of an innuendo that would make master Olom instantly bash his head with whatever in hand at the time of uttering.

They ate until they were full, and their sense of taste and smell satisfied beyond mere hunger. The fire was burning well now, clothes hung overhead with a well balanced piece of wood and some of the hanging green ropes of vegetation seemed to dry sufficiently. Hilderich had laid down on top of his cloak, feet outstretched, drying out close to the warmth of the fire.

Amonas had lit a pipe with what he thought passed for uwe around here, and puffed away, lost in thought. He had offered some to Hilderich who politely refused, and instead downed a few sips of his own distill. As if it had been bothering him for days on end, Amonas turned and asked Hilderich:

“Won’t you sleep now? You must be exhausted from all this. I was a soldier once, I’ve known similar hardship. But you? You should be half-way home in a dream by now.”

“I know what you mean. I feel like a metal press was weighing me down and now that I ate and laid myself to rest, it has been lifted. I should have fallen soundly asleep, as you say.”

“And what’s keeping you, Hilderich?”

“The moon. There’s no bloody moon to fall asleep under.”

## Machina Segnis



THE suns seemed to have risen earlier on that day, or at least the Castigator's people definitely had. At every level of office and hierarchy, the living mechanisms of the Ministry, the Army and the Procrastinators were of singular mind and purpose. The Castigator had announced that in two weeks time the wrathful military might of the Outer Territories would be ready to march for war. Something that had not happened in the past 25 years.

In every single office and chamber of the various organizations of people and ruling institutions, the situation was almost the same, if one would take into account the multitude of minor variations in disciplinary strictness, interpersonal roles and affiliations, as well as structural differences and the specific nomenclature of each branch of service.

Lesser officials busied themselves with arranging communiques, writing down orders and manifests, then calling for couriers or perhaps taking it upon themselves to forward the appropriate documents and even matériel to their intended recipients. It would be anathema to any one in that overwhelmingly complex machine of sorts that he should singularly fail in the most simple of orders.

If anything were to happen to this whole enterprise, this majestic war footing, this Holy Campaign, issued by the Gods, commanded by the Castigator himself, then it would not be because a lowly clerk or young lieutenant forgot to send out some matériel requisition form, or a call-to-arms teller. And indeed, if this Campaign was to fail because of a human error, in such a catastrophic way, before it even began to put itself into motion, everyone performed beyond their absolute best to ensure that it would not be on their account, on their watch.

Diligence was considered a virtuous characteristic, and most Law-abiding parents tried to hammer that into their children if they had to, so as to become proper people, upholding the Law whenever they could, serving from any place in society they might reach up to. Those that the Gods seemed to favor most, were selected to enter public service, either as Ministers, Procrastinators, or Army men, according to



how well they performed at the Agogeia.

Select officials from these three embodiments of rule and order taught at the Agogeia, schools for those that could afford to become something useful in their lives. Once the basics such as obedience to Law, reciting scripture, and fairly simple counting and sword-fighting skills were taught, the best of each class of children were selected according to the inclination, receptiveness, and skill they showed at the various tests and games carried out for the very same purpose of separating the wheat from the chaff, those capable of serving the people and the Gods.

Some, those better skilled in memory, oration, the use of language and emotion, capable of swaying their fellow students to their own purpose, were further trained to become Ministers, further trained into the teachings and trappings of Law, how to best interpret Law according to need, how to teach, enlighten, and chastise laymen, and how to impress and guide hundreds if not thousands of people as Law, Ministry, and Ruling Council dictated.

They would be responsible for the enlightenment of the people, teaching them the Law, and helping them avoid the temptations that would lead to blasphemy, heresy, casting out, eternal damnation, and a most probably gruesome, demeaning execution that would serve as a reminder and a lesson that All is Law, and no one and nothing is above it. The Ministers would also tend to the daily running of the Territories, as administrative officials, collecting offerings, making amendments to the lesser decrees of the Law to better handle the multitude of people and the realities of land of the living required, with its economy, trade, and needs.

The spending of coin for public works would be decided and then dispersed accordingly to those noble houses that could field enough manpower to make it happen, like roads, bridges, canals, buildings, walls, mills and workshops and every other resource that would the Territories grow and prosper, for the glory of the Pantheon. And one of their number would be chosen from the Castigator, with the blessings of the Patriarch, to be the next Arch-minister, the one blessed to be the voice and heart of the Ministry.

Those of the Agogeia students who were energetic, athletic students, showing exceptional stamina and strength, exemplifying martial

prowess with the blade and their bare hands, those who were blessed with possessing a sharp decisive mind, had proven to be of faith un-failing and a stone hard dedication to the Pantheon, those were chosen as fit for service in the Army.

Rigorous training in all the known aspects of warfare was their only occupation until death, whether or not they were called upon to act, kill or be killed in service to the Gods, they would train with sword and spear, shield and horse, until old age came, when they would carry on with training others of their kind, in matters such as the planning and design of warfare where a mind should be much more fit than the body.

Their training started with single combat techniques, with many different weapons, under different situations and varying levels of duress. Then they progressed into squad tactics, in the open field, against other types of units, like cavalry, or steamers and artillery. And then they would rotate into the rest of the units, for their training to be complete and be able to use everything from their empty hands to a complex steamer machine, and be knowledgeable in the weakness and strength of each one, being able to select the best course of action and what kind of men, machine or animal it would require to be successful.

These were the core lessons they were taught: strength in knowledge, success in adaptability, glory in death. As they progressed through the standings of the Army, always according to their merit and degree of success in their duties, always keeping in mind their faithful devotion, through their accrued experience they learned more about handling men, matériel, and equipment, organization, designing and planning with tens of thousands in mind, as one day they might be called upon to lead the whole Army as Generals, in the name of the Pantheon first, and the Castigator second.

Those that did not excel in anything, but showed average skill at wielding a sword, and could learn enough of the Law as needed orally, those did not learn to read and write like the Minister's did, nor train further in order to excel into combat. These children were strictly chosen for their ability to follow the letter of the Law, blindly, unerringly, keep a watchful eye for signs of heresy and insubordination, any element that was an affront the Pantheon, and the Law, anything that defied the Law or its upholders in spirit or in letter.

These were the ever watchful eye of the Castigator, the arm that made the Law reach into every heart, body, and mind, the Procrastinators. Their training was simple, crude, and effective, hammering into them the utmost loyalty unto the Law, as well as teaching them how to use people in order to learn all that there is, all that is going on, the rumors, the happenings, the weddings and deaths, births and oath-takings.

Everything that went on not just in Pyr, but everywhere in the Territories, they had to know. And if the need arose, they disciplined, re-enlightened, or fetch to the Ministers those they deemed suspicious or genuinely guilty of sin. And then they enforced the Law and the divine will of the Ministry, unflinching, following the credo that All is Law. And if they performed impeccably, surely they would have the honor of becoming Procrastinator Militant, part of the Ruling Council, the left hand of the Castigator himself.

It was a structure that had been handed down from the Gods themselves, so its purpose and form were Holy, and any talk of reform, change, or deviation from the established was treated at best as blasphemy, but usually as expressing heresy, and was treated accordingly by public torture and death.

None were exempt from such punishment, especially the men in the Ruling Council, who were the paragon of Law itself to all the people. Such a hideous concept was not unknown, that a man in the Ruling Council would denounce the Gods by committing or speaking heresy, for it happened long before, in a past almost rightly forgotten and excised from the Annals of the Territories, but still lingering in peoples' memory as Shan's Betrayal, a myth to frighten the children into obeying, a fable to instruct and put the fear of the Gods into the soul of men.

Shan had been a General of the Army, at a time when the Territories had not grown past the lands around Pyr. When the Ruling Council decided it was time to enlighten the nearby shores of Urfall, Shan was reluctant, at first. The story says he was publicly chastised, with a hundred lashes to his body edging him close to death.

Because he was deemed an exceptional strategist and a peerless tactician, he was once more asked to lead the armies that would enlighten Urfall, instead of being stripped of office and rank and live on

the streets as a beggar, given the opportunity to redeem himself in the eyes of the Pantheon, the people and the Castigator. He acceded, and the armies marched off, gleaming in their metal armor, the blessings of the Castigator sung over the Southern Gates of Pyr. Within a few weeks, Shan's armies seemed lost, no message of the war reaching Pyr, and no messengers from Pyr ever returning.

One day, Shan appeared over the hills encircling Pyr, and had with him not only the armies he had marched off with weeks before, but horses, and men and catapults and hellish contraptions that spurted fire and death, from Urfall. He had spread the heresy to the armies like the mythic whores of old spread disease, like the cancer that spreads from the roots of a tree to its leaves and brings about its death. And he had the Urfalli with him, their machines working in unfathomable ways, the products of heretical pacts with the forces of evil.

He reached the Gates of Pyr and demanded the surrender first and foremost of the Ruling Council, and had the ineffable audacity to accuse the Council of lies and crimes to the people, twisting the word of the Law and spewing horrific untruths. It was an attempt to poison the minds of everyone in the city as well, promising that none of those who surrendered willingly would be hurt in any way, and a fair trial would be arranged for all.

Except for the Council, who would be executed after their supposed lies had been exposed and their non-existent crimes against men proved unquestionably. Such heretic lies had never been uttered or thought of before, and never would again, their venomous treachery so base, the Castigator himself is said to have cried in desperation, for he had never thought a dearly loved brother like Shan would fall from grace like that.

The city was utterly defenseless, save but a few procrastinators and old army tutors, and lowly farmers, herders, artisans and traders that had not yielded shield, spear or sword not once in their lives. The armies of Shan had cast away all form of decency, form or honor, and turning into a heretic rabble, had begun to scour the lands, pillaging, raping, and burning, before what they thought would be the grand feast of Pyr itself.

But they never managed to sink their putrid claws and teeth into the immaculate flesh of the City of Pyr, for it was protected by the Gods, as

are all their faithful and humble servants. For when the time was nigh, and all seemed lost, the Castigator Hanul Ofodor the 1st, retired from the halls of the Disciplinarium, and went deep into the Sacred Vaults, where he and the Patriarch offered their blood to commune with the Gods, and ask for deliverance in that time of need.

For a day and a night, while the heretic hordes of Shan looted and pillaged, and while the outer walls of Pyr were about to fall, an angel sent from the Gods appeared in their image, casting brilliant rays of cleansing light, and annihilating the armies of Shan who had no other recourse but to flee like the vermin they were. None escaped the angel's wrath, who spread the cleansing fire to every last part of Shan's army.

When the Day of Redemption had passed, the City of Urfall and its majestic harbor and proud workshops were all extinguished in a ball of light so pure in its wrath that those who saw it with bare eyes went blind, and would forever be praised in their lives as Martyrs of the Wrath of the Gods, spreading the tale of Shan and what they saw to everywhere they went. And such was the way the story was told, from one generation to the next, as a reminder, even though the official Annals never admitted or recorded it, for as much as it mattered, it should never have happened in the eyes of the Gods, and so it never had.

And such was the tale of Shan Lagus, the Betrayer, proscribed from history, but alive in the memory of Law-fearing people, people like the Arch-minister LaVasse, a wide, big-boned man, dressed in an opulent surplice, holy texts in High Helican weaved around the sleeves, a Seal of Office hanging round his neck in a pendant made of platinum and emeralds, fittingly pure and clean to represent the qualities of the Arch-minister.

He was presently at the Strategium Proper, in the company of the General of the Army, and the Procrastinator Militant, whose embarrassing near-blunder at last night's festivities at the announcement of the Last Holy Campaign as it was officially now named, had not gone unnoticed, and had become the subject of sarcastic comments and irony even at lower echelons of Ministry and Army, but had only naturally been ignored by the Procrastinators as a whole.

The General of the Army had not been present at the event due

to having received news of the Castigator's decision from beforehand, and had indeed spent the night hard at work putting his most trusted and capable people together, rousing them up from their sleep in order to lay down the priorities of planning and start orchestrating the massive preparations involved in such an endeavor as a Holy Campaign.

He had of course learned of the Procrastinator's Militant blunder, and even though second hand accounts rarely manage to do justice, he had exchanged knowing looks and smiles with the Arch-minister that had gone largely unnoticed by the Procrastinator Militant, a somewhat alarming fact if one would care to extrapolate the level of the Procastinators' vigilance from the qualities apparent in its most senior member.

The three of them had been there from before dawn, the Arch-minister and Procrastinator Militant arriving together though having rode in separate coaches, having left from the Disciplinaryum once proper etiquette was adhered to and the reenactment of the Pacification of Zaelin thoroughly reenacted, with bloodletting and prayer ensuing.

They were now sipping fresh hot uwe tea, comfortably seated at the General's planning chamber, all sorts of charts and maps laid out over a grand table, heaps reports and still unsigned orders heaped upon the General's desk, a utilitarian piece of furniture, like most around the chamber, sturdy and well-made but otherwise unadorned and plain.

The Arch-minister was seated on the only luxurious chair available, plush velvet adorning the back and the sitting surface, elegantly inlaid pieces of ivory, black granite and tether-wood intertwined in flowing designs in the stylish armrests. The Procrastinator Militant sat at a simple stool, much more accommodating for a soldier in search of a few moments of resting one's legs during brief pauses in a battle, rather than a man of such a high office as a Procrastinator Militant.

The General had briefly apologized to the Procrastinator Militant for lack of a better seating apparatus, and explained that any and all equipment deemed to be of an extraneous nature was being dismantled to be put into other uses now that the preparations for the campaign demanded every last bit of usable material. And that even included artisan chairs made of young sycamore and inlaid with ivory, granite, and tether-wood, not unlike the last one available for seating persons of importance, of which the Arch-minister seemed to make such good use.

Not that he implied at any point, the General continued, that the Procrastinator Militant was not a person of incalculable importance, but alas, the Arch-minister had seniority according to the Law of Founding, so it was Law that essentially demanded that the Arch-minister be seated in the proper way, while he would have to make do with what little was available at such a time.

At that, the Procrastinator Militant withdrew from any thought or intention of protesting, and simply accepted the proffered stool graciously. By looking at the Arch-minister, if one didn't know better he might misinterpret his slight grin as an indication of silent enjoyment of the unfortunate predestinations of the Procrastinator on his behalf, but such a man was beyond such base thoughts, and was merely grinning at the studious labor going on around the Strategium Proper, praising the high spirits of everyone involved, and personally congratulating the General of the Army for kicking off the preparations in the way expected:

“Well done, Tyrpledge. I see that you are already thinking of using all available material. Even using the ivory and granite in such a fine chair. Hard to find materials, very important, are they not?”, the Arch-minister inquired, his nose delicately poised over his cup of uwe, letting the aromas seep in of their own volition.

“I am more than honored, indeed blessed, to hear such praise from your Excellence. Yes, they are most valuable, as well as tether-wood and the sycamore. From what I know of the artisan's techniques, the ivory is used in delicate steamer parts without which the damnable things would blow up before going ten feet. The sycamore and tether-wood are used in constructing siege engines, and the granite is turned into pellets for the steamers' slingshots.”, General Tyrpledge answered, with a hint of a smile and his eyes darting back forth between Gomer-mont, the Procrastinator Militant, and La Vasse, to whom he added as an afterthought:

“Is the uwe to your liking? I can always call up the cook to present himself and receive proper chastisement if he has failed you. He was specifically instructed on the required quality of the uwe and your precise likings. It would be an affront to the Council if he could not serve properly.”

“There will be no need, General. Please, call me La Vasse. We

rarely meet on official business as it is with you spending most of the time on exercises away from Pyr, and me always busy at the Ministry and the Disciplinaryum. I believe that in such an important time, we should dispense with tiring mannerisms of protocol and etiquette, and get on with the business in hand, to better serve Law and the glory of the Pantheon, of course.”, the Arch-minister’s tone polite, level, straightforward, as if the General was his peer, which was strictly speaking, false.

Tyrpledge was visibly but also pleasantly surprised, his look widened and his face brightened up a tone. Gomermt seemed to fidget uncomfortably at his stool, unable to arrange his body in a manner both sufficient and comely of a Procrastinator Militant.

La Vasse and Tyrpledge largely ignored Gomermt’s discomfort and Tyrpledge replied in kind to the Arch-minister:

“I am more than grateful for that dispensation then, La Vasse. It does help a great deal when going to war when you don’t have to devote precious time on finding the right chair, serving the proper tea and using the protocol-bound appellations of rank and office.”, the General said while easing up on his chair, his body assuming a relaxed position.

“Oh, make no mistake Tyrpledge, my rank, office, and related trappings of my status as Arch-minister still hold and I expect you to diligently administer the proper respect. At least in public, when we are not planning together, exchanging information and agreeing to our next best course of action. Be reminded of course, that the Castigator is always briefed on our meetings and though we have been given executive control of the Holy Campaign, whatever course of action we decide on, has to be ratified by His Piousness. In grave matters of battle that is, since currently I have been empowered with freedom to act as the Castigator’s proxy in these preliminary stages of the preparation.”

La Vasse’s voice assumed a harsher tone, the weight in his voice and words punctuating his heightened status of authority. His strict but fair tone was indicative of his intentions: He would be reasonably cooperative and would dispense of the pleasantries and honors where applicable, but that would not bring Tyrpledge up to the same level as him, the proxy of the Castigator.

He also seemed to limit this dispensation to Tyrpledge alone, since Gomermt apart from being a relatively useless dolt, the most com-



mon type of Procrastinator, his office also was not immediately pertinent to the Campaign, since he and his men would remain in the cities and towns, ever watchful of signs of insurrection and heresy when the Castigator and much of the governing mechanism would be in the Widelands.

Tyrpledge was simply a soldier, a sword to be wielded like a tool, bending to the master's will. He had never had any misconceptions of his status, and the Arch-minister's words carried no different message: he would still be following orders diligently and respectfully, he just didn't have to stand at attention the whole time.

Once La Vasse's words settled in, Tyrpledge said in a simple, straightforward manner and a genuine voice of calm acceptance:

"I understand perfectly, Arch-minister."

Gomermont was standing up, having given up on the stool, and he was languidly peering over the milling mass of soldiers, artisans and laborers outside at the huge staging fields, sipping on a freshly poured cup of uwe. He asked no one in particular, in a rather rude manner without turning to face either one of the men he was supposed to be working closely with:

"These are the Army's infamous steamers then? They do seem clumsy and unwieldy. They lack that polish I thought the Army insists on fervently. And how do you fit the horses inside that? How do they breathe, is it through those pipes? I'm quite curious."

General Tyrpledge rolled his eyes in an almost shocking expression of unadulterated disesteem towards Gomermont. The Arch-minister was smiling, sipping almost indifferently at his uwe when the General sighed and replied in as much seriousness as he could muster:

"The are called steamers, because they use steam, which is very hot water. They do not use horses. They are not polished because if they were, they would give away their position hours away before reaching their intended targets. The pipes are part of the system of steam-works."

Gomermont was adamant as he was ignorant:

"Ah, I see. Still, clumsy pieces of machine. I'll never understand why you insist on using them."

"I can accept that in good grace, Procrastinator Militant.", said Tyrpledge and left the dead-end exchange of words at that. Tyrpledge re-

sumed his thoughts even as Gomer mont took in more of the vast work, construction, and camp area. At length, the General asked the Arch-minister:

“La Vasse, I need to know. You are closer to the Castigator, his proxy, probably the only reliable person I can talk with meaningfully. The Widelands are wild lands, there are no people living there. Sane people, at least. No cities, or towns, or anything to capture, and maintain. With no population to enlighten, no forces arrayed against us, what objectives should I designate? What provisions will I require? What manner of equipment, what disposition of forces? How will our forces move? What, exactly, will we be attacking, Arch-minister?”

Tyrpledge’s tone showed some anxiety, some words bursting forth rapidly behind others. He was not scared, La Vasse could see that. He simply needed a target to focus on.

“I am much at a loss as you are, General. I have had little foreword of the Castigator’s decision, and though privy to most of his thoughts and discussions, I have to say that the Patriarch is better informed than I am. All I can tell you is that you should commit the totality of our armies, for a reconnaissance in force.”

Tyrpledge frowned in disbelief before asking to make sure, surprise more than evident:

“The totality of our forces? In two weeks?”

“I have not been known to impart His Piousness’s words imperfectly. The sum of the armies, Tyrpledge, in two weeks.”

“But.. There is no precedent of such a mobilization.. The artisans and laborers at my disposal cannot cope with such a workload even if I drive them to death thrice over! It is not a matter of ability, it is simply a ..”

The general’s protests were politely interrupted by the Arch-minister waving a dismissive hand and saying as he reached for another cup of uwe:

“The Army has been granted special dispensation to use any and all capable men and resources that can be found across the land, for the period of time up to and including the Holy Campaign, with the blessings of the Ministry and the cooperation of the Procrastinators.”

Tyrpledge was stunned in silence and was instantly awed at the power put forth by the Castigator, effectively forcing everyone to serve

as labor and offer his belongings for the express purposes of this Last Holy Campaign. Truly momentous times they were living in, he thought. And then started mentally calculating the manpower he would need to use to have everything ready in time, when the Arch-minister commented on his tea:

“Fine uwe, Tyrpledge. You have a fine cook. If the rest of the army proves as capable and willing, the Pantheon will smile upon us.”

To which the Procrastinator Militant added morosely:

“I prefer keplis to uwe, really. It upsets my stomach.”

## The longest errand



HE previous night's walk had exhausted him. He had laid down to sleep right after dawn, his feet sore, his legs leaden with the weight of all the distance traveled so far. It was indeed a long ride from the northern lands, from Nicodemea south through the great farmlands of Rubnis. Then crossing the river Shielwa, and onto the western rough country of Ilonas, the shepherd country, more animal, hill and rock than man.

This was where the marble road leading into the Widelands begun. This was where his quest had taken him so far. For weeks he had been on the road, suffering fools too gladly sometimes, subjecting his body into such a trial of strength of will and body as traveling on foot for almost what seemed to be half around the world. Indeed a feat in itself, it was simply the means to far greater a prize, the complete knowledge of which still eluded him, despite all the years of studies and inquiries, both his and his master's.

The marble road started off as a narrow, thin road, small edges of pure white marble-like material delineating its boundaries. It was not really made from marble, for if it was it would have been demolished and chipped away bit by bit long ago. But it seems to defy any tool and machination of man, neither pickax nor chisel capable of even slightly damaging the road.

A sleek, shiny white-gray road, cold to the touch but fine and delicate, like glass-work. But unbreakable, unyielding, unscathed by time, man, or nature. A foreign body so exquisitely crafted that it is indeed unique, and no artisans at any time, and no empire that ever rose and fell ever managed to construct such a piece of perfection, truly as some poet once said "for the Gods to walk upon the lands".

It was, and had always been, part of the lands, but alien to them as well. The people had always known of the marble road, just as they knew of the trees, the mountains and the rivers, the forests and the glens, the fields and the wheat, the goat and the cow, the suns and the moon. But these things were of nature, and the marble road clearly was not, for nature abhors uniqueness. Animals come in pairs, rivers abound, so do trees. But there is only one marble road. A perfect thing;

a left over from the time Gods walked among us. Or even so, before us.

What reason was there behind it? Why does it lead into the Widelands? What is it made of? And who made it? With what tools, what materials did they use? They, because this must surely be the work of thousands. No single man could ever accomplish such a work in his lifetime. Perhaps, most rightly so, it is the work of the Gods. And to try and unravel their reasoning and purpose can only lead to madness, heresy, or both.

Molo decided to leave such thoughts aside, thoughts which beget questions that begged for answers he could not find. At least not before he ventured into the Widelands proper, until he found what Umberth described as the Necropolis, where inestimable knowledge was waiting to be uncovered to the world. Knowledge of a time unknown, perhaps before man ever walked the lands. The Time of the Gods.

It was already a fascinating sensation, walking upon the very same road that even the Gods might have walked upon once. What other man, apart from him and Umberth had dared walk the marble road unto its terribly unknown end? What other man, who lived long enough to tell the tale? What other man, who was not hunted down as a heretic, a blasphemer? What other man who didn't have a tragic, miserable end?

He grinned wickedly at these thoughts, for they were immediately followed by his aspirations: He wouldn't perish neither in the Widelands, nor at the hands of a fanatical mob, or the ever watchful Procrastinators. He would not succumb to any torture the Ministers might want to put him through for when all his trials and tribulation had come to pass this, he would not be simply a man anymore. He would not be hunted down, or exiled, or even held at bay, as a feared and terrible man.

No, when all the power and majesty and magnificence of the Gods was unveiled and made manifest through him, he would be transformed into a being of awe and power that the lands had not witnessed since the beginning of time. He would become a living deity, an avatar of the Gods, and he would be loved, and cherished, and worshiped as a God among men should.

He knew the truth of it, he could feel it in his heart and bones, see it in his twisting dreams. Dreams of cleansing light and fire, himself a

creature of wrath and glory, terrible power at his hands and unimaginable purpose in his mind. The purpose of the Gods. Indeed it was their divine plan. Conceived and hatched untold eons ago, and he was their chosen instrument. He would not fail them. For the lust of that power burned deep withing, deeper than the need for breath itself.

But he had indeed to find the Necropolis first, and that task seemed ever so slightly more difficult with each passing day. Last night he had found the marble road, and eagerly walked under the stars for a long stretch of time, without pause. He had seen the trees give way to bush, the grass wither, the sounds of animals grow weaker, fainter, fewer. He knew he was entering the Widelands, the signs visible around him. It had been the same with Umberth, as he had recorded.

When he laid down to sleep near the marble road, under a skinny old withered bark of a tree, a cluster of rocks sheltering him from the winds, he put his cloak under his head as a pillow, and drew his blanket high enough to cover his face from the rising suns, and slept lightly, with a smile on his face, as if he was merely a content child.

When he woke up in the afternoon, the suns still high, he was more than surprised to see that the road was not there. In fact, the road was nowhere in sight, as if he had dreamt of how he got where he was, or as if it was all in his mind which was starting to fade away into chaos, and madness.

Molo was sure he had been traveling in the correct direction. More than sure, he felt certain it was the right direction from the beginning. He had studied the maps his master had crafted painstakingly, with reverent attention to detail many times over, and he was certain he had correctly identified some, if not all of the landmarks mentioned in Umberth's tale.

So he was sure that when he stepped on the glistening white road, hard and unyielding, though soft to the touch, almost like metal but more like porcelain or clay, he was indeed walking on the marble road. And that when he got off the marble road in search of a place to sleep awhile and rest before following it once more, it would still be there, an undisturbed reality, a known quantity, a fact. By the Gods, it was a *road*! Not a river to overflow, or dry up, or change its course! And even rivers have been known to take their time in such happenstance! How can something like the marble road disappear in a matter of hours?

Perhaps he was indeed losing his mind. Perhaps Umberth was a crazed old fool, and his esquire doubly so. And it had all been a fantasy to stir the minds most weak, those who were most prone to fall for grand visions, tales of mystery and untold secrets. And he had followed that fantasy in vain, like a fool the sort of which he despised and felt little less than pity for. He was a fool, half-mad and soon quite lost, left to fend for his life in this hostile land, with nothing of worth or substance to live off it. Such an unfitting end to a journey that should have changed the world.

Black despair seemed to take over him, his head swimming in a sea of moroseness, thoughts of ruin and death his mind's sole occupation. He was tense with bad temper. His fists were clenched, banging against a rock once every so often, as if it alone was to blame for his meandering path up to this foolishness. His despair turned into rage, overwrought since he was with anger at his failure. He retraced his thoughts and conversed silently with himself.

Would he accept an ignominious defeat at the hands of fate? Would he blindly give in to the temptation of despair? Throw away the years of studies and preparation? His long walk, his peregrination to the Land of the God unfinished, nothing but an exercise in futility? And to what purpose would he devote himself now? What other singular task can match his ambition, his dreams beyond the realm of mortal men?

And what if he was indeed a madman? What of it? Madmen answer to no one, only to the Gods. And so would he answer. The Land of the Gods beckoned. They tested his mettle. Only the one who is mad enough to challenge such authority can truly knock on the Holy Gates. He was all alone out here, in the Widelands. The marble road disappearing, was just the start. The beginning of the play the Gods seemed to love so much.

He would play. He would play in anything they chose to throw at him. He would find the Necropolis, at any cost. This, was merely an inconvenience, one of many he should still encounter. For once he set out, he knew he would be attempting a feat that almost no one had succeeded at before. And even if he did, as Umberth might have had, nothing was certain of the power therein, and how it would finally become his own.

He would have to see for his own, marble road or not. He got

up decisively, and walked back to where he remembered the road lay exactly. He was standing either right on a spot where there was a road to be seen last night, or only a few feet away, he was certain. The grass had a wholesome quality, as if it had always covered the same ground as it did now, as if there never was a marble road here, not ever.

Then it was an illusion. A mirage. The only logical explanation he could arrive to with what little he knew of the marble road, and ignoring the possibility of him being mentally unstable, which was not helpful if at all true, this was the only reasonable explanation. The marble road was a lie, and by some sort of means unknown to man certainly, it was there to be seen, only to lure those that were mentally unprepared and easily misled and fooled deeper into the Widelands. A fly trap of sorts, he gathered. Well, that would be of little significance now that he had uncovered that the marble road was in fact not there at all.

His thought took him to a passage from Umberth's tale, which made more sense now that he had seen this happen with his very own eyes. The passage read:

"Only a few nights after we had gone definitely in Widelands country, we lost track of the road. Deciding to camp quite a distance away from the road, towards what had seemed to be a natural spring in a rock formation, we had lost sight of the marble road. We were doubly misled, since the spring had dried and was no more. The maps had failed us early on. Terlet went mad and master Umberth ordered me to put him out of his misery. Nubir and Vamden probably got lost trying to find the road, or simply decided to vanish before we went deeper into the Widelands. In any case, we never saw or heard of them again."

Molo had thought that they had indeed lost their bearings in the difficult to navigate terrain of the Widelands. That was why he didn't stray out of sight of the road. But it seemed that had little effect. The road had vanished seemingly of its own volition, or by forces and plans he could not understand and certainly not control. At least for now.

He decided to continue on the same direction he had taken as before, when the road was still visible. The exact location of the Necropolis was a mystery, but he had arrived at the conclusion that it lay far enough deep into the Widelands, into the Dunes of the Widelands, the desert proper.



So he would grind along purposefully with the same eastward direction, deeper and deeper into the Widelands. He would try and record the distances traveled, counting his steps, in order to both focus his mind, as well as keep an account of how far deep each day of travel takes him. There will be time to recollect, muse, and decide on every next step when he stops to rest and take sustenance and water, two things that will indeed be scarce.

He still had a ready supply of honey-laden bars of nuts and sesame, a confection highly energetic, most appropriate for traveling long distances and generally when consuming one's energy. His water sack was still full from yesterday, but he should definitely try and keep its usage at a minimum.

The more the Widelands turned into a desert, the more imperative it came for him to conserve his water. That is why he had chosen to travel at night, both to use its cover if anyone had been following him, and certainly because it was cooler at night, the walk not as demanding in both food or water.

But he still should be able to find some water until he went deep in the Dunes. There, he doubted any water could be found at all for days on end. And that was where he would either perish or triumph. Deep in the desert dunes of the Widelands, searching for the Necropolis.

As was his preferred way, what he thought was the most sensible one, he waited for dusk to come and the suns to come down the sky, before he would start walking again. He picked up his knapsack with what little more he carried within, picked up his walking stick and started off once more, feeling he had one small battle today, renewed vigor and determination coursing through him. He needed no road to find his path, he would instead tread on relentlessly, and his path and journey would be sung in the eons to come.

He kept a count of his steps in his head, and focused his eyes on a specific star to follow, trying not to lose track of either his footsteps or his direction. And as he trod on, the star firmly fixed in his gaze, he thought he saw a great silver-white line appear in front of him, like someone had let open open a small slit of glittering light amidst the rocky desert night. He blinked, thinking he had not rested long enough, that the whole incident with the road was taxing his mind.

And then he had this rush of exhilaration and hope, and started

running towards the thin sliver of white in the dark. He ran as if his life depended on it, forgetting everything about counting steps or going in a straight line. He just ran ahead towards the straight white line that seemed to fill the horizon and was coming ever so closer to him.

And when the line had grown past a line into something recognizable indeed familiar, his aching feet and burning lungs meant nothing at all, for he was once again stepping on the marble road. He threw his head back and let his body drop on the road, laughing like a child who had found a toy he had thought lost.

# **Part II**

## **Per Ardua**

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# Wishes of the Unholy

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“A soldier is offered two ways to serve the Gods, the Council, and the people. That is, he can either be dead or alive, but he will still serve. A soldier might choose either, but one of the two has proved extremely popular, and for good reason. As a soldier myself, with as much experience as any can hope to amass over the years, I can only share with you a rough guideline on how to live long enough to write your own manual: Avoid the meaningless battles, especially politics.”

-General Ret. Normo Mimmot, *Didagmata*

## Circumstance and happenstance



He hasn't spoken a word, your Reverence. He could be a mute for all we know.", the man with the bloodied iron scraper said to the Inquisitor. Bits of raw flesh were still hanging off the tool of torture, the man shackled to the wall limp, probably passed out.

The Patriarch stood still, his attention drawn to a few pieces of

clothing and some belongings, sitting on a shabby old table, jutting splinters and worn-away cuts all over its rough surface. He picked at some of the clothing with the edge of his patriarchal Rod, the sigils and High Helican scripts etched on its golden knob top barely visible in the dim torchlight of the torture chamber.

He sniffed the air around the ragged, bloodied clothing, and a grimace of distaste and scorn appeared on his otherwise solid, expressionless face. Some would say he sometimes looked as if he was wearing a mask, rather than a real, human face. And then there were tales of him sitting idly in the dark without ever sleeping, or that he never called for food or drink. Fewer still feared he might not be a man. It was indeed wondrous what the human mind could attribute to persons of unimaginable power. It made the Patriarch laugh sometimes.

None were brave or stupid enough though to point out such troubled thoughts in the presence of his Holiness. Others, were too eager to circulate such rumors as well as the names of those who commented on such impertinent views of the Holy Avatar the Patriarch.

All these kinds of curious, imaginative and disrespectful people who could not impose self-discipline and mind their own business ended up in deep rivers, forever reaching for breath, or in shallow graves, their bones exposed for wild dogs to chew on. Some simply vanished, neither body nor bone left behind, not even as a gruesome reminder.

The Patriarch smiled at the thought of people being capable of voicing such audacity and felt almost impressed. Naturally, such phenomena had subsided considerably after it became a well-known fact that people with much to talk about can be heard the most, and when people talk, the Patriarch listens. Still, from time to time people tend to forget what has passed, but they are on occasion grimly reminded not to speak of the Holy Avatar in anything less than reverent hymns to his Holiness, divine origin and purpose.

The Chief Inquisitor stood still a few steps next to the Patriarch, his head bowed, his gaze averted from the Holy Avatar's face, a sign of reverent servitude and deference. Which was in fact, nothing less than adhering to protocol. Before speaking, the Inquisitor cleared his throat and licked his lips momentarily, his forehead glistening slightly with perspiration. He stood in a bowed position, his hands knitted together,

hidden inside the sleeves of his surplice:

“Your Holiness.”

The Patriarch was still examining the small pile of clothes and the contents of a leather pouch and a small sack that were found on this man. He seemed detached from his surroundings, seemingly deeply engrossed in a detailed cataloging of what the prisoner was carrying on his person, as if searching for something his servants and people might have missed, something important that he had to make sure of himself.

There followed a brief period of silence, with only the sputtering flames of the torches and the hollow sound of drops of water on damp stones accentuating it, a faint echo filling the otherwise almost empty chamber.

At length, the Patriarch spoke, addressing the Inquisitor without turning his head or gaze, his examination of the prisoner’s belongings uninterrupted and now seemingly even more thorough:

“Hmm? Speak your mind Inquisitor.”, his voice commanding, but calm, almost unassuming.

The Inquisitor then bowed deeper, stiffness in his voice, the words coming out of him with difficulty, almost pain:

“The prisoner, your Holiness.. He has not given up any information yet, sir. The procrastinators found him where you indicated he would be, but there was no sign of his accomplices, your Reverence. His name is Philo Dutur. These are his belongings you are examining, sir.”

The Patriarch cast a gaze of subdued anger at the Inquisitor, his otherwise serene face causing a disturbing, fearful sensation. The effect was rather unsettling, and the Inquisitor bowed deeper still as a physical reaction to the Patriarch’s menacing look. It was evident he felt real fear overtaking him.

The Patriarch took notice and felt pleased. Fear was most useful. He paused his examination of the items on the table, and turned to face the Inquisitor, offering him his complete focus and attention:

“You should be careful not to recite the obvious, Chief Inquisitor. One might mistake you for a blabbering fool of little use beyond shoveling dung in the heat-pipes. Or even for committing blasphemy, taking me for a fool. That would be most unpleasant. I would have to choose a new Chief Inquisitor and the technicalities of such an affair,

though I sometimes find pleasant, tend to bore me. Not to mention there are ongoing issues and little precious time, so please, Chief Inquisitor, spare me and tell me something useful.”

The Patriarch seemed calm and restrained, but his last phrase was uttered with such venom and malice, that his melodic voice suddenly took on a sickeningly sweet quality, as if his last few words were dripping with thick, clotted blood.

The Chief Inquisitor, who had witnessed and performed countless acts of relentless, inhuman torture, was apparently terrified at the prospect of the incurring the Patriarch’s wrath, and physically recoiled, taking a step back, before kneeling to the wet, hard stone floor and begging in all fours:

“I beg your forgiveness, most revered and wise of All, the Holy Avatar of the Gods. I had nothing more to offer you your Holiness. I spoke out of nervousness and felt ashamed for my failure. I have faith you know it in your heart to be true. Shall I ever once again even imply blasphemy or sin, strike me down with all your might, but not because of a slip of the tongue, Luminous One.”

The Patriarch could see the man was visibly trembling. Another weak minded fool. He would have to dispense of him sooner rather than later, but not immediately. Other matters would have to take precedence. These traitors, more aptly sinners, pronouncing themselves rebels. The Kinsfolk. Delusional fanatics, sprouts of a seed long thought extinct. The dire remnants of a long lost cause.

He should have personally eradicated the lot of them, a long time before they developed the propensity to spread their mewling half-truths, insidious propaganda and riotous myths to the weak-minded and always eager to be deceived masses.

He had knowledge of even certain noble Houses to be either sympathetic or actively participating. Remis would have to be made acquiescent in this matter and forcefully removed if needed.

He thought that he should have known better, he should have seen it would come to this before long. But there were niceties to be observed, rules to be followed before they were bent and finally broken.

His hands were finally, figuratively speaking of course, loose. He would break down their spine, their will, their determination. He had the means to accomplish that, and with some careful steps it would all

seem so natural, so typical of failed revolutions, blood-soaked affairs of chasing wild dreams that turn into ashes when the night is through.

His part would be small, the stage would be filled with other characters, some willing and some not very so. But he would conduct the opening and closing lines of the chorus, and they would all dance to his tune. It would be a performance truly fit for Gods, if only for a limited audience. Nevertheless, he felt he would genuinely enjoy crushing these fools utterly, they would offer a fitting diversion indeed.

He had been absorbed in these thoughts for a rather discomforting period of time, the Inquisitor hanging by his ever word, or their absence. None dared break the forced, uneasy silence or his concentration. The prisoner stirred, awaking from a merciful sleep.

His moans drew the flogger's attention, who immediately reached for a barbed whip from a motley of tools and instruments, some specific in their use, and others much more common items put to such a use with surprising ingenuity.

As he drew far back to have more room to lash out to the chained man, a shout from across the chamber halted him, whip almost in mid-air:

"Stay your hand!", the Patriarch's voice deafeningly booming, matching and perhaps surpassing the authority he was imparted with, however impossible that would be. The torture chamber reverberated with his voice for mere moments, the flames of the torches quivering in response, as if the air had been momentarily sucked out of the room.

The flogger set down his instrument of torture, bowed reverently but as fast as it would seem prudent, and then stepped back from the chained form of Philo, standing still, his gaze nowhere near the direction of the Patriarch.

The Inquisitor managed a slightly expectant look towards the Patriarch, awaiting for the a casual flick of the Rod that would sentence him to excruciating torture at the hands of the Patriarch himself, far more delicate and much more painful agonizing unseen methods of torment at his disposal.

No such move was made. The Patriarch instead motioned with his left hand, the unadorned one, the Mourning hand, for the Inquisitor to rise, before adding:

"You are a pathetic fool, Inquisitor. Stop groveling. I never suffer



fools gladly, but by necessity I shall. Serve your purpose and you might be able to redeem yourself and avoid my personal chamber of torture. You might even be able to save your insignificant little life you seem to value so much. I might feel less inclined to throw you to the boars, if you actually provide me with names.”

The Inquisitor, a middle aged man, lean, with an austere face, would normally look menacing and unyielding to a common townsfolk, with his robes and sigil of office and rank, someone important and powerful, someone to be feared and respected.

He now seemed instead, a hollow, reduced man: his surplice spoiled and muddled, his face contorted with imagined agony in the hands of the Patriarch, and his feet barely able to support his weight, slight tremors coursing through his body. He simply managed to croak:

“As is your bidding, your Holiness. But we need more time with the prisoner. He has proved, quite resilient.”

The Patriarch was studying the prisoner intently with a frowned face, as if trying to uncover everything he needed to know merely by watching hard enough. His right hand, the one adorned with Holy Diadems, was scratching his chin in a rather detached, insouciant way, starkly in contrast with his earlier searing demeanor. He addressed the Inquisitor without turning around or even slightly moving his head, his voice carrying hints of aggravation:

“What you need, Inquisitor, are lessons in silence. You would have killed him without getting a word out of him. I will break him myself. Your crude methods can only serve as instruments of death, no more. Leave the chamber now, both of you.”

The Patriarch’s voice carried a finality that could not be challenged. The flogger did not even bother picking up his tools, bowing once more hastily but affording proper reverence and then quickly heading towards the badly lit staircase that led to the upper levels of the tunnels.

The Inquisitor had no intention of uttering a single sentence that could very well be his last, and with series of deep bows and small steps, made his way to the staircase as well, being very cautious not to turn his back to the Patriarch at any one point. The minute he reached the base of the stairs and as he was ready to turn and hurriedly run them up, the Patriarch raised his left hand and with gaze still locked on Philo, asked the Inquisitor:

“The men you sent after the sinners, deep into the tunnels, did you take care of them as instructed?” his tone sharp like clear ice.

The Inquisitor stood at the base of the stairs, one foot already on their steps, then bowing low he replied in a somewhat controlled voice, rather than his earlier mewling tone:

“They were blinded with hot iron, their tongues were cut out, their arms were chopped off and their teeth smashed to the last. As per your instructions, your Holiness.”

“I see. There are tasks even you can accomplish then. Let it be known that these men were chastised for they witnessed one of the Holy Grounds with their unclean eyes, touching its walls with their bare filthy hands, soiling Holy Ground with their impure voices. Parade them through the City. Let the people see what happens to sinners and blasphemers.”

The Inquisitor answered meekly after a small pause:

“Thy will be done, your Holiness”.

“Of course it will be done. And no interruptions Inquisitor, not even for the Castigator himself. If he threatens you with death, remember that I will be less merciful.”

The Patriarch’s last words struck true with the Inquisitor who managed to simply nod and rushed up the stairs as if swaths of fire were behind him. A dull metal thud echoed, the large door to this chamber closing right behind the Inquisitor, who walked closer to Philo, still alive and awake, unable to look at him face to face. A grin that threatened to tear the Patriarch’s face apart suddenly appeared on his face, his teeth revealed to be an immaculate pearly white.

“Alone, at last. Philo, was it then?”

His next steps took him closer to Philo, the Patriarch’s boots barely making an audible impression on the stone floor. He noticed the pool of clotted blood lying under Philo, his back a horrible mess of deep gouges and bloody wounds.

Rivulets of blood stained his whole body, from his shoulders down to his legs. His feet were bare and bruised livid, the skin so deeply stained crimson that it was almost impossible to know whether there was any of it left. Philo’s thickset body had lost its healthy color, and seemed only a little less than feeble.

Philo did not answer verbally, neither did he nod. He simply spat

vehemently, a thick mix of blood and saliva landing on the pool of his own blood, the little splash audible enough to register as an action defiance, or even possibly indifference.

“These amateurs who worked on you, were thorough, I’ll give them that. But amateurs still. Bleeding a man to death can only achieve in killing someone. Not in confessing his sins. Will you do that, Philo? Will you confess?”

The Patriarch had leaned closer to Philo, he was standing on his right side, looking at him with bright enthusiasm, expectancy loitering timidly in his voice. The Patriarch wished dearly for an easy answer, a “yes” that would make things smooth and civil. A recognition of being outplayed, an acceptance of defeat, the knowledge of pointlessness proven in Philo’s resignation from the fight before it could even really begin. Such a joy, the feeling of superiority.

But the Patriarch also knew Philo would not choose the easy way out. He was too proud, too ignorant and too stupid to do so, to spare himself further unreached before heights of pain, unbearable humiliation, and in the end, total destruction of his mind, body, and soul.

He must have thought himself already a martyr for his cause, a proud shining beacon against the darkness. Someone for the others to follow as an example, an stoic fighter, a proud man that could not be brought low.

How embarrassingly naive. He would leave his tongue and throat intact for as long as possible. Their own screams always became insufferable. He would drive him mad, when he was through with him. A mad, witless fool. Not a martyr, but a wretched sack of flesh. Nothing. He would obliterate him utterly in the most literal sense. Philo Dutur would be in all manners erased, as he had never even existed or indeed been born.

Ah, the small mercies, the little joys of his life and work. That was what kept him interested, what made him tick. In the end, it would all have been worth it, just for these bright moments of uninhibited truth and feeling.

When the cries blanketed all the senses, thoughts and feelings. When the reality of pain promoted a higher sense of self, when the men and women that received his attention were indeed enlightened, their forms pure and bright right before they ended, like the last light

of dying suns.

It was, the Patriarch thought, an art form. He wished he could make Philo understand before he began, but that would be an effort in futility. Words would not affect him, his ears and mind were closed shut to him, that much was certain. It was of little consequence, because soon he would be so much more receptive, like a child only now beginning to learn, he would learn so much about him in so little time.

The Patriarch was filled with a fleeting sensation of jealousy, he thought to himself how blessed indeed these people were, to be stripped down to their essential self, see for just once clearly what everything meant, the truth of life bared naked before their crying souls.

He almost wished he could experience that first hand, but he had the knowledge ingrained. The pain and sensation were not worth as much as the revelation did. He felt almost violated, robbed of his right to discover, experience, learn anew.

It was as if he was a mere tool, that should never amount to much. A useful but otherwise uninteresting tool. These people here, these were considered so much more intriguing, entertaining, mysteries worth uncovering.

An inner rage that had been left neglected for too long, flared up again. He could use that rage, he would make Philo really believe. Not just acquiesce, or give up his friends, his family or all that he loved and held dear. He would make him a true believer, a man happy to die in servitude at long last. The Patriarch told him, with a laugh and a grin:

“I’ll make you believe, Philo. I’ll save your soul. You’ll see. Faith, Philo. Faith can work miracles.”

Philo concentrated his few remnants of strength and smirked derisively before adding in a low but steady, unwavering voice:

“I spit on your faith. I will die a free man. You can cage me no more.”

And to accentuate his point, Philo did spit once more, reddish saliva coming out of his mouth, the broken teeth and wounds in his mouth still bleeding.

The Patriarch replied in a candid way, as if exchanging opinions with a peer:

“Oh you misunderstand, dear Philo. I was talking about faith in oneself. And I do have faith in myself, Philo. Here, I’ll show you.”

And with that, the Patriarch reached for Philo's chains, a mere touch of his unlocking the first one, Philo's body swaying immediately to his other chained side. It was all very sudden, and Philo barely had time to put his feet down to be able to stand instead of slumping on the stone floor.

When the Patriarch unchained his remaining hand, Philo tried to act as fast as possible. His right, drooping side was nearer the Patriarch, so he mustered all the strength that he could and focused it on his elbow, suddenly jutting it towards the Patriarch's groin.

As he did that, he was already clenching his left fist, trying to gather some momentum by twisting his torso and perhaps landing a good punch on the Patriarch. This was probably his last and only opportunity, so he thought he'd make it count and go for the kill as well, his thought focusing on the motley arsenal of torturing tools available.

His elbow did not connect with the Patriarch. Instead he felt a rush of air, as if a void was suddenly created were the Patriarch was standing. As his torso swooped around in its instinctive movement, his feet swiveled to accommodate the sudden move, and his left fist came rushing down only to meet thin air. His body was awkwardly positioned now, and precariously balanced, like the mock statue of a victor or an athlete, about to fall off his feet.

The Patriarch was not where he should have been, and was instead at Philo's left side now, like he had instantly sidestepped him with inhuman speed, reflexes and foresight. As Philo turned his bruised head around, one eye completely hidden behind swollen tissue, the other one almost damaged and bled beyond recognition, but still seemingly functional, he managed to ask the Patriarch, evidently surprised and dumbstruck:

"No one can move that quick."

The Patriarch let out an almost hysterical laughter, his shoulders bobbing freely up and down, and then added, still snickering intermittently:

"And yet, I did! A wonder made manifest! Praise the Gods!"

And yet another smirk before he laid out his right hand, his adorned hand, the Hand of Tribulation, and grasped Philo from his forehead.

Philo went limp almost instantly, his big bulk sagging down onto the floor, legs sprawled awkwardly, arms simply resting against his

body, barely touching the bloodied floor.

His face, or what was still left of it, tried to take on an expression of pain, flinch and contort. Instead, it slackened, his mouth opened up to reveal broken death, open sores and wounds. He started mewling incoherently, blood and saliva dribbling down his chin, incomprehensible words sputtered in blood.

The Patriarch smiled, his face lit up and seemed pleased that his work was beginning to take form now. He asked Philo in a sweet, inviting voice:

“Who else was with you in those caves Philo? Was it someone I know? Who were your friend, Philo?”

Philo seemed to twist his body a little, as if trying to escape an invisible grasp, and his head shook with involuntary tremors. The Patriarch tightened his hold, and his voice became a venomous hiss:

“Who was it? I’ll pry it anyway from your dying mind you wretch, so tell me of your own volition! Unburden your soul! Who was it?”

Philo let out a deep moan, and his eyes tried to let tears flow, but it was nearly impossible. His eyes were almost swollen shut, tears welling up constantly, making his vision, if he had any left, a complete blur. His moaning became deeper, his body shaken by involuntary spasms.

The Patriarch screamed in hellish fury, the air around them crackling audibly, small arcs of blue lightning flickering between the Patriarch’s ringed fingers:

“Who was it? Who entered the caves with you?”

Philo’s skull was throbbing, enormous veins jutting out ready to burst and his flesh was beginning to turn red hot. His throat managed to let out a few audible words, while his head was still being tightly head, forming an odd angle with the rest of his body, as if about to snap off its place:

“Amonas..Ptolemy..Hilderich..the curator boy..Please..End it..”

The Patriarch grinned appreciatively, and then immediately grimaced, his face expressing mild disappointment, resentment accentuating his words:

“The seed of doubt still lives then. He had been hiding well enough, it seems. And this Hilderich fellow, a Curator’s apprentice? How quaint! A schoolboy and a romantic!”

He let go of Philo, who instantly regained some sort of composure, though he was drained of his vitality to the point of death, his body barely alive, his every breath copious and painful. Breathing deeply, his voice now little more than a whisper, he said amidst weeps and moans of pain:

“End it..Kill me..You have your names now..”

To which the Patriarch replied with a brilliant smile adorning his face:

“But Philo.. I knew their names all along.. I just wanted to hear them from you.. Can you feel it? The stain of treason? It will go away before the end. Have faith, Philo. You know I do.”

The Patriarch grasped Philo’s head once more. The screams filled the chamber, echoing through the stone surface.

The guards above the torture chamber were used to the cries of the sinners. But not to whatever it was that they were hearing. They became uneasy. At length, one of them vomited.

When the other guards came to relieve them, the screams and voices could still be heard. And that went on, and on. All through the night.

When the Patriarch emerged from the door of the torture chamber, the guards posted were almost ashen in color, but still managed to stand to attention briskly enough. The Patriarch said to the first one he laid eyes on:

“You. Send for Ursempyre Remis to my personal chambers. And you, clear up what is left down there.”

Both saluted and bowed deeply before silently rushing to perform their assigned duties. The Patriarch walked down the long corridor that would bring him to the staircase leading to his chambers. He felt stiff from the effort, but satisfied.

He smiled to himself, before musing aloud:

“Oh, Philo. What a charming little soul you had.”

## By the horns of the bull



**H**ILDERICH had finally slept, his protestations about the lack of a moon and night sky silently put aside when the fatigue took over and the anxiety and nervousness subsided after their thirst had been quenched and a warm, tasty meal sat comfortably in their bellies.

He was snoring heavily now, and though it would have normally been less than a pleasant sound, under the circumstances it was mildly comforting, as it let Amonas know that not everything was amiss, that some things were still normal, albeit frustrating and hard to deal with.

Such a thing was Hilderich snore. Amonas tried to picture a future lady D'Augnacy trying to go to sleep next to the man, but failed to end his train of thought in anything other than a grin or a hearty laughter.

He nodded to himself as he thought that it was a good thing that Hilderich had slept after all that had happened to him, he definitely needed sleep more than himself. Not that he didn't wish for sleep to come, and bless him with a few precious hours of oblivion and rest.

It was a nagging feeling he knew, that rest would not come even in his sleep. Nightmares would haunt him, as long as he was away from Celia, as long as he couldn't know what would befall her should he fail to return, if he was stranded in this lush version of hell with Hilderich as his sole companion for the rest of their lives.

At least, before they turned on each other, went mad or took their own lives as their last meaningful action, sparing them a life of torture and sleepless, unending days.

Amonas was sitting cross-legged, outside the cover of the small makeshift shelter he had fashioned, where most of it was taken over by the sprawled figure of Hilderich, who seemed to be thankfully quite at ease sleeping on the ground, with nothing but his already muddied and stained cloak as a mattress.

He, on the other hand, could not let himself surrender to sleep. It was not the lack of moon, or the invariably harsh conditions of continuous light, unbearable heat and sticky moisture, that prevented him from having some kind of much needed rest.

It was as was the case most of the time, his mind that could not



be appeased, that could not be turned off as it should. The immediate necessities had taken their toll already. The search for water which he still didn't know if it was indeed drinkable, the food he hoped would not prove much of a problem now that they knew there was at least something edible to be found.

But it was not just the simple minded anxiety of surviving. It was this strange new environment, totally unlike anything he had experienced before. Certainly nothing he knew ever existed, even on the most faraway lands.

And the suns were wrong too. This might not even be their own world. The thought had unconsciously been formed before, when they first saw that clear, harsh sky. But now it took form, voice, he could here the thought ringing loudly in his head. This might be another world.

The ultimate truth revealed in form and substance all over him. And he had no one to share it but Hilderich, who might even hold it yet as suspicious, implausible at best. Another world. But no animals to speak of, no people, however queer or similar, however friendly or hostile.

He suddenly felt terribly alone, as if indeed the thought of them being the sole two individuals on this other world was weighing him down, grinding him to the ground. Just the two of them, wandering like castaways on a strange and mysterious island where no ship would ever sail to. An uncharted land, its existence always hidden away, never to be revealed, their bones bleached and turned into lime for the wild growths to set roots in.

His gaze turned to the tiny flickers of the fire, a few coals still red hot, thin lines of smoke rising from the perpetually wet wood. He focused on the fire, marveling at its simple avarice, consuming the wood steadily, unperturbed, without a care for the world at large. A force of nature. A universal truth, fire. It eats away as much as it can and then it perishes on its own accord, accepting its fate.

How he longed for such simplicity in life. Away from all this, this world, the other world he knew as home. Away from the Castigator's tyranny and its false Gods. Away from poverty and the coming war and the misery that would ensue no matter who the victor was. How much he had wanted to get away from all that, with Celia by his side.

And they could let the world burn for all he cared. Just like fire burns on wood.

He smirked despite himself, thinking he was letting himself down somehow. Perhaps he had been too morose in his thoughts, their plight so far sinking his feeling even more than he had realized. It would do him no good, that he knew. No matter whether any of these thoughts hold to the truth in the end, they would do him no real good.

He knew that thinking too much and acting too little had brought everything to this point. A rule of tyranny, based on lies and deceit. People dying everyday of famine, or rotting away in eternally dark dungeons for stealing a loaf of bread, or having children without permission.

He shook his head. Permission was needed to create life. As if any God would need to consider the utility of the inevitable, the unimpeachable, the unstoppable force of life that permeated everything, from the worms in the ground to the stars themselves.

It was indeed a sad moment when a star fell; but someone had said that another one was born at the same time. He had no way of knowing that for sure, since who could count the innumerable stars or the grains of sand in a beach? But he knew it in his heart it would be true.

Life just keeps happening. Whether anyone permits it or not, it just doesn't care and blindly goes on whatever the cost. Even in this place. There might have encountered no animals so far, but the vegetation.. Astounding, lush, green. If it wasn't so damn hot and humid he could have felt like living here for ever. Him, Celia, and their children. The many more to come after his firstborn.

Would he ever live to see all that come true?

He sighed as he mentally chastised himself for thinking in such an almost saturnine way. He stood up, deciding to clear his mind, flush it clean of any thought. Any kind of action would do his spirits good. And since he couldn't rest or sleep, a mild activity that would not drain him of much energy, would be a welcome change in pace.

He would go for a walk, in a way exploring their immediate surroundings, perhaps even scouting ahead their path to the bull-horned structure, that huge fork of a structure.

Hilderich stirred in his sleep, and mumbled something inaudible, licking his lips and smiling lightly. He must be dreaming, Amonas

thought.

The fact that Hilderich could sleep as if nothing of import had transpired over the past few days, brought a smile of hope to Amonas' lips. Perhaps not everyone looked on things so dourly, and had good reason not to. So did he, he thought to himself, bringing an image of lovely Celia to his mind.

Lovely Celia, her hair touching her slender body with grace enough to make any man weep from the joyful sight, and instantly adore her beyond reason. Her face a sweet and mellow taste, if his eyes could swallow her whole, and forever feel her smile. Celia beloved, and to the death his mate and pair. His firstborn's mother to be, his miraculous haven where every storm subsided and all the seas came to rest.

She was not far from giving birth to their child, and though they had known bloodied times of fire, steel and death were drawing close, he had at least the surety of her touch and her smile to count on and see life or death by.

Now he was denied of her touch, the smell of her breath, the feeling of her body clasped against his own, her gaze locked with his own, oceans of time passing by in mere moments. Damn them! For that hurt alone, he would make them pay. Whoever was indeed behind all the lies and curtains of deceit. Behind the Castigator. He could feel there must be something to the Gods. Every lie, he had observed, has been sown from some truth.

As he walked about the place, he noticed more and more beauty and celebrating life in this otherwise simmering cauldron of green. Small colorful flowers with overgrown petals and fat, juicy stems. Lithe trees that could be easily bent without being broken, and thick overgrown plants that dared climb the huge trees, hugging them, curled around them like charmed snakes.

It was indeed teeming with life. It remained a mystery to Amonas why they had come across no animals at all, barely enough insects to simply make their unwanted stay even more miserable. He mused for a while at the strange color of the only sun, and decided he could not come up with anything resembling an explanation other than this was another world to their own, indeed wholly alien and undecipherable, at least with the knowledge at hand.

Perhaps they could learn more of it before they returned, but that

would be more in Hilderich's domain, not his own. He was more interested in solving problems, not analyzing them thoroughly and documenting them for posterity and further study.

It would be a strange day indeed when he would be able to sit in a chair and tell his grandchildren stories of the other world. Or maybe even worlds. If there are indeed more than one, why just two?

The walk had made him thirsty, and he felt like maybe it was time for him to return, and with his mind put a little bit at ease, perhaps try for some restful sleep. Even though he was used to hardship, sleep was essential, and no one could go more than a day or so without some sleep, however little.

He had also climbed up an inviting tree, in an effort to see over the canopy if at all possible, get their bearings, so they could start off in the right direction for the nearest bull-horn. Getting the direction wrong while already being lost would be a blow to their morale, let alone a waste of precious time and meager resources.

Back in their own world, the Kinsfolk were about to strike for the first and hopefully the last time. Years of planning had led to this culminating point, and an untold number of his brethren had lost their lives in the effort of keeping it a secret alone.

He knew they were being followed, he knew they were being watched. But he also knew they were waiting for the right time to act, catch them all in one fell blow, root them out forever, crush them utterly and dispense with the notion of a rebellion for untold generations.

He would be there when the time came, that much was the least expected of him. And he'd rather die trying rather than abandon and shame his brothers in blood and soul. Or face the wrathful scorn of Celia; no, he could never suffer that.

A weak but warm smile crept on his face as he imagined such a scene, Celia all fiery wrath, her gaze searing, boring through him as if he were made of powdery snow, and he laughed despite himself, memories of her rushing through him like a stream of water on parched land.

As he approached their tiny camp he could hear Hilderich screaming his name over the top of his lungs, probably terrified at the thought that he had gone and left him there to die all alone, a final twist of

a incongruously ill fate. He answered back, his strong gruff voice undimmed by the blanket of vegetation all around them:

“Coming Hilderich! Just went for a walk!”

Without yet being able to actually see him, Amonas heard Hilderich cry out in a near falsetto:

“Damn you I thought you’d left me here to rot!”

A few more steps brought Amonas nearer to their camp where he could see Hilderich quite evidently disheveled, his hair in wild disarray from the sleep and the humid hell they had to endure, his clothing almost unrecognizable by now, a uniformly gray and brown mud covering most of it. Amonas waved a dismissing hand from afar, laughed heartily and replied playfully:

“I’d never leave you behind to rot, Hilderich. Simmer a little perhaps, but never rot!”

He good humor went largely unnoticed by Hilderich, whose spirits where in sharp contrast. He looked genuinely hurt, glum and uninspired, giving Amonas a picture of how he must’ve looked a couple of hours before. The thought sobered his mood, and thought he had better make Hilderich bounce back from what must have been a seriously rude awakening.

Hilderich was keeping silent, casting a look of rightful accusation at Amonas, who thought it a little childish and perhaps somewhat unbecoming of a man. But their situation was indeed unique and perhaps he was asking too much of the man already. He cast those blemished thoughts aside and instead spoke from the heart, seeking to calm Hilderich and soothe his fear:

“I am sorry I left you alone, but I could not sleep. I went for a walk, but I was close by. I heard you when you called, didn’t I? I could not have been very far. You were as safe as I could vouch for in such a place. So please, accept my apologies and think no more of it. It only helps to aggravate you, and lower your spirits. Here, have some of this.”

Amonas reached into his small sack and brought out a small roundish object covered in what seemed to be something like hair, thin strands of wood or brown parched grass. He used his knife to chop off a small slice from its top, then offered it to Hilderich.

Hilderich made a gesture to take the proffered little ball, which

looked to be white on the inside, but he shook his head and gave it back to Amonas, a hesitant look on his face, a quavering quality in his voice:

“You try it first.”

Amonas’ pride was stung, since Hilderich seemed to imply that he might be trying to poison him. He was about to go off on a rant unfitting his character, about how misguided and foolish a person must still be unable to trust him after what has befallen them, but wisely decided against that. After his initial surprise and shock lifted from his expression, he took the strange cross between a hairy nut and a fruit in his hands, and drank a good mouthful.

After he had quite thoroughly sloshed it around his mouth in an evident display of the juice’s potable quality, he swallowed and offered it back to Hilderich who accepted it, even though still reluctantly, sniffing the watery liquid inside the strange fruit.

“It’s sweet and refreshing. Almost better than water. Drink up, you’ll like it.”

Amonas was motioning with his head for Hilderich to drink, urging him to just have a taste, while Hilderich slowly brought the fruit to his lips, eying Amonas warily at the same time.

After a brief pause and a small period of uncertainty, Hilderich finally took a small sip, swallowed, and then surprising even himself in the process, proceeded to empty the small ball of a fruit of its watery content.

Amonas grinned in a relaxed manner, and as he laid down to the ground to enjoy at least a few minutes, he said to Hilderich after closing his eyes and covering his face with one arm, the other resting at his stomach:

“I wouldn’t kill you with fruit Hilderich. There were ample opportunities with better tools. We need to trust each other to make it back, that much I can assure you.”

“Oh I know about your assurances so far. I can see them all around us, sure as hell.”

Hilderich’s tone was rather that of a grudging complaint rather than gross accusation. He might be right, Amonas thought, but now was not the time to settle such a score. He hoped that they would make it back, become friends, and Hilderich would forgive him for the misfortunes

brought upon him. But until then, Amonas' patience would be tried and tested at almost every chance. He replied in kind, eyes still covered by his arm:

"Opportunities may arise once more, don't make me want to take advantage of them."

Hilderich opened his mouth wide in what seemed a mock expression of shock, before composing himself once more, straightening up and saying in what seemed to be his formal tone:

"I'll restrain from further commenting on the problematic issue and instead focus on more worthwhile endeavors, such as getting back."

Amonas smiled even as he said in a genuinely friendly tone:

"That's more befitting a Curator now, isn't it? Let me catch some sleep, and then we will be off to the bull-horned structure."

The thought had occurred to him, but he had not given it much thought. With the death of his master and half-way in his apprenticeship, he was now considered, officially, though without seat, a Curator, with all the rights and responsibilities his office carried. It was certainly not an apt time, but he felt somewhat proud, and suddenly all too grown up and a bit older than he thought possible. Amonas added as an afterthought:

"Don't fret over it. You can do whatever you like for a while, as long as you don't get lost. Study the trees or the insects, do something a Curator would do."

Hilderich nodded silently and appreciatively, before heading off to a nearby log of wood, half of it rotting away, creeping with maggots and worms, what he had been taught was the basis of a healthy and fertile ground.

Time passed quickly for Hilderich, who uncovered all sorts of different layers of decaying wood, noticing the wood's grain, the various kinds of insects that used it as housing, food, or what seemed to be a combination of the two, eating tunnels through it on which then they laid eggs.

It was fascinating, he thought, to witness a whole civilization of insects in its various stages and levels unfolding in front of you in a simple piece of wood, right in front of your eyes, at your very hands. How tempting it felt to push the eggs around, see how the insects would react, or douse them with water and see whether they'd drown. But he

was taught that nature knew best, and men could only learn from it, not change it. At least not for better. So he let the insects be.

When he did so and paused his study of the insect-ridden log, he noticed Amonas had quietly awoken, seemingly quite refreshed and energized. He asked him if he had slept well, to which Amonas answered after briefly thinking about it: "Good enough."

Amonas then made some broth of what he had found to be adequate substitute for uwe, and sipped appreciatively. As before, he offered some to Hilderich who again politely refused, but did not resort to his small flask of gin. He wisely assumed that they would need more of it to light up a fire, and more than just once. So he kept Amonas quiet company, until they would move on again.

Once they did, Amonas led the way once more with quite deliberation, carefully choosing his path as if he could smell their destination however afar it might be.

To Hilderich, it was unfathomable how any man could navigate practically blindly, without a map or a solid point of reference, simply by hunch and a general feeling of direction, both even more easily fooled in a chaotic mass of vegetation such as the one they were entangled in currently.

When Amonas felt Hilderich needed time to rest, he paused, and made sure Hilderich was ready to move on before they set off again. Hilderich felt quietly thankful of that small matter and made every effort to proceed in a timely manner, never dallying too long, until either they had walked for the better part of what would amount to a day in this accursed place, or until they had reached the bull-horned building.

The heat was as always unbearable and the moisture nearly debilitating, but they trudged along, hoping to strike lucky soon. If nothing else, Hilderich hoped they would soon rest for what should have been night time. Lost in thought and numbed by fatigue, Hilderich bumped unwillingly onto Amonas, who seemed to have suddenly stopped. Hilderich apologized curtly and asked:

"Pardon me for running onto you like you were made of air, but why have we stopped? Are we here yet? I can't see anything like a wall or stones or something resembling a construction. So does that mean we can rest now?"



Hilderich's voice had an unmistakably pleading quality, and though it would be indeed great if they had reached their intended destination, it would be nothing short of bliss if they would stop and sleep for now. Amonas knew what Hilderich was thinking from the look on his face and the expectancy in his voice, and replied with a question:

"Did you notice something about this place?"

Hilderich was still catching his breath when he said to Amonas in a knowing manner:

"It's too hot and too wet for comfort, what else is there to notice? That it's too green?"

"See here, I like some healthy irony from time to time but right now it's not what you should be doing. You should be feeling. What do you feel, Hilderich?"

Hilderich was about to make some comment in the same vein as the previous one, complaining about sore feet and an empty stomach, not to mention a dried out mouth.

But once he paused for little more than a moment, he felt it. A light breeze, chilly to the touch, a swift rush of air like a cloud from the heavens.

"The air is chilly. And everything is not as moist. It's like.. It's more of back home.."

Hilderich was genuinely surprised, and looked fittingly puzzled. As he tried to make sense of it, Amonas added:

"Well it's not chilly. It's not that hot, cool would be a better choice of words. And the light is less intense, it's almost like an overcast sky. Like a shadow is over us. We're in its shadow, Hilderich. The shadow of the bull-horn."

Hilderich was enjoying the cool breeze when he pleaded once more:

"Would it be then advisable to get some more sleep now?"

Amonas laughed out heartily at that display of good-humored single-mindedness, and feeling his spirits lifted, laid down and started singing a tune his grandfather used to sing when they were fishing together, down by the river.

Hilderich was complaining that his stomach felt empty, and that they had not secured a source of fresh water. He also heard some grumblings about him doing all the really necessary stuff, and that Curators

should be treated respectfully rather than being ignored profoundly. He stated that he would nevertheless procure some sort of food since he was the only reliable and responsible person in this world which might or might not be an entirely different one from the one they called home.

Amonas kept on singing heedless of Hilderich's protests, thinking he would be soundly asleep before he had time to finish the song came to a finish. As the moments went by, his voice became softer and shallower, and then he stopped altogether. Indeed, within moments he fell into a slumber, where he dreamt of Celia, and in the dream he could feel the cool breeze that was her smile.

Pretty soon, he was snoring heavily, as if he had not a worry in this or any other world.

## Meetings and Greetings



He had woken as early as every day, giving thanks to God for allowing him to live and breathe once more, and greeted the suns as they rose with a hearty smile. His hair was as always tousled, gently swayed by the light breeze coming down from the mountains and onto the plains that filled his entire view.

Once more he had used his walking stone to guide him, and before noon had passed he entered the Land of God proper. He had been warned to be wary of these lands, for not everything that roamed it was graced by God, and not all that he may encounter was sent by Him alone.

The devious others had plans of their own, and would likely oppose him when they saw fit. He should steel himself wholeheartedly if he were to carry on with his Pilgrimage, and meet his ineffable destiny.

Once he did step foot on the Widelands, it was as the elders had said it would be: A flat and uninviting country, with low grass and trees few and afar, the sounds of animals and birds lost in an emptiness that defied the senses and made one humble and awestruck.

Then the True Path appeared in its glistening beauty and perfection, as had done so many times before. He was witnessing the path to his own destiny, and soon he was walking on it, treading lightly and with reverence, whenever possible, but making haste and good speed, for what good was the path, if he dawdled on it for longer than prudence would allow?

As his peregrination took him further into the Land of God, his thoughts coalesced bit by bit into how this land was perhaps purposefully designed, meant to evoke ascetic feelings. Civilization in any form had been kept away from the Land of God, as if it had preordained that these lands would forever be a sanctum, a land devoted to praising God.

It was a land indeed forbidden to most mortal men, uninviting, almost hostile as far as he could tell until now. And the Path was there, a clear sign of God's design, a Path for true believers, a Path for those that came with holy fire burning in their heart, searching for God, a

divine purpose guiding them deeper into a land that would normally kill a man of hunger, thirst or pure exhaustion.

Distance lacked meaning in the Land of God, which almost defied logic in its flatness, its emptiness, an emptiness only the love of God and faith in him could fill. A terrible void that shrank the impure soul and made an unwilling mind recoil in awe, a land that turned the unbeliever away, a land where the mandate of God was carried ever more strongly by the formidable gusts of wind that swiped its every acre.

It was indeed magnificent to behold, the will of God made manifest all around him, a sacred place that he was not only allowed, but indeed expected to traverse to its very heart, and complete his Pilgrimage, as his God and his people demanded.

God, in his inestimable wisdom had prepared the land more than well enough for a believer, for someone who lived and died with His name upon his lips, His thought in his mind and His image in depths of his soul.

Water, he could find in the small damp spots around the Path, when night fell and a hazy carpet of fog crept across the immeasurably flat land. He would dig, with either his hands or a small flat piece of rock, and he would find a few mouthfuls of water to sustain him.

And when he felt hungry and tired, his strength about to leave him, as if God kept an ever watchful eye on him from afar, a small thin bush laden with tiny berries would appear near the road, or a small colony of ants or some other kind of insect he could eat.

He always thanked God for these small mercies that kept him fit and healthy, that kept him going without delays, other than a few brief stops and some much needed sleep. His clothing was good for the Holy Land as it was for the lands where his people dwelt. Perhaps it was not as cold during the day, but the nights became colder the farther deep he went while following the Path.

He kept the wise council of his elders, and never strayed off the road. He kept on it at all times, and when he could, when leaving it to get to a source of water or find something to eat, he would always leave his walking stone on it, with a piece of woolen string attached to it, laying it behind him as he walked.

And then when he had drank or filled his belly, he would pick up the string and walk right back to the Path and the walking stone. It was

said, that if one strayed off the Path, he might never find it again for as long as he walked the Land of God. It was blasphemy, for the Path to be revealed to you and then choose to leave it.

So he would lay behind him a piece of string, to always connect himself with the Path, even when not directly on it. And that he would do by strict necessity, and only after solemn prayer in which he would beg for forgiveness and recognize his own imperfection and crude humanity that had afflicted him with the feeling of hunger and thirst.

Thus, he hoped and prayed, God would not be offended and would find it in his heart like a loving father to allow the Path to remain, to guide his faithful servant on to his Holy destination, beyond all the hardships and dangers that might arise in his quest.

For if it was a simple, sheltered matter, it would matter not at all how the Pilgrimage was made. Anyone would walk about the Holy Lands, especially the deceitful liars and archenemies of Gods and their followers, soiling the land and air with their mere breaths and unclean feet, poisoning the very air with their hideous laughter and venomous lies.

No, it was not a simple affair walking through the Land of God. And that was why he kept praying each and ever waking moment, to thank his God for his magnanimous and benevolent nature, to thank him for allowing to draw breath, and drink water as he needed it, and feast upon the fruit and the very life of His Land, for his heart to keep beating, for his hands to touch the Holy Soil without being struck down, without being deemed unworthy.

It was almost dusk, on the third day since he had set foot on the Land of God. It was once more time for prayer. He laid down his small sack, and took off his cloak, setting it down in front of him. He then knelt on the cloak, and closed his eyes, his arms resting on his legs, the palms of his hands touching his knees. He then started bowing down low, his forehead touching the Path every time, whispered words of reverence coming out of his mouth, in the tongue of God which they no longer used, but kept handing down as holy passages, from mouth to mouth, and generation to generation.

Though he could not understand what the words were saying, he could feel their perfection rippling through the air, Holy words spoken in the Land of God, like a river mingling with the sea. A small trickle

of divinity flowing onto the essence of God made manifest, the air, earth and water resonating with godly purpose and sacrosanct silence.

Hence His words, the Holy Mantra, which should normally be shouted aloud for all of Creation to bear witness to his grandeur and wisdom. In the Holy Land, in His Land, His Domain, it would be sacrilege to utter them in anything above a whisper. For every grain of sand, and every wisp of air, every drop of water carried everything back to him, voice, thought and deed.

As he bowed in homage to the creation of God all around him, grandiose, majestic, striking chords buried deep inside his very essence and soul, he felt pride in his heritage, his people, his purpose.

He cast it swiftly aside, since pride was a double-edged blade, ready to cut into him when he would feel invincible, safe, powerful and righteous. That was not God's way; God taught humility, wisdom, faith, belief and love. Not pride, arrogance and lust.

The Holy Land was indeed a place to be wary. Even in paying homage to God, the ruinous ones could find a man's weakness and seep inside him, all the while he believed he was walking the True Path. The Path is not just this white, slick and unending road; it is a state of mind and soul.

He made the sign of God with his outstretched palms facing towards the falling suns, the rising moon a faint gossamer red shadow in the hazy distance, where only the line of the dark crimson horizon could be identified with difficulty over the misty green and yellow of the rising mist.

He stood up on his two feet and wore his cloak, picking up his sack and setting off down the road once again. As the chilly night rushed to meet him, he thought he could see a figure like a mirror of himself walking on the road towards him. He squinted his eyes as tried to make sense of what he was seeing.

It was a man, not very much unlike him, lean and not very tall. His stride seemed purposeful, and if he had taken notice of him walking on the Path, he showed no sign of alarm, surprise or fear. It was as if he would go on nevertheless, as if he was nothing but a phantom, an apparition of the Holy Lands.

But maybe this was what he was seeing. Stranger things had been heard around the life-stones during the coldest nights at his people's

gatherings. It would not be without precedent that he should meet a ghost of the Holy Lands, perhaps some other Pilgrim before him who wandered the Holy Lands and warned the Pilgrims and the faithful, guided them through danger.

Perhaps he was a messenger from God Himself, though it might be presumptuous, even blasphemous, to think that God would seek to aid him in such straightforward ways that completely and blatantly proved his Divine existence.

But he reminded himself to be wary, perhaps he was a ruinous force in disguise, an servant of those that would always be evil and would seek to corrupt men and everything good and wholesome that he tried to protect from their rotting grasp and insidious machinations.

Perhaps, he was just a man, a believer like him, brave enough to seek out God. He would soon find out whether he should strike him or greet him like a brother should. He was quite closer by now, and he thought it prudent to make some sort of sign, to announce himself properly, like a man in the Holy Land should greet a fellow man.

He stopped and stood still, and then made the sign of God, touching his bowed forehead with one straight palm, offering his other hand, showing his clear, empty palm. What the gesture meant to those familiar with it, or those of pure mind and soul, was: "I am a man blessed with God's gift, a mind of my own. I carry no weapon, I am your brother."

The man walking towards him slowed his pace, visibly trying to discern the gesture. Then he responded in kind, first with a deep bow towards the sinking suns, then with the same sign, albeit with the opposite hands, mirroring the Pilgrim's motion. A true believer then, or some instrument of God. His blessings were countless, his heart leaped with joy at such a sight. A brotherly soul, here in the Land of God.

The Pilgrim smiled widely, and picked up his pace to meet with his brother from afar. He could see the man coming towards him smile as well, his face lit up with enthusiasm and surprise.

Under the faint light of the crimson moon they met each other, faces visibly ridden with the signs of hardship only a believer would endure to prove his love of God, and stay true to his faith. Brothers joined by belief, sharing the creation of God, walking on the Path. What joyous occasion such a meeting of brotherly souls, in the Holy

Land no less!

They were standing opposite each other, and the man in front of him, the man who he had seen walking up towards him was younger, leaner, and taller than he had glimpsed at first. In the light of dusk it was easy to misjudge the shape and size of things.

The young man proffered his hand, and spoke a few words in Helican. The Pilgrim didn't speak Helican, had actually never heard it before in his lifetime. He was thinking the man talking in front of him must have uttered a greeting, or announced his name. He seemed friendly, unassuming and harmless. He might be speaking in weird tongues, but he made the sign of God. A brother under God's view is brother enough. The Pilgrim closed his eyes and nodded with acceptance, hands outstretched to his left and right.

"Thessurdijad Molo, damn glad to find you. You're one of them aren't you? You're one of Esphalon's people. The wild ones.", his voice bright with excitement and unmarred prospect.

The Pilgrim thought it proper to answer in kind, in the tongue of God, even if his brother from afar would not be able to understand. Indeed, what he said sounded as if it could have been familiar, but no sense could be made of it yet. Perhaps some common thread could be found while they conversed.

"I greet you as a brother, and you are stranger to me no more. His will be done."

The man's eyes went wide with sheer surprise and disbelief before he replied with the words coming out of his mouth faster and faster:

"You can talk then! You know High Helican? Your people learned High Helican? When? When Esphalon was there? How?"

The Pilgrim look at him puzzled. His brother was as excited for their meeting as he was, he could tell. But he was so outspoken, so emphatic and energetic. He seemed to have forgotten about paying proper respect in the Holy Land, his voice loud and his expression wild, his body almost hyperactive, tense with motion.

Still, he could not understand a single word the man said, even though he seemed to have repeated a question at least once. He might be asking where I'm coming from, or where I'm going, the Pilgrim said to himself silently, absorbed in thought. It was difficult to believe this was a messenger from God or one of his holy servants.



He seemed just a long lost brother, the language he spoke altogether different, as so were his customs pertaining to the reverence of God. He was quite different, but he hoped he was indeed a brother as he had hoped. Though he could always be a trap, a machination, an evil thing sent to thwart him and his Pilgrimage, to mock God and his divine plan.

He would not allow himself to fall for such cheap tricks, and his wary eye would be on the lookout for signs that would expose this man as a pawn of the archenemies. For now, he would treat him as a brother, and offer God his prayer, seeking forgiveness for thinking such accusing thoughts even in a time that should be joyous, for a brother, he hoped, had been found. He smiled, and motioned his hands to the sky, head slightly bowed and a thin but hearty smile on his lips, his voice clear and true:

“Let God guide us wisely. Let He be the answer to any question, our light in the dark.”

And with that, he reached for his sack, and took out a handful of berries he had only picked up this morning. It would have been his dinner, but knew he now had to offer his brother everything he had. It was God’s way, and it mattered not what he would eat, because God provides.

“You can’t understand anything I’m saying, can you?”, said the man, constantly smiling, a small bow before accepting the berries in a seemingly timid way.

The Pilgrim made the sign of God once more, and looked at the strange man he now considered a brother under God, and felt a bit saddened that his words could not be understood and his questions, he could not be able to answer.

Though he was starting to find some common sounds, he had not the wisdom of an elder, or the eloquence of their Prime. He was just a Pilgrim, and thanked God silently for that preordained fate that brought him to the Lands where no one else can go. Except, it seemed, this strange new brother of his.

“You speak High Helican though, but can’t understand the simple, day to day Helica people learn as children. And unless you’re a minister gone mad, I’d say you’re one of the people Esphalon wrote about. You’re quoting, aren’t you? You’ve learned it by rote? Damn fools the

lot of you, then. This is getting so much better every day. To think I was ready to botch everything a couple of days ago. And now this. Fantastic.”, said the man and made the gesture of praising God.

As the man ended his incessantly long phrase, which the Pilgrim thought it could contain the man’s story, how he came to the Holy Land and why, where he was raised and what his people do to live. Perhaps he was wrong. He offered thanks to God in the end and said a single word he heard clearly. He could learn from him then, slowly. They still had an unknown amount of distance to travel.

Maybe God had not sent this man to find him, but he had sent both of them to find each other. Fate is for God alone to change and decide, but he was thankful he would have a companion with him. For where else could this man be going, walking on the True Path, other than to the Holy Grounds themselves? It was their journey now, the Pilgrim thought, and then smiled, carefully pronouncing each syllable slowly, before bowing and once again pointing upwards:

“Fan-ta-stic.”

“Bugger me, you’re trying to learn aren’t you? That might come even more useful. Esphalon was bloody brilliant, noted down your rituals and everything. Must’ve saved my life. You’d have my head with your bare hands if you thought I was an infidel or a blasphemer, wouldn’t you? Must keep an eye on etiquette then. Wouldn’t want to, as you might say, incur your wrath.”

With that last sentence, the man laid down on the Path, without a cloak to shield his knees, and offered prayer to God. He must’ve been forgetful, because it was past the time of dusk. But God forgives. And it is never too late to ask for forgiveness.

The Pilgrim thought he had been too critical of his brother. He seemed weird and acted in a strange way, and his language was not either like something he had heard amongst his people or the language of God’s messengers.

But he felt it in his heart, this man would become a true friend and brother before their journey was through. And perhaps, he would learn a quite foreign and alien language. Something he had never even thought possible, since he had not known other languages existed. The thought made the Pilgrim laugh his heart out, a fit of laughter he hadn’t had since before he had left his people on his Pilgrimage, before he was

indeed chosen to.

His new brother looked in disbelief, somewhat dumbfounded, his hand pointing at the laughing figure of the Pilgrim. His lack of reverence would have to be punished with at least a hundred prayers the next day and fasting for two. But the Pilgrim felt it was worth it, such laughter must have been welling inside him for too long. It was a liberating experience.

“Was it something I did? Never mind, you’re probably losing it, aren’t you? It doesn’t matter if you can show me the way. Can you show me the way? You’ve been here before? Do you know the way to the Necropolis? Whatever you call it? The way, yes?”

The man was gesturing with his hands up and down the Path and the Pilgrim thought he was probably trying to find out “Where does it lead?, “Does it lead to the Holy Grounds?”. He should’ve known better, but perhaps he was distracted, lost, fallen prey to some of Their machinations and mirages.

Otherwise he would have been going towards the Holy Grounds, not towards the other side of the Holy Land. He must have seen they were on the Path, only going in different directions. They would now help each other, as good brothers certainly do. So, without further ado, he gestured onwards towards the way the Path shone under the light of the first stars.

“Bugger me, you do know? Can’t understand a thing, but this is all your own stuff. Well then, lead on, I’ll just trudge along and look like I’m praying when you do.”

The man was smiling gently, bowing constantly and offering too much praise and thanks to a mere brother, but he was otherwise quiet and respectful of the Path, the Pilgrim thought.

They started walking together side by side on the marble road, under a starry-lit sky. And they were both as happy as any man can be.

## Stirred within



SLEEP never came that night to her. Her tears flowed freely for the better part. She stifled the worst of the sobs and moans that welled up from her insides, but still she wept. By morning her face was that of an older woman, eyelids swollen from the crying and sleeplessness. She felt horrible, the child within her seemed equally disturbed. How could it not be, if its mother was in such a terrible state?

She had left her windows closed, drapes and curtains tightly drawn shut. She cared not whether the suns had risen, and a new day had dawned. She wept for her only love, the one half that matter most in the world. The other half, his own half as well, was stirring uneasily in her belly. She tried to think comforting thoughts but all she managed was to utter with a croak:

“Sleep, my loving child. Sleep, for I cannot.”

She wandered aimlessly from their bedroom, to their kitchen, every once in a while hugging herself as if vainly trying to land herself in Amonas’ arms. But to no avail, he would not appear out of thin air. And still she cried, at times silently with tears welling up in her eyes, and other times fitfully, the sobs that she could not contain released in languish.

She pined for the father of her unborn child, to hold him and caress his face. To kiss their fears and troubles away. But he was not there. He was nowhere, it seemed. As if he had been spirited away, by the same sort of devils that had caught poor Philo.

But no body had been found, and none had come for her or her child. Philo would never talk, he would never give up his blood brother, his mentor, his friend. She suddenly felt a pang of fear in her heart, as if it had been struck violently, nearly coming to a halt. Was the child safe with her? Did she need to run, run like the wind and the winter streams? Disappear like she had never existed?

And what about Amonas? What happened to her love? She could not for one second think of him as no more, as dead, as a body limp and unmoving. He must be alive, somewhere. In hiding, running for his life. And he had that other man with him. He would be running to

protect him as well. That was why he hadn't come forward to her, or sent a message that he was well and alive.

It must have been a matter of secrecy. How tired she had grown of all these dark affairs, so many lies upon lies. The lies they had sworn to break and burn away, those very lies were what kept them alive, probably. What irony, to have had your life built around what you despised most.

It was the only way, they had kept telling to themselves. The only way they could change things once and for all, the only way they could spread the truth and uncover the deceit that blinded them all. And this was the way he was gone now. Perhaps forever.

The dark thought contorted her face into a mixture of anger, pain and weeping sorrow. She held her head in her palms, sobbing silently. She was constantly going through the same phases: Sorrow, then anger, then a faint sliver of hope would dawn upon her and recollect her thoughts, compose herself somewhat.

And then fear would grip her once more, uncertainty for her child would sweep everything clean, and the vicious circle of gripping emotions and harrowing memories of happier times would start anew.

And she would weep and cry and throw herself against the walls until she could stand it no more; and then she would think of her loved one that might be dead and would never live to kiss her again, and hold his child in his arms.

And then she would weep once more, all the tears of the world coursing down her cheeks, like she was amidst the torrent of pain and anguish that ran throughout every living thing. She would suffer until no one had suffered before, and it would not stop until she either died herself, or her love was standing right in front her, calling her to his arms.

The child stirred within, as if it was calling out to her, as if fear had touched it deep inside, past the warmth of his mother's belly, and chill crept up all around it. She tried to soothe her child, and in spite herself started to sing an ode to the streams and fields, a song of merry melody, something that would have Amonas smiling and laughing within moments. She would not cry at the thought, nor think him long gone. She would sing it in quiet waiting, and strong hope. She would sing it for their child's sake.

And so she did, and her voice echoed in her empty house, which suddenly felt brighter, warm and full of charming smells, like cinnamon and naristhel, and lermendis leaves, and honey-spice and mint. All those smells that brought the senses joy, and a smile on their face.

The child felt quiet now, the singing had relieved it of fear and brought back the warmth in its heart. It felt like it was asleep now, comfortable in its mother's womb, who herself felt soothed, her fears cast away for the moment, her hope shining more bright, her heart beating with renewed vigor.

Her mind was filled with thoughts: He would be alright, Amonas. He would be fighting or running all the way back to me, like the lovely fool he is.

She strolled around the house for a while, thinking that she could not longer sit here idle and miserable. She had to find out what had happened, see for herself. After all, she felt she was not safe sitting here anymore. Neither her nor their child.

It sounded a foolhardy and unnecessarily risky, her mind told her. But her mother's instinct shouted that she should run away, find another shelter. Somewhere where she might give birth as safely as possible. She was due anytime soon, each day could be the day their child would be born.

Her condition made moving all the more difficult so she would require some assistance in her endeavor. She thought about moving out to the countryside, take what coin she could and find some good people, some family to take her in, at least until she gave birth.

But things were about to get hectic, she knew. And soon there would be very few people that she could trust. Amonas had chosen to keep her well away from the happenings and goings of the Kinsfolk, so she had only met and knew Philo, who was supposed to be her guardian and protector should anything happen to Amonas.

She had been frightened at the thought, but had accepted it as a realistic precaution. The irony now was that with Amonas missing, and her protector arrested she would have to fend for herself. Poor Philo, what horrible fate must await him at the hands of those tyrants?

She would have to turn to the Kinsfolk for their help. At this time of need, with an uprising boiling right under her feet, the child almost on its way, what should she do? Run away, fearing for their lives every-

day? Never knowing who to trust, with every possibility of war raging throughout the territories? No, it would be foolish.

She might have been foolish with her own life before, before she was graced with Amonas' and her child, but now she would give her all to protect her child. And this was her best bet, find the kinsfolk before all of Pyr turned into a nightmare, and stay with them until this nightmare was ended and a new day dawned.

For better or for worse, she would be amongst friends, free men and women, brothers and fellow believers in the just and right. It was time she accepted that there would be nowhere safer than right in the heart of things, where the revolution was about to spring out from like a restless stream. A revolution more like a mad, furious river overflowing with the tears of the downtrodden, the poor and wretched, the ones that were made to disappear in the middle of the night, their cries haunting the streets like ghosts trapped in a hellish afterlife.

That knowledge, the knowledge of the deeply rooted injustice, the tyrannical masterminds of the Ruling Council, the lies and deceit spread through the ministers, all with the same purpose of breeding sterile and harmless minds like sheep, all that made her subscribe to Amonas' purpose.

She saw the truth behind his words, behind every poor beggar and every blind former soldier, every child dying of hunger and every old man hanged for blasphemy and sin that no God would allow, if he had anything at all to do with the real world.

All that steeled her, and made her finally decide. She would seek out the kinsfolk and actively join them and participate in any manner that she could. Not just for the safety of her unborn child, but for its future life.

She knew then instinctively that Amonas would have been proud for her right now. Making such a decision. Not out of a childish conception of bravery, or duty or a vainglorious attempt at posterity.

But because she genuinely cared, she actually hoped and wanted their child to grow up a free person, not bound anymore, not a cripple in mind or soul, but a person free to build his own destiny, free from oppression of the spirit, free from misconceptions and prejudice.

A person that could think of his own, decide for himself, live in a world of endless potential. Someone that could dream of reaching out

of the stars without fear of being damned as a heretic, a blasphemer, or a raving madman.

If it was a boy, she thought to herself and smiled, she would like him to be like his father, but not too much. Carve his own destiny, raise a family of his own, set the example to those around him, be cherished and loved. He could be anything, an artist, a poet or a painter, and he could put down on paper and canvas the feelings, emotions and thoughts none had dared so far.

He could be a man of reason and logic, and make something useful out of things like steamers. And think of new, exciting and purposeful uses to make the lives of people easier, and carefree.

He knew in the end he would be a wonderful man, just like his father. Who he will meet and grow to cherish and love, the man who will help him become happy and whole in his life.

She smiled at how she corrected herself even in her thoughts, and bit her lip thinking what it would be like if the child was a girl. She would be born a free woman, and she would have all the time in the world to become what she wished.

She could become so many things that would have been unthinkable before. She could become the thinker and the tinkerer, and then her baby brother the dancer, like his mother.

These thoughts of merry prospect brought her glee and her face shone. She could not wait for Amonas' to return. She now felt it would be impossible for him to miss the birth of his firstborn. She would tell him all about her plans when they met again. After she had smothered him with kisses.

But first things first, and that blessed reunion would have to wait.

She picked a rather small sack, and carefully picked up some things she would either need or would miss terribly. Some letters from Amonas, that would also serve as proof he was her husband, if it came to that. The flute he had carved for her, which she played to him on the colder nights, the both of them wrapped together under heavy sheets, playing endlessly until the break of dawn, and making love without a care.

And then a few clothes, her nightgown and a blanket or two, in case she had to spend a few nights on the road. She packed some leftover bread-pie from yesterday, and remembered to fill a flask of water from



the well before she would be off.

It would be best not to tell anyone, not even dear Rovenia. It would do her no good to upset her and make her worry without being able to help in any way. Once she was gone, it would not be long before the revolution proper began and then no one would be safe.

It would be best if she warned her somehow, but what could the poor lady do if she knew of the gathering storm? This house was all that she had left, no spouse or children to speak of. She would stay, Celia thought, whether there was a rebellion going on or not. Then again, she had proven to be somewhat of a rebel herself. Cinnamon bread-pie on a Watchday! An audacious old lady, indeed.

Her small sack was packed to the brim, ready to burst. Outside dusk was falling, but she would wait for the night sky to appear, when it would be easier for her to find the men she was looking for. She would try some of the places they had met with Philo, some inns and some artisan's stalls that stayed open past the usual times, in the corners of the market were most avoided because of their ill reputation. She would take a large kitchen knife, just for good measure.

She might not look like it, bloated belly and all, but she could move real fast. A dancer, a really good dancer like her, has certain qualities that can be put in more than one use. At that thought she brought up a particularly fond memory, and giggled in spite herself, like a little infatuated girl.

Oh, he would be back and she would scold him properly for leaving her alone like that. A pregnant woman mere days before being due, a world-shattering uprising in the works, and the husband, off on a tour!

She suddenly broke down in tears, the tension that had kept her going suddenly released. The fear and uncertainty did not return, but she felt she should slap herself for trying to lose herself in forgetfulness, act as if nothing serious was happening, like she could be all play and games when she saw him again.

She composed herself and stopped crying, and let the tears down her cheek run dry. This was all deadly serious, and he might be dead. She knew it in her heart he wasn't, but she had already learned life could be so full of surprises, and not all of them good. So she turned her heart into ice, and gave the thought some possibility, which only made her cold and distant from her usual self.

At that moment, she took a vow on her life and the life of her child, that she would fight in any manner or way possible, for the future freedom of her child, and if things were so, in memory of her loving husband, Amonas Ptolemy, to honor his legacy and offspring, as he would have wanted so.

Time passed slowly, and she grasped the opportunity to have a last look around their house. Their bedroom, where he had loved her with passion and care, sometimes a strong lover, unyielding, discovering every inch of her body with a conqueror's lust. Other times, he was soft, mellow, caring and delicate, like the gentle breeze that caresses the flowers and meadows and flows freely wherever it pleases, always welcome.

It was here where their child was conceived. It must have been one of the coldest nights, when he took her under the sheets and made her forget the world existed, in such a way that she could not remember now whether it was truth or fantasy. The child in her womb though was real enough, his seed taking place well enough.

She was caressing her belly absent-mindedly when she walked through her kitchen, the wood stove unlit, the fireplace glum and silent. It was as if the room itself mourned her leaving. She would miss all the times she would prepare their meals with loving warmth, making sure there was always uwe on the table in one or another. Amonas loves uwe, she knew.

She had been quietly absorbed in thought, her gaze fixed someplace irrelevant, when she happened to look outside the street. Night had finally fallen. It was time she left.

She lit up a single candle in their bedroom, at their window sill, as if in memory of the time they had spent together, gathered her small sack and went outside, careful to close the door behind her.

She noticed lady Rovenia must have been outside, because she could see no candle lit. Perhaps she was already asleep, early to rise, early to bed. She thought she should have said goodbye, but it might be for the best in the end. Her love went out to her as well.

Soon she was mingling with the night crowds of Pyr, common pyres lighting up the streets and the more lively parts of the market, where stalls sold meats and some women sold their bodies. One could find anything he desired in the market of Pyr, as long as one searched

hard enough in the right places, that much she knew.

On her way to one of the inns, she noticed she was attracting unwanted attention; surely it seemed that a pregnant woman should not be walking outside in the market all alone. She should have thought to somehow cover her belly, accommodate for her shape.

All she could really do now was try and stay in the shadows. With one hand she clutched her sack over her back, and with the other her solid kitchen knife. She felt she was ready for violence, but she couldn't be sure if the need did not arise, and she dearly hoped it didn't.

At length, she reached one of the inn's she remembered Amonas saying were more than sympathetic to their cause. It was one of the few places she had seen Philo in public, and when she did it was indeed more of a social gathering, a few friends enjoying a drink together.

It was indeed more than strange, in some cases depending on the circumstances and the phase of the moon literally a sin, for a woman to have a drink amidst the company of men, even with her husband present. She thought all that was about to change soon, and entered the inn as any client would.

Some of the men in the tables nearer to the door turned around and looked at her with stout disapproval, some even voicing their objections and threatening to call the procrastinators to make an example of her. "A pregnant woman no less", she could here some say in what appeared to be disgust.

Those few left their coin on the table and left in a boisterous but rather pretentious manner. Most of the others who had protested more mildly returned to their drinks which seemed rather more interesting than an unscrupulous woman of probably lower moral fiber than their own.

Those who did not return to their drinks and kept on pointing, some even calling her names, she ignored in an exemplary fashion. Soon, they focused their attention on other matters, and her entrance was then only memorable in passing. She hoped they would all drink up enough to pass out and remember little of the matter.

Before she could reach the innkeeper's bar, the man approached her and drew her aside by the arm, quietly and gently:

"Please lady, what are you doing? Why aren't you at home? This is no place for a woman, no less one carrying!"

He seemed genuinely concerned. Celia felt instantly he could be trusted so asked him straight as an arrow:

“Do you know a man named Philo Dutur, or Amonas Ptolemy?”

The man’s eyes narrowed and his brow arched, became tense. He was evidently disturbed by the names, certainly surprised. He replied with a question of his own, his hand still gripping one of her arms:

“What are they to you?”, his voice steady and demanding, no longer just a gentle, caring innkeeper.

“One is a friend, the other a husband. Please, I am looking for friends in a time of need.”, she uttered with sincerity, her hand holding the sack putting it down momentarily to reach in her pouch offer the man a generous amount of coin.

The man recoiled at the sight of the coin, took a step back and released her arm:

“My apologies lady Ptolemy. Please, no pieces of venom, not from you kind lady.”

She motioned to her to stand behind his bar. He gestured with one hand for her to wait there, and she indulged him so. He went around the tables, filling up the cups of his customers with beer, wine, mead and spirit, each one to his poison. After he had a second look, he leaned over the bar and told her in hushed tones, imparting hidden knowledge:

“Where you stand, there is a hatch on the floor. Feel around for a handle with your hands and pull it open. I’ll call for my brother to watch the place while I make some excuse and come down with you. Wait for me there, I won’t be long.”

She nodded in acknowledgement and the innkeeper ventured a smile, revealing a few bad and broken teeth, and a silver one that must have cost him a small fortune. Still, it seemed genuine and since she was flying blindly it would make little difference if she had went to some other place.

She comfortingly thought that any place she would try that night would be somewhere she would be treated at least as a friend, and that lifted her spirits somewhat.

She cast a few guilty looks around as if she was about to try something forbidden, and went down on her knees. She found the hatch and the small handle, and pulled. Faint light was shooting upwards and she could see a small ladder going all the way to the cellar floor.

She threw down her small sack first, and then carefully placed her feet on the steps one after the other, her large belly giving her a little bit of trouble. She was standing in the inn's cellar, and looking around her she could see row upon row of glass bottles filled with a variety of wines.

And then much larger casks and barrels, some smelling of wine, and some of beer. A metal contraption filled with pipes and resembling a large sort of cauldron must have been a still, but she wasn't all that sure about those things.

Until she had time enough to look around, the innkeeper showed himself, coming down the same way she did moments earlier. He was a short but sturdy man, thick red mustache and a slightly bald scalp giving off a friendly, jovial image. He proffered his hand and bowed slightly before introducing himself:

"Rewe Dutur, at your service lady Ptolemy. I did not know you knew Philo personally."

Her expression was kind, but somewhat severe, almost grave:

"Why do you say 'knew' kind sir? What have you learned of him?"

The short man looked her straight in the eye with a slight blur forming up on his own, and said with finality:

"I do not expect to see my brother ever again. But do not lose hope on your husband, we have confirmed he and his friend were not captured. Let's make sure my brother gave his life quickly and painlessly, and not in vain. Come now, please. Since we know Philo and Amonas were probably betrayed we must also assume you are not safe in the streets. If Amonas is still alive, getting hold of you will be one of their priorities. I will lead you to somewhere safe, at least for now. It won't be long. Have you had foreword, did someone approach you and lead you here?"

Rewe had gestured for her to follow him through some cellar corridor, all the time talking to her.

"No, no one did. It was my decision. I hope I am not imposing on you or your people. I felt it was time. With Amonas missing, and the child on its way. I thought.", she shrugged apologetically, and though she thought she had all the reasons laid out, she was now at a loss for words.

Nevertheless, she was following Rewe's steps through what ap-

peared to be a hidden door, cut away in the dirt, a small tunnel of sorts. Rewe had produced a torch from some place only he knew where to find in the total darkness, and lit it up with ease using what appeared to be a small stone. Rewe took notice of her surprise and told her kindly:

“Even better than flintlock, my lady. It was most fortuitous you did that. If it was that somebody had lead you here, I would have reason to believe we would not live through the night. As it is, we would never had done that. We had been left with strict instructions to distance ourselves from you in any way possible. If someone came to you, he would be one of their lackeys, not one of our own people.”

“Amonas’ told you to leave me be? Fend for myself?”, asked Celia quite puzzled as they made their way through the small winding underground passage that was dug intermittently between layers of lime and dirt, small wooden frames supporting the ceiling where needed.

“Amonas thought if it came to that and he was not around, you were quite more than capable of protecting the child and yourself. He wanted you to stay indifferent to them, never become a target through which they might be able to test his loyalties.”

She was surprised and felt both proud and slightly put off. Amonas would not abandon her or the child like that. But she thought, if he could not be there for her, he thought this was the best way to protect her, keep her away from it all, as he had from the start. “Oh, Amonas, that thick skull of yours..”, she whispered as she followed close behind Rewe who turned his head slightly to ask, never pausing in his stride:

“Pardon, my lady?”

“Never mind.. Rewe is it? Just thinking aloud. I want you to know, I know Amonas will return. And I have always hope for Philo. He is the sturdier man I’ve ever met. He will hold out as long as he has to.”

Celia was being truthful but ultimately she was simply putting more wish rather than thought in her words. Rewe was not as blunt as before when he said:

“I would hope so too, lady Ptolemy. But please, let us pick up the pace. Can you do so without causing trouble for the child?”

“You’re being too kind, Rewe. I am fine, go faster if you must.”

Indeed, Rewe opened up his pace and soon they were walking rather briskly through a series of turns, widening and narrowing tunnels, some crudely cut into the rock, and others finely bored with care

and precision.

They must have had been walking for at least a quarter of an hour before Celia at length broke the silence and asked:

“You said we were not far, but I have to ask, are we there yet?”

Rewe turned his head around to reply, his silver tooth casting off a shiny reflection of the torchlight:

“Perfect timing my lady, right around the next turn we will be heading back to the surface. We will part ways there.”

“And in whose company will you be leaving me, Rewe?”

“All in good time my lady. I would think you would have more questions I could not answer, so have some more patience.”

“Alright then.”

Celia nodded with acceptance, and they had now reached a crossroads of tunnels. Rewe then used the torch as some sort of knocking apparatus. He used it to knock on what seemed to be finely cut limestone, in a series of rhythmic knocks using pauses in between, as if playing part of a tune. Some kind of code, she guessed.

Indeed, a strange kind of challenge sounded, a series of knocks from the other side of the limestone. Rewe seemed to pause for a while, and then proceeded with a different series of knocks. The limestone slab was slowly pushed aside, and strong candle light filled the underground tunnels. A small simple wooden ladder was lowered, and Rewe motioned Celia to climb it. Silently, he bowed and waved her goodbye before losing himself back the way they had come. Celia squinted at the bright light as she came up the stairs, onto what seemed to be a very plush kind of cellar, with exquisite bronze and silver decorations on the walls. A whole wall devoted to grand collection of what seemed to be wine bottles. A smiling old man in a luxurious servant's suit complete with velvet vest was the sole occupant. He seemed a rather upstanding and polite man who helped her make the last steps up the stairs, offering his hands as support. She looked rather mystified at her whereabouts, and as she was ready to ask the venerable servant where she was, probably his long experience and hard years of service prompted him to greet her before she had time to open her mouth:

“Greetings my lady. I see you are carrying. Please, lay down on the couch. It might not be quite the most comfortable couch, but I suppose it will have to do for now. I shall bring you refreshment and

a choice of sweetmeats and roast lamb liver that I believe are good for the child. Anything at all, I am at your disposal.”, the old man’s voice tactful, polite, and convivial. Proper use of language and etiquette. A most experienced butler.

“Kind sir, I am fine. I do not wish for anything to eat, but some refreshment would be welcome. I have to thank you for your hospitality in advance, but tell me though, where am I.”

The old servant bowed somehow uneasily, but said smiling:

“Excuse me for not greeting you fully and properly, my lady. The trappings of old age, you see. It would seem you are the honored guest of his eminence Ursempyre Remis, Lord of the House Remis. Will some fresh fruit juice be to your liking, lady?”



## A fool's resolve



LYRPLEDGE was as was pertinent and indeed unavoidable over the past few days in his minute office, sitting at his desk, piles of reports and inventories stacked in front of him as high as his forehead. The minutiae of a preparation for complete mobilization were indeed innumerable.

Personnel manifests, rotation forecasts, matériel inventories, requisition forms, count practicals, soldier and officer levies, clothing requests, workshop and mill necessitation orders, movement and guard formations, forced labor documents.

All of these, and quite some more kinds of papers and formal scrolls had to reviewed, amended if needed, edited, signed, forwarded, then signed again and scribed, before sent out in a seemingly never-ending vicious cycle of bureaucracy and stale ministry procedures, designed to triple check and record everything that went on, making sure nothing seemed to stray in weird, unexplored territory that would alarm the various officials and by natural order the Arch-minister himself.

All this paperwork and mind-boggling interdepartmental anarchy had the general sitting wide-eyed at his desk, papers strewn all over his desk, a carpet of ink and white that made his head dizzy merely by looking at it, much less reading it.

He leaned over and put his elbows on the desk, resting his head on his hands, gently massaging it as if that would make the terrible headache go away. All this had him thinking about his career in the army in general. He somehow wished he could go back in time and almost fail at pretty much everything, and get Gomermont's job for a change.

Instead he leaned again back on his chair, the muscles in his back stiff from constantly sitting and signing since early dawn. His wrist hurt like he had been practicing with a sword since yesterday. He looked at the plain and unadorned ceiling, his eyes out of focus, and seemed to ponder deeply the state of affairs he was in.

The army had been metaphorically, though almost literally at times, handcuffed and thrown around like a useful but dangerous idiot for almost ever since its inception and creation. The hindrances and

bureaucratic steps that are constantly battling the army and its people are designed in such a way as to extend the period of time it takes for troops to assemble, equip and move, from days onto weeks.

The concept was thoroughly and widely known as a safety measure against people in the army trying to achieve power through strength of arms, perhaps even change the balance of power within the Ruling Council to include the General of the Army.

There had been precedents surely, but that was another time entirely, when the Territories were still young and the people dumb-founded by the new emerging order of the world, one common rule for all, under one religion.

There was bound to be some dissidence, some kind of resistance. It was well known that even the earth opposes the river's flow, but the ending is inevitable. So it came to be that Shan the Traitor only achieved in permanently making the army a mere lapdog, at the beck and call of the Ruling Council, blessed be their exalted souls.

And so I'm stuck here, he thought, trying to build a machine of war faster than what is conceived possible, with almost anything and anyone at my disposal, except from freedom of action and the ability to ask for things and make them happen.

Even with the help from the Arch-minister that had indeed expedited some processes, Tyrpledge was experiencing significant delays in most of his petitions and requisitions. It all had to sift through the gargantuan train of Ministry processes, officials and hearings, disappear in its labyrinth offices, clerk pits and then back up again through the same path, in order to probably, but not always most likely, end up in something useful and tangible.

The more he thought about it, the more incredulous it all seemed, but it was manifestly real. The other day, he just remembered, he had received a notice of an annulled material request for a shipment of chisels required for the maintenance and construction of most of the siege engines. The ministry's reasoning behind the annulment was mystifying at best: "Said objects are still under examination for safety reasons".

It seemed the ministry was contemplating whether or not a military coup could put chisels to good use, in preference to the usual swords, scimitars, bows, steamers, slingshots, siege engines and the good old

knives.

Their lack of trust was crippling. He was given a colossal task that was daily compounded with the burden of the ministry's schizophrenic tendencies that balanced precariously between gross, outright denial and a maniacal urge to have everything done and ready armed merely with ink.

The arch-minister had been quite unable to help, since this was how everything worked and reiterating the jumbling mass of ministry people to adopt new sound practices in a matter of days was just as inconceivable as totally circumventing the antiquated ministry machine. In essence, he was caught between a hammer and an anvil. With nowhere else to go, he knew he would have to endure. He could feel the pressure though, and it was rising to a crushing level.

He got up from his office and decided to have a little stroll outside. Maybe some fresh air would invigorate him. As he left his office, his aide-de-camp and various other officer belonging to his immediate staff saluted crisply, most of them with papers and ink in hand, designated to handle some of the bureaucracy whose scale defied that of behemoths.

He left orders for his aide-de-camp that he was not to be disturbed or communicated to in any way while he was out having his walk. Anything it was it would have to wait for him, not the other way around.

He might not have a vote on the Council, but he didn't like being pushed around like a junior officer after 45 years of humble and devoted service. It felt wrong, that was the word. Plain wrong. He reached for someone's mug of fresh uwe and without a nod or excuse just picked it up and went outside in the clear cold air.

He looked casually over the throngs of artisans, laborers and soldiers going about their frantic work. The artisans were terribly busy constructing breakable, portable siege engines, refurbishing and testing the steamers that had fallen in prolonged disuse. Even with the sudden influx of forced skilled and unskilled labor, he could easily discern they were behind schedule.

In the background to the main staging area of the army, laborers were hard at work ferrying ore from the nearby Ilo and Rohms mines. The mines were working at full capacity non-stop, the noble families that were allowed to operate the mines failing to reach the needed pro-

duction. Already, procrastinators teamed up with squads of army men were instructed to gang-press as many people as needed to meet the allotted quotas.

There were less than ten days left before the army was expected to march fully armed with the maximum strength of trained men. There were still thousands of weapons and pieces of armor to be made, which meant more and more ore each day.

Forges had been setup right here, but artisans were already starting to break down from exhaustion. Work had been issued to forges and workshops around the Territories, and failure to meet the allotted quota assigned to each was punishable with death.

The same went for the grand fields of noble families. It was reported that even the Lords themselves, the heads of families, were working their own fields, busy to harvest as much grain, wheat and fittle as possible, however premature the season.

The whole of the Territories was living and breathing in preparation of the army - everything else had come to a standstill. Mills had broken down from excessive speed while grinding endlessly. Rumors of some of them catching on fire trying to meet the demands could not be far from the truth.

Horses and tract animals of all kinds like cows and donkeys were being taken forcibly from their masters, inmost cases the only animal they had to work the lands or make a living with. Huge convoys stretching from one side of a town to the other were being created by local procrastinator forces, and went about the countryside, picking up whatever it was on their ministry approved lists, filling up cart after cart of supplies and materials for the army.

All of that wealth was congregated and amassed in even larger convoys that stretched from one end of the horizon to the next, filling up the few roads that carts could go traverse. Some of them had already started arriving at Pyr and the staging area, a huge stretch of land to the south of the City, where once the harbor of Urfalli with lay.

The harbor was made a new, and ships from the farther reaches of the Territories should begin arriving in the next couple of days, like the convoys cart, laden to the brim with supplies and men, flirting with disaster from being overweight and prone to sinking should they happen upon bad weather.

Procrastinators around the lands with the authority of the ministers rounded up men fit for duty of all ages, those who had received military training as militia men in the past, as well as new recruits that could not tell the pointed tip of a spear from a moose's behind.

It was happening too fast for comfort, too hastily for any serious preparation to be made, plans laid out and understood. The people under his command, from the high ranked officers, the colonels and brigadiers, to the lowly green recruit, would not have enough time to prepare, get their bearings, get to know what their purpose would be, their orders and responsibilities.

He hoped first that he could put it all together in time, since failing to do that would mean his head. He thought about that, and it did not frighten or trouble him, not in the sense it would most people. Of course, it would be more than unpleasant, but he had long accepted that he would be asked at some point, sooner or later, to give up his life for the glory of the Gods and the Castigator.

It had just never occurred to him that such a time would come rather later, right before he would be rotated to an easier life of teaching young aspiring officers. And it definitely had not occurred to him that his death might not be because of an enemy's spear, sword, rock, arrow or fire, but because of failing to meet production quotas.

Perhaps it would more specifically boil down to a lack of chisels. The thought brought a bitter smile to his lips, and he sniggered with a dark sense of amusement.

He wished he could have a smoke right now, a nice pipe-blend of uwe, keplis and dark tobacco, but he had given up on the habit a long time ago, and now lacked all the assorted paraphernalia, as well any sort of tobacco to speak of.

Perhaps a one of his officers would be so kind as to volunteer a pouch and a pipe. If it came to that he would order him to do so. He grinned for thinking like a brash cadet once more, and sipped a hearty mouthful of uwe from the cup he had confiscated with authority from one of the desks.

It tasted horribly. Some idiot had let the uwe leaves boil along with the water, and the result was a horrible green broth fit only for mules and perhaps sailors. He threw the cup altogether and headed back to his offices, his head much more clearer but his mood equally, if not more

glum than before. He made a mental note to himself to reprimand the one responsible for the terrible uwe tea.

Once he entered the planning chamber which was filled with his officers, he noticed it was completely silent and everyone inside firmly standing to attention. He thought he had given orders that with such hectic work going on, discipline should be lax. He couldn't have everyone standing stiff as a corpse every waking minute, and the shouts of "Aye, sir" were a cacophony his ears and head could do away with.

When he gestured them to sit down and go about their work with a simple flick of his hand and they did not comply, only then did he notice a figure standing in a corner of his office, which happened to turn around and address him at that exact moment:

"Oh, General. I trust you don't mind. You have a very nice selection of boar teeth. Impressive samples. Quiet the hunter, are you not?"

The Castigator was dressed in simple loose combat clothes, no marking or insignia. Only his face and sigil implied his person and stature. His tone of voice was conversational, unassuming enough but not overly friendly.

Tyrpledge bowed deeply by reflex, and though at first he was utterly surprised and about to lose his words like the Procrastinator Militant almost had, he managed a constrained and somewhat witty answer:

"Naturalist, your Reverence. I study animals, not hunt them down. I believe there are more than enough people for the job."

The Castigator turned to face him, and quietly stepped off his office. At length, he said:

"I was told you had left strict orders not to be disturbed by anyone, under any circumstances. Your aide-de-camp was quite adamant, though somewhat hesitant. I understand I can be hard to deal with at times."

The Castigator shot a mystifying look at the general's aide-de-camps, a young major who was perspiring visibly but remained otherwise at stiff attention, unflinching at the Castigator's remark.

Tyrpledge resumed from his bow and said with a casualness that sounded strange in the presence of the Castigator.

"Had to clear my head."

The Castigator nodded in acknowledgement, and gestured outside with one gloved hand.

“Let’s walk then.”

The general nodded, bowed, and went for the door himself. The Castigator walked outside and the general followed behind, careful to observe protocol and keep a proper distance.

The Castigator was keeping his hand tied behind his back, surveying the landscape. It seemed as if he was enjoying the cold wisps of air sweeping in from the south, almost craning his neck in a seeming effort to smell the sea breeze.

After a small period of time spent taking in the scenery as if he were a visiting tourist, the Castigator spoke, turning to address the general face to face. His hair was slightly ruffled by the gusts of air that were quite common this time of year in Urfalli, and made for good ship-running as well as the working of the mills. He said to Tyrpledge:

“Tell me, General. Skip the formalities, and tell me what you really think about all this. This campaign. It’s put a lot of strain on you and your people, hasn’t it? And you’d have to be a gibbering idiot like the Procrastinator Militant not to question my motives for such an operation. Who wouldn’t want to know what he’s going up against, true? Please, Tyrpledge. Be unpleasant if you have to be honest. I do not consider myself a man easily taken by petty flattery, and neither should you.”

Tyrpledge felt a bit surprised, perhaps even shocked from such a straightforward manner. It was strange enough when the Arch-minister came to him and extended somewhat of a professional courtesy towards him. It was more than strange that the Castigator himself, of all people, would be so direct in his approach. It probably meant things were about to get all too serious, too suddenly for comfort. His voice was straight and professional, perhaps a bit sullen when he replied:

“True enough, sire. I’m blindly preparing for any scenario and contingency I can think of, working everyone to near-exhaustion to have as much as possible ready within the allotted time. If I may say so, the extend of the mobilization you have requested is simply overwhelming. There may be a possibility that we will not be ready in time, sire. Not completely, not fully. I can guarantee a bare minimum of a well-equipped, well-trained and disciplined fighting force, but I cannot do the same for the full weight of our armies. We are still receiving conscripts and draftees from the villages and towns, people that have only

worked with shovel, pickax and hoe. We need more time, sire. Or we will not be able to field our maximum numbers.”

The Castigator absorbed what was in essence a verbal report from the General, and said to him:

“That is all very well, General. You’ve worked nothing short of a small miracle, as far as I can tell. But, you still haven’t answered what concerns me most. Don’t you want to know why we are going into the Widelands?”, his voice with a more rough edge, a hint of menace, perhaps anger in it.

“That would be a very helpful piece of information, sire. It would be crucial in designing a proper campaign with objectives and time schedules to capture and follow. But, if I may be less circumspect sire, I cannot for the life of me fathom what we will be doing in the middle of what is practically no-man’s land.”

Constrained exasperation showed in Tyrpledge’s voice, but he remained otherwise calm, professional.

The Castigator let off what could be considered an unseemly laugh, and continued to say:

“So, it does feel strange, doesn’t it? No matter. There might be a change of plan.”

The General furrowed his brow before asking, his mustache seeming to somehow follow the motion:

“Change of plan, sire?”

The Castigator came a step closer and looked in the eyes, coolly but sharply, as if he wanted the General to feel he was being threatened, physically, right then and there. Then he asked, his words coming out with slow deliberateness and heavy thickness:

“Where does your allegiance lie, General?”

The General did not flinch, and replied with ease and confidence:

“The Castigator, the Pantheon, the Law, the people. Sire.”

The Castigator smiled and turned to leave towards his escorts who were discreetly waiting at the entrance to the planning chamber, having appeared at some indeterminate point. As he walked away from the general, he raised the tone of his voice to be heard clearly:

“Remember that well, General. I might need you before long.”



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# Breaking point

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“At such a point in time, with all that has transpired and revealed to me, I cannot honestly say I know clearly where my allegiances lie. I can only hope that a clear mind and perhaps some sort of sign will push me over to make the right decision. What passes for right though these days, is making less and less sense.”

- Lord Ursempyre Remis, *Letters*, Vol. IV p.221

## Two steps beyond



HE woke up feeling refreshed. He sat up and flexed his arms and legs, all the time his gaze towards the direction of the bullhorn. It had been a more than pleasant change to find themselves under the shadow of the immense structure that seemed to blot out the sun quite effectively for the whole area to have a different feeling all together.

First of all, the one thing they noticed almost immediately was the different climate. Instead of the scorching heat and sticky moisture, they felt they could have actually been back in their own world, during

a hot summer overcast day.

The heat was much more sensible, and their sleep had felt much more relaxing and refreshing than before. The moisture was still a bother, but it was not aggravating as much as before. And there was no night time to worry about chilly wetness brewing through their bones. It was an almost pleasant, comfortable climate.

Even the vegetation seemed to be somewhat different. The trees for one thing, were visibly smaller, and the canopy above them evidently thinner, so even though the shadow let less light inside, the canopy was thinner and let more of it through. So, lighting conditions were about the same, a twilight of sorts that though eerie at times, did not put a strain on the eyes.

The greenery was still lush, but it was as if it had shrank a notch, the leaves were smaller, thinner, the stems resembled proper plants instead of soft green pipes. There was less rotting vegetation on the ground, much fewer dropped leaves. It almost felt like a weird forest that could have been somewhere on the far away lands of the Territories, like the south where they said plants like no other grew.

Amonas decided not to go for a little exploratory walk as he had done before, so as not to alarm Hilderich a second time. And in any way now that they were in the bullhorn's shadow, he knew they were on the right track, and all they had to do was keep going in the same direction. It was a matter of time now.

He would have to worry about what they would actually do only when they got there. For now, he was more than content to feel a gentle rush of air, quite a novelty in contrast to the non-existent wind in the sunlit parts of this place.

They hadn't found a source of water like the small trickle of water that must have been condensed moisture, running through a jumbled mass of thick leaves and a particularly shadowy spot somewhere high above in the canopy.

Instead he thought they could rely on that strange hard-skinned fruit with the sweet watery juice inside. He could see clusters of the trees at various distances, and a nearby tree had even shed some its fruit of its own volition. Amonas thought they would probably be most ripe and quite sweet, if trees worked like they did back home.

The word even though only uttered in his mind, brought his

thoughts to a halt. He looked at the ground reflectively, a fleeting sadness visible on his face. It was not just that he longed to see Celia again, even though they had not been apart for more than a week.

It was the worrisome feeling of being unable to protect her that wore him down. He had told his kinsfolk to keep their distance from her, even if something happened to him and he would be unable to be there for her. More so, especially if something happened to him.

As luck had brought things about, he was far away, out of reach, with no means to communicate that he still drew breath. His people would probably think him dead, or running for his life.

But with each passing day with no sight or sound of him, no message left behind, without some kind of proof, they would silently accept the fact that he might not have escaped the clutches of the tyrants.

If he was being kept alive, reason would dictate that they'd somehow manage to know, and perhaps hope he would still be alive when the uprising began in earnest, which would be pretty soon, a matter of days.

But men had been known to completely vanish before, men that had attracted the ire and viciousness of the ruling scum that still chose to wear the facade of divinely appointed men of honor.

He was just one man after all. He would not hold it against them if they already believed him dead, drowned at the bottom of a lake or river, butchered and fed to wild boars or roaming dogs. They had seen it happen before, they all knew the dangers and the ignominious ways the Patriarch and the Castigator chose to dispose of their enemies.

But he could not bear the thought of lovely Celia thinking him forever lost, never to return her trusting gaze, never more to hold her when the nights were cold. How did she take the news? What did she make of them? Was she drowned in sorrow, her spirit broken?

He never thought of her as a fragile thing, a snowflake that melt by touch alone. She was not a little woman, a hapless gal. She never did mind her own business, and she always spoke her mind. She was proud of her accomplishments, and knew her strengths and weaknesses.

That was though what he feared most. He was one of her few weaknesses, now that he was gone. He felt a knot in his stomach, at the thought of her giving up, burying him alive with that little ritual they buried their dead kinsfolk.

He could picture her, dancing to the tune of a weeping song in his memory, and then losing herself in the hills and fields, roaming the lands. Until her days became unbearable, the thought and memories crushing her like a millstone crushes seeds, grinding them to oblivion.

No, he thought, a sparkle erupting in his heart, his gaze shooting upwards through the canopy toward the uncaring, seamless sky. She was with child, she would try and burn the world itself before anything happened to their child.

She would come through this, she would endure. Even if the thought of his death weighted her down, she would find a way to use it as a focus. She might even go as far as thinking of avenging him. She was a fierce woman, he knew. She would be a terrible force to behold indeed, as a mother, and a grieving wife. He would definitely not want to get in her way.

The thought made him grin with a sense of pride and amazement, as well as renewed optimism. He thought to himself that since she would be fine, he had no reason not to do as well.

He decided to rouse himself into action, and started off towards the fallen hard-skinned fruit he glimpsed earlier, when a sound like a man desperately gasping for air mixed with what reminded him of creaking wooden hulls of ships, made him pause in his stride and turn around to the source of the cacophony.

It was Hilderich and nothing more, awaking with a clatter and a show that Amonas had never thought possible, even more so in their current circumstance, without even a blanket in hand. Still, Hilderich somehow managed to give off the impression of someone who had been very violently and quite against his wishes woken during a lusciously promising dream after a night of heavy drinking. And all that with only soil and fallen leaves under him.

Amonas waved a hand and boosted his voice just for good measure before asking:

“Nice of you to join the ranks of the living once more. Going to get us some of those sweet-water hard-skins, care to look for anything else while I’m at it before we move on?”

Hilderich yawned with his mouth forming an impossible angle. For just a moment Amonas thought his jaws would fall out of place and his skin snap in a horrible way, blood and bone spurting forth.

Thankfully that did not come to pass, but he was still mesmerized by the way Hilderich's mouth could stretch. He still didn't know Hilderich as much as he wanted to, but he knew that he was a man indeed full of surprises. It's not that he didn't trust him or felt wary of him. It was just that he made him go wide-eyed with surprise at the most curious of places.

"Ehm? Hrm. Ah, the hairy brown ones you mean. The brown ones. That'll do as an appellation until I can sort it properly. Yes, I'll be fine with a brown one to quench my thirst. I slept wonderfully, thank you, almost better than back at the keep. Bad case of insect infestation. Never mind. Oh, and some food would be most appreciated. I believe I can get the fire going."

"Refreshing sleep, I must say. I'll try for some of those mushrooms, but if I can't find any, you will be scavenging these woods my friend. And don't throw all the gin in one go."

With that, Amonas picked up a brisk pace and walked off into the distance, not needing to hack his way through the much less dense vegetation. Hilderich languidly got up, his gaze flicking all around him, looking for an inviting bush or hopefully a bunch of fallen branches somewhere nearby.

Hilderich rested his hands on his waist and surveyed the landscape around him. He would inevitably have to engage in a wider search than what he could merely browse just by standing there.

So he set off as well into the direction of what looked like a promising cluster of older-looking trees, their bark craggy and moss-laden, happily whistling a tune he could not possibly remember what it was.

Amonas seemed to be well-versed in surviving skills and at ease with finding his way through this remarkably chaotic mess of a forest. Hilderich on the other hand knew his own limitations in orientation, which had failed him more than once even in the simple confines of his master's keep.

So he used what he thought was a quite practical way of keeping track of his whereabouts: he took off his cloak and cloth shirt and hanging the white linen shirt on tall yet thin green stalk, he decided he would stray only as far as he could keep an eye on his shirt. Unless he went blind or some mysterious lurking thief of the wild came along and stole his linen shirt, he felt safe enough to wander away in search

of some hopefully less than soggy firewood.

When Amonas came back with his sack filled with various edibles, he was surprised to see Hilderich naked from the waist up, sitting next to a few piles of wooden branches and bulkier logs sorted by size as far as he could tell.

Hilderich was sitting idly, his back propped up against the trunk of a tree, legs sprawled nonchalantly. He looked expectantly at Amonas sack and said in a casual manner:

“What took you so long?”

Amonas put the sack down, laughed cordially and began picking up wood from the piles to build a fire.

When it was time to move on again, their heart, especially Hilderich’s was not in it. The pleasant environment in combination with their stuffed bellies was a major disincentive to even stand up and stretch, much less start hiking again in a brisk pace.

Even though the ground was totally flat, the only variations in height coming deceptively from the various degrees of thickness in vegetation, it was still an activity that required some degree of energy and patience.

In any case, all their energy seemed to be drained from the need to digest. They had indeed enjoyed a small feast: brown ones, some other green horn-like fruit with soft sweet flesh, as well as something that resembled wheat in taste and form, but was over-sized and purple in color. And then some other kind of crisp fruit, red flesh in the inside, wonderfully juicy and marvelously mellow.

With Hilderich displaying genuine culinary audacity, mixing various fruit-stuffs together and roasting them in small leaf parcels, they had indeed made the best of what Amonas had come up with, which was surprisingly, and thankfully, quite a lot.

Amonas had joked about how sorry he was for having been unable to find the pack of boars for which the piles of wood had been amassed. Hilderich had insisted that Amonas had been gone for quite some time and it was perfectly logical that having nothing much else to do, he would have kept picking up more wood if he hadn’t felt stiff by the effort.

They thought about it and thought it would be better for them to let their stomachs do some work first before they set off, so they talked at

length, something which in the short time they had known each other, they had not found an opportunity for.

So they lied down around the embers of the fire, hands behind their heads, comfortably peering through the canopy of the forest wherever they could, invariably seeing not a wisp of cloud, more by habit rather than curiosity or expectancy.

Hilderich talked about his curator's apprenticeship and master Olom. Amonas shared his memories from a time that seemed remote now, when master Olom was a close visiting friend of his father's, when he had not become shunned by most Curator's and practically forced to live as a recluse, and a hermit, rather than an esteemed member of the Curatoria Prefecta.

Hilderich had been surprised to know that Olom was in fact a gin connoisseur, and Amonas even remembered he had brought a distill of his own as a gift once. He somehow thought better of the old man now, though saving his life as he did seemed to have been reason enough to like him immensely, even right before he died.

Hilderich asked politely about Celia, having seen Amonas' reading some of her letters, but Amonas was somehow reticent. He apologized to Hilderich saying that it was not an appropriate time for such a discussion, but promised him though that he would be more than happy to introduce her to Hilderich when they both got back.

At length, and after a time period of grace that Amonas seemed to be less than averse about, and once they both felt they could do so without pain and anguish from bellies about to burst open, they started off towards what Amonas had declared as the proper direction.

After a while, Amonas was showing signs of uneasiness, stopping every once in a while, trying to feel the brush of air. He craned his neck, as if the air had a strange scent, something intangible but yet evident all around them. Hilderich could not smell anything out of the ordinary, or feel something out of place. He noticed though at some point while they were walking, a tingling sensation, some the hair in his back and hands rising as if a chill had settled in.

Hilderich asked Amonas about it:

"You are uneasy. Even I can tell. What is the matter?"

Amonas puzzlement showed in his voice. He was hesitant, reticent, as if looking for the right words.

“I feel.. Weird. I cannot put it words. Nothing specific. But, there’s something in the air. I cannot tell for certain. But it feels.. Unnatural. Wrong.”

“This whole place is wrong. The suns are wrong. There’s no moon and no night. What could be stranger?”

“You don’t feel it? A reek of sorts. Something permeating the air, something impalpable. As if a bad taste is circling in my mouth. It makes me nervous, I’ll admit. You have felt nothing wrong? Nothing different?”

Hilderich shrugged, and motioned with his shoulders in uncertainty.

“Nothing as in the way you put it. Nothing intense. I did notice my hair rising slightly from time to time. Perhaps it’s the air, getting colder.”

“No, this is not because of a chilly breeze, Hilderich. There’s something about the place. The sense grows stronger the closer we are getting to the bullhorns. Keep a wary eye and mind. This place might not be as pacified and indifferent to us as it seems.”

Hilderich nodded thoughtfully in acknowledgement and asked Amonas with some anxiety in his voice:

“Do you think we are in danger? Of the immediate kind? Someone following us? Waiting to ambush us or something of the sort?”

Amonas sighed and resumed walking, his pace not as energetic as before, his gaze darting around him, watching for something he felt like he wouldn’t be able to see until it was too late.

Hilderich pulled his cloak tighter in an instinctive motion, as if it could protect him, ward him from anything that might be wandering or lurking.

At length, even with their slowed down pace and their almost paranoid wariness wearing down their minds, they finally reached the base of the bullhorns. They could visibly tell because the vegetation thinned out to small bushes and insignificant groves abruptly.

In the hazy background they could indeed see a wall of sorts engulfing their field of vision. Once they were past the last few trees and plants, a trench of sorts lay there, mossy but clearly man-made, clear-cut lines and angles defining it, not deeper than the height of a man.



And beyond the trench, was where the bullhorns front face dominated the horizon, defying the senses in a matter none of them thought possible.

It was indeed gigantic, blocking out the sun with ease. To their left and right, all they could see was the wall of the bullhorns as far human vision allowed, the horizon visibly incapable of containing it., an immaculate black mat wall, its appearance obsidian like.

It seemed to be shaped like a huge mount, wider at the base and narrow on top, like a solid triangle of sorts, a tetrahedron master Olom would call it, Hilderich thought quietly. It seemed as if it was painstakingly constructed of small bricks or blocks of whatever material it was built from.

The wall face rose with a small inclination, the blocks forming steps that seemed to be possible to climb with some difficulty because of their dimensions. The huge horns could be seen further higher and farther away, sitting majestically atop a tall summit that could easily be as high as any mountain of the outer Territories.

Amonas urged Hilderich onwards.

“Amazing isn’t it? A man made mountain. Come, let’s have a feel for it.”

“Is that wise? Much more importantly, is it prudent? I think I am tingling intensely. You don’t feel strange?”, Hilderich said with a worried frown on his face.

“Oh, more than ever. But this is what we have been walking for all this time. We have to know what it is.”, Amonas replied while still gazing all over the surface of the immense wall.

“Can we even pretend we might be able to? I mean, look at it. An immense megalithic structure in the middle of a huge exotic forest. Not to mention that it is not unique and there many more like it, probably innumerable from what we’ve seen.”

Hilderich seemed troubled, perhaps a bit scared as well. Amonas thought it was more than normal and perhaps wise considering their situation, but he cast aside his own doubts and concentrated on appeasing Hilderich’s fears, appealing to his logic.

“Even grains of sand in a beach can be counted, if one has enough time and is dedicated enough. Focus at what’s in front of you Hilderich, don’t fret over things we don’t have to care for immediately.

And where is your analytical thinking? How do you know it's made of stone? You said megalithic. If it was obsidian, it would have some shiny quality, wouldn't it? This looks quite different. Ever seen mat black stone like that?"

"I had never seen brown hairy hard-shelled fruit with sweet watery juice before, but I drank from more than one. That proves nothing. Plus, it was a logical to assume it's made of stone. Didn't think you would feel comfortable with such vocabulary."

"I can read too, Hilderich. How can you know what it's made from if you don't even touch it?"

"We could poke it with a stick or something, see if it's dangerous."

"It's a wall, Hilderich. Whatever's strange around here, it's not just the wall. Besides, can you honestly feel serious about yourself when suggesting that a *wall* could be dangerous?"

Amonas' voice was mockingly serious, meant to relax Hilderich's doubts and make him focus on finding out as much as they could about this unreal structure. He definitely needed Hilderich's clear and precise thoughts, not a muddled assortment of insecure comments, defeatist thoughts and morose attitude.

"I never thought I could be displaced in a place with one sun and no nights just by stepping into a column of light, but here I am. Indeed, here we both are. After that, I could expect anything of this place."

"You'll never forgive me about all this, will you? Never mind that. I'll touch it for you if that's what's occupying your mind so fiercely."

Amonas held out both of his hands and touched the block of stone that stood right in front of him, the first line of steps leading to the bullhorns summit. Nothing happened. Amonas smiled to Hilderich disarmingly, to which Hilderich nodded unenthusiastic.

"So, the wall won't kill us. Not outright at least."

"Now that the walls are safe, what do you think we should do? Any thoughts on what this thing is? A monument of some sort? Should we try and walk around it, find an opening or an entrance, if there is one? Or should we climb up to the summit, to where the bullhorns are?"

Amonas had pretty much laid out their options quite concisely at that point, but Hilderich was still skeptical, one hand scratching at his three-day old beard.

"Walking around it would take a couple of days, my guess is. We'd

be searching for something we assume might exist. I don't know. The other thing is that this wall face is shadowed, but the others can't possibly be, not with just one sun, one source of light. That means we would be scorched dry with all that sun and nothing much in the way of making ourselves a shade. So, I have to conclude that the only viable course of action at this point is indeed to climb up the summit. We could try and search this wall from edge to edge, but I don't know what might come of it. Quite possibly nothing. Whoever built this thing would be indeed quite an eccentric if any door would be cryptically lying in an obscure, random position. But that's just my guess, and not a very educated one. All I have to base my conjectures upon is rudimentary knowledge of common practices and some plain old good sense. But all that on a different world."

"Convinced we're in another world then? That the Pantheon is a tale for conditioning weak minds and obedient slaves?", Amonas voice suddenly became harsh, almost a rasp.

"That's entirely another issue. I am convinced that we are in another world because of this damn sun and all the trouble I've had the displeasure of enduring in this place. But I've seen nothing so far that proves the Gods don't exist and everything we've based our society on is a lie. There are some lies involved, certainly, but I would be hasty to reach such a conclusion of perhaps catastrophic consequences and implications. Besides, I'm just a Curator, and only because of chance and the edicts of the Curatoria Prefecta.", said Hilderich shrugging as he uttered the last few words, careful to intone the name of the society of Curators in which he belonged now, by right of his master's untimely death.

"Believe me when I say there was no chance involved in your master's death. And though I have strong reason to disagree with you wholeheartedly, perhaps I'd be as reticent as you are to accept something that would wipe my notion of the world clean. But there you have it in front of your eyes, a thing that just doesn't fit."

Amonas' voice was clearer than before, though he sounded exasperated. Hilderich nodded slightly in reticent agreement, before shifting the subject to the main question:

"Well, I do. So, are we going to climb up this oddity?"

"We are. I'll lead on and help you when you need it. I wager we'll

need to make a few stops. It's breathtakingly tall, for one thing."

"I hope we will not be coming down empty handed."

Hilderich was packing his cloak into a roll, while looking sourly at the height-defying summit.

"Who can foretell? Life's full of surprises, as you already know. Let's hope they'll be pleasant. I've even gotten used to the peculiarities around this place, the strangeness in the air. It seems to be connected to the bullhorns. As if they exuded some sort of aura.", Amonas' gaze following the slight curves of the bullhorns.

"I thought auras were something only people gave off, and perhaps the suns."

"Well, that's what it feels like I guess. It's strange, but not exactly hostile. More like, cagey I would call. It's like it wants to be left alone."

"Let's hope it doesn't have a very good reason for that."

And with that last remark, once Hilderich had folded his cloak neatly, Amonas began their long, effortful climb up the steps of the bullhorn's base.

They had started their walk a few towards the bullhorns a few hours ago, but the walk was easier than before and less demanding, so even Hilderich felt he could go on for a few hours more.

The large blocks of jet black though cleanly cut and smoothly finished, as if from fine porcelain, offered enough friction for a man unused to climbing to be able to push himself upwards. Hilderich felt it was somewhat like reaching for the top shelf of a cupboard. Child's play then, he thought, only somewhat much more taxing on the body.

Indeed only after a little more than a hundred steps, Hilderich felt cramps and stiffness overtaking his aching body, especially the legs where he put much of his strength in to propel himself upwards on the large blocky steps.

Amonas noticed and motioned for Hilderich to take a breath for a while, relax his muscles, stretch, and breathe. Hilderich's lungs were starting to burn, but he hadn't complained. Just as long as they'd made some progress.

He peered over at the landscape stretching behind them, trying to make out where they had originally arrived, where they started their trek from, but he was unable. It all looked uniformly green and jarring,

trees after trees after trees, a green sea under a green sun. Amonas was standing a few steps above Hilderich, looking thoughtfully at the steps behind them. At length, while Hilderich was stretching, feet dangling over the steps below, he said with a hint of worry in his voice:

“You know, I counted the steps up so far. You seem to be jaded. I cannot say I’m not tired either. The problem is I’ve counted one hundred and seventeen steps. If you look at the summit does it look any closer to you?”, Amonas pointed at the summit of the bullhorns, without looking directly at them, but rather looking at Hilderich.

“Uhm.. I’m not very sharp-eyed, but I’d say not at all. It looks like just as it did when we were at bottom. Means we’re going real slow with this, aren’t we?”

“Yes we are. I don’t know if we should go back down and forage some more before coming up again. We might actually need more than a day to get up there, it seems. And we’ll need some food with all the effort we’re putting.”

“Luckily for you I’ve kept a brown one and a couple of those horn-shaped soft-flesh fruit. They should do until then, with a little bit of economy on our part. I dread to think I climbing up this monster so I would have to go back and forth each time I felt hungry or thirsty. And after all, if there’s nothing important up there, something like that pillar of light that brought us here, then we’d be stuck here, wouldn’t we? We’d have all the time in the world to go searching for new exotic fruit then, I wouldn’t worry.”

Hilderich’s tone was ironic, even caustic, but Amonas thought bitterly that he was right. If their climb did not bring them closer to home, then nothing else would. At least not in any foreseeable future. He wouldn’t have to worry about provisions then.

“You’re right, Hilderich. How are you feeling now? Stretched a bit, didn’t you? Lungs feel better, refreshed? Ready to move on?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

And so they started off to the summit, prepared to only stop for some breathe and relaxation, careful not to push their bodies beyond their limits. They climbed slowly but steadily, sweat pouring from the pores in their skin. The higher they went the more they could feel the existence of the wind, sometimes a gentle breeze, other times a rough gale. The warmth of the air varied, sometimes hot as it was below on

the ground, other times chill as they had never felt it before here, under this sky with its single sun.

They stopped when they needed to, and moved on when they felt their legs and lungs could go on. But the higher they went and the more time passed, it became more and more difficult to climb and their pace dropped considerably, their pauses increasingly frequent and more prolonged.

But they had made good progress. They could see the bullhorns clearly now, rising as majestically as ever, indeed towering over them, dominating the sky above. But they had still some way to go before they reached the summit proper, and those last few steps seemed to put weights of lead on their legs and pour fire in their lungs with every breath.

It seemed as if they wouldn't make it and actually stop shy of the summit, forever perched on a jet black step of the bullhorns. But, with grudging determination, and the constant urging of Amonas to ignore the pain that made even breathing quite a daunting task, they finally reached the last step, and the summit lay all around them.

Panting from the exertion and the toll put on their lungs, they sprawled themselves on the surface of the summit which was similar, but not entirely, to the blocks of black material they had been climbing on for what must have genuinely been hours on end.

For a few minutes they lay there, doing nothing but squinting at the ever-present sun, and breathing deeply, trying to get their lungs to work normally again. They felt almost unable to move their legs, and their whole upper body was stiff from the tension and the aggravated efforts to reach the top. They had succeeded, but that had left them drained and exhausted, staggeringly so.

Amonas was the first of the two to stand up with visible effort and strain, and try and walk about the summit, a large terrace from which the horns themselves sprouted from on either side, one of them casting a permanent shadow on the wide mat black surface. He grabbed Hilderich by one shoulder as he still lay down, seemingly ready to fall asleep, and roused him to action once more:

"Come on, Hilderich. A last bit of effort. Let's stand at the shadow over there. It's a bit of a walk, but I promise, you can sleep later on."

Hilderich moaned audibly, expressing both the fatigue that had

overtaken him as well as his reluctance to even lift his head in protest, much less walk someplace in the state he was in. But to Amonas' surprise, evident in the furrow of his brow, Hilderich managed to pull himself together and stand up, though with pain written all over his face, and creaking and crackling noises coming from his joints, bones, and muscles.

At length, they reached the base of the shadowed horn, where Hilderich let his body almost go limp and fall on the surface, uncaring of its hardness.

Amonas sat himself down with less violence, and noticed that Hilderich had not hurt himself in any way by his fall, or did not seem to feel any pain. At least not greater pain than the one he already was in.

Amonas then spoke with a weary, yet friendly voice:

"Finally, we've reached the summit. And there's shadow to rest under. I'd try and look around for what we can find, but we're both exhausted. I think we should rest properly first. The place won't go away under our feet right away now, will it?"

Amonas grin, as well as anything he said at that point was useless. Shortly after he finished his sentence, he heard Hilderich snore in his usually loud and unworried way. He then knew Hilderich must have really overworked himself getting up here. He felt Hilderich was warming to himself and by inference to their cause.

But maybe he just wanted to get back as badly as he did. To what was Hilderich coming back though? All he had left was a promise to master Olom. Find the Stoneforger. Did such a person even exist, or was it as so many other things had been proven to be, just a myth? He'd have to see for himself to believe it. Amonas felt like sleeping as well. His body craved it, and his mind told him he could more than use some right now.

Before he laid himself to sleep on the hard surface of the summit, he picked Hilderich's cloak, unrolled it and threw it over him. He had no intention of nurse-maiding him all the way back home, however little or long it would soon prove to take them.

Once he had taken care of Hilderich's meager comfort, he turned to face the other bullhorn, closed his eyes and before even he could think to himself "this whole world must be huge", he had fallen soundly

asleep.

The first one to notice the vibrations was Hilderich. He woke up suddenly, as if emerging from a fitful sleep, a nightmare instead of a dream. He could feel a throbbing sensation coursing through his body, very much unlike a headache or some other pain of the senses. It was a deeply mechanical sensation, as if the very air was vibrating. As he stood upright, senses on the edge waiting for the next sign of impending disaster, he could feel his teeth clatter upon each other involuntarily. He woke up Amonas immediately by rather indelicately kicking him in the ribs where he lay. Amonas was sluggish coming around when the whole surface underneath them lit up like a miniature sun lay within it, a bright white light underpinning their figures. The throbbing became a more audible trembling, a deep rumbling feeling that seemed to come from way underneath. His surprise alerted his reflexes and with a sudden and deft move he was on his feet, his head turning in all directions, trying to establish some sort of enemy direction to no avail. Hilderich spoke hurriedly to Amonas:

“Something’s happening. This place suddenly came alive. We have to do something quickly. This might be our chance! I suggest you start looking around.”

Amonas was still a bit drowsy from his sleep and slow to react, but he eventually nodded in acknowledgement and visibly a little flabbergasted from what was going on around him, he asked Hilderich:

“Our chance for what? What are we looking for?”

“Anything! Anything at all is better than nothing! A lever, a button, a piece of tile sticking out, a mark, a sign, a sigil, a symbol! Anything that could be used as a control, anything that might react to a human touch! Anything you can find that’s not just sleek, or black or both.”

Hilderich left Amonas standing there trying to picture in his head what he would be exactly looking for and walked away towards the center of the surface, while at the same time the rumbling grew louder and the light stronger.

Hilderich though in a frantic state, and not in complete control of his thoughts and actions, certainly far from being cool-headed and analytical in such moments, still had a knack of noticing things that stood out. The blemishes, the one piece that didn’t quite fit, the important bits. So, after a quick look of the bullhorns themselves, his mind was



now working in a sort of slowed down time, where every scene in front of his eyes could be slowed down almost infinitely, brought to a crawl.

There, in a bubble of time, or a heightened state of mind, he would find what seemed important, come up with theories about its existence and role, its properties and characteristics, then start eliminating what didn't fit or was not as probable, and in the end come up with a solution to a problem, or a keen insight that would prove to correct and to the point.

Then his mind would resume its normal operation so he would be capable of speech and most other things considered useful and indeed necessary for basic survival. It was something that he had caught with the corner of his eye, and had pretty much arrived to a conclusion about its significance before he could turn around and yell to Amonas:

“Lie down! Now!”

Amonas' reflexes were much better than Hilderich's and he had the clarity of mind not to question people when they instructed him to cover himself, or avoid something, since they usually did so with the intended purpose of saving your skin. His body moved almost of its own volition and he let himself fly towards the hard surface of the bullhorn's summit.

As he did so, his eyes caught a glimpse of what must have been nothing less than fiery death. He was barely able to see a giant ball of fire hurtling itself with blinding speed towards them, towards this particular bullhorn. There was a silvery quality about the fire, and as it came over through the bullhorns beyond, he could barely make out Hilderich trying to throw himself flat against the bullhorn closes to him in a fashion that would seem rather comical in a different situation. The flaming apparition was just passing the last bullhorn before Amonas instinctively closed his eyes as if that would make it go away, and that was the last thing he saw for what appeared to be eternity.

He only opened his eyes after the terrible sound of the sky tearing itself apart with the force of ten thousand cannons or more had passed, when he could breathe once more, when the scorching heat wave above him was come and gone again in less than a flash of thunder.

He thought he had gone deaf, since he could hear himself getting up, but the sense of sound slowly returned, though his ears ringed like his head had been turned into a living bell. It hurt like something had

ran him over.

He checked around to see Hilderich, and found him lying on the black surface, trying to move or perhaps stand up but he seemed quite visibly as shaken as he was himself. But he was alive. Whatever that thing was, they were alive.

It had come and gone like a God of thunder, Amonas thought. It was strange that he would think in such terms, but he had no alternative to express himself by. Whatever all that was, it was indeed as they had been nearly smitten by a fiery, God of thunder.

He offered his hand to Hilderich to help him up to his feet, which Hilderich took without second thought, dazed and flabbergasted. As he did so, his gaze was fixed towards the direction of the fireball that had nearly killed them. Hilderich just stood there transfixed, looking out as if waiting for that thing to come around and finish them, as if they had been marked for death and this was just their executioner calling.

Amonas looked worried and held Hilderich by his arms, trying to attract his attention, calling out his name, asking him what was the matter. But Hilderich could only afford a mere flick of his gaze, the rest of him steadily fixed on the far side of the horizon, across the row of bullhorns from where the flaming thunder had passed over. Hilderich then spoke, mesmerized, grave seriousness in his every word:

“That thing is the answer. We have to ride it, somehow. I’ve never thought anything could go that fast. It came and went in two blinks of an eye. Can you imagine that? Yet it just passed over our heads. Like a tamed star, made to fall forever.”

Amonas looked over the same direction Hilderich was, and then looked bitterly back at Hilderich:

“It nearly killed us my friend. And you would ride it? You called me a madman before. I think it’s time I returned that remark. Whatever that was, it’s not made of nature and it’s not something we can use. We have to think of other ways.”

“There are no other ways. There is nothing but wild green lush forest with mushrooms and brown ones, and this. These bullhorns. All these bullhorns only seem to exist for what just passed overhead. It went through and through each of these bullhorns, like a cart on rails. Whatever it’s headed, it can’t be worse than this.”

“Still, if all that stands to reason, if this was indeed built only to

accommodate that huge fireball, what makes you think we can ride on it? With it, inside it, whatever would make some kind of sense. Don't you see how incredibly powerful it is? What are we going to do? Catch it with a rope and hang on to it?"

Hilderich grinned and the effect on Amonas was for the first time totally disconcerting, perhaps even chillingly terrible. He thought the effect of the fiery ball on Hilderich was the loss of his wit and mind. As these thoughts made a deep frown appear on his face, Hilderich spoke:

"You thing I'm losing it, don't you. You think I just went crazy, broke down, my mind left me forever and so on. But I know we can ride on that thing. And I also know that it was designed for that specific purpose. Do you want me to explain the reason why or do you think you can come to the same conclusion yourself?"

Amonas shoulders sagged, and he took on an expression of pity, looking at Hilderich sorrowfully, as it was the last time he saw him, as if his mind had parted with him forever and he was talking to another man entirely. Hilderich laughed at Amonas' look:

"That look on you is actually funny. Doesn't suit you getting melodramatic at all. Now, listen: What happened before the fireball came zooming in towards us?"

"You told me to duck, lie down. Flat, on the surface."

"Before that, when I woke you up. What did you notice?"

"I was drowsy from the sleep. Perhaps there was some kind of buzzing sound, a rumble."

"There were two signs - light and sound, indeed more like three sounds. There was a buzzing sound a hum in the air, clearly audible. There was a rumbling so deep it vibrated our insides. And the whole surface was lit up brightly, a bright white light from underneath us, so bright it shone brighter than that damn sun."

Hilderich was smiling with what could only be characterized as smugness.

"So, you are saying there was a warning? All that was for us to know something was coming?"

Amonas sounded like he considered what Hilderich was saying quite incredulous.

"Not just us, anyone who might happen to be on the top at that particular time. Remember we where asleep, nothing like that came

rushing down at exactly when we stepped foot up here. It came at an inopportune moment, some time later. In fact, these signs woke me. And I believe you would have woken as well by yourself even if I wasn't there."

"And why warn us? This thing, whatever it is."

"Well if it, the building, the bullhorns, this world, the fiery thing, wanted us dead, I believe there would have been no warning. Unless it's part of a well played sport, it doesn't make sense. What does make sense though is that the signs appealed to almost every sense: Sight, hearing, touch. Now that I come to think of it, I could even taste something like copper in my mouth, and smell something too. Not sure I knew the smell, but something smelled different alright."

Hilderich was positively brimming with excitement, his eyes and face were lit up and he was actually tipping on his toes.

"You are implying that it was a sign specifically designed to warn any man? Whether he be blind, deaf, or even unable to taste or smell?"

Amonas had cocked his head sideways in a possible attempt to see if there was something messing with Hilderich's head.

"I'm saying exactly that."

"You are full of surprises, Hilderich. It could stand to reason if it didn't sound like too far-fetched to be true."

"All this is beyond far-fetched, but as I have pointed out in the past, here we are.", said Hilderich and shrugged with his arms extended, indicating the scenery around them.

"And what do you suggest we do about that? Surely, we will have warning of when another one of those things approaches. And what do we do then? Jump at it in an opportune moment?"

Amonas voice had a sneering quality, but he was still maintaining a conversational tone.

"Amonas, my radical friend. Have you ever boarded a ship, or a wagon train?"

"I cannot see where you are getting at here, but indulge me. Yes, yes I have.", Amonas said with mild annoyance.

"Well then, doesn't always someone announce the arrivals and departures?"

"You are again going beyond the imaginable to imply that this thing is a vehicle of some sort. That it can actually stop and pick us

up? Just like that?”

Incredulity seeped from Amonas’ every word. It was as if he was being told he had suddenly grown a third foot.

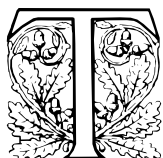
“Well more or less, yes. But not like that. We’d need a ticket.”

Hilderich could be seen fumbling inside the pockets of his shirt and pants, as if searching for the said ticket.

“What could possibly count as a ticket in this extremely unlikely scenario you are proposing?”

“I’ve been waiting to ask you this when there’d be no point in you saying no: I’d have my keystone back now, please.”

## Friend or foe



THE corridors of the Disciplinarium were enigmatically silent. Lord Ursempyre Remis was escorted by a pair of procrastinators, at the behest of the Patriarch himself, he had been told. The mere thought of that man made him uneasy, and now he had been summoned personally. His mind raced with conjecture and possible reasons.

As his steps echoed in the stone floor of the hallways that never seemed to end, he thought he had a pretty good idea of the Patriarch's intentions. He thought that perhaps the Patriarch knew, but he had to know for himself.

See it in my eyes, Ursempyre thought. He would play along his role to whatever end might await him. This was a critical point. Everything hang in a precarious balance, and this was the push that could tip things over either way. He calmed himself, emptied his mind and held to just one conviction:

"I am Lord Ursempyre Remis, Noble Representative, Duke of the Fief of Wir and Prefect of Urfall. I serve the Law and the Pantheon, I abide to the rulings of the Council". That would be the only thought coursing in his mind, and he would make-believe if he had to. And if things came to that, he had prepared for other contingencies. He merely hoped there was time enough, that things would not be rushed.

They passed through many hallways, some of them exquisitely decorated with hand-woven tapestries of a beautiful, delicate, and quite extravagant nature. Others were bleak, strictly functional and indifferent, not destined to impress or provoke awe. Probably hardly ever seen or used.

As if he had not been summoned here officially. Indeed, the procrastinators seemed eager enough to take him by force if he had resisted. Would the Patriarch be so rash? Would he suddenly arrest him without good reason? Certainly he had the power to do so, but was it to his best interest? How could he ever succeed in finding out what drove the Patriarch?

The man was a terrifying mystery, an uncanny wildfire people tried to steer away from. The kind of fire that only consumed, and never

warmed or lit. He was probably the most dangerous man Ursempyre could hope to face, even more dangerous than the Castigator, who might be a tyrant and heartless man, a man that cared for naught but power and its exertion over men, but he was still a man.

His motives could be understood, some of his actions anticipated. Perhaps he could be reasoned, to the extent that it would seem to him to be in his best interests, perhaps offering him a deal he could not refuse. But, the Patriarch was a blank, as if totally heedless of the circumstances, the dynamics of power play and indeed the workings of the world around him.

It felt like he had an agenda no one could hope to fathom, an agenda he had no intention of altering or suspending. He was relentless in whatever pursuit he was involved in, and once you laid eyes on him, he looked back. It was an eerie feeling, him knowing you were watching. It made one think that this man could read your mind with a glance, know your fears, your weaknesses, the things that made you cry and the things that made you laugh. It was as if he was a chilling, unnatural force that could bore right into your soul and leave you empty, a walking hulk, your mind and soul gone, his own at a mere whim.

Ursempyre shuddered at these thoughts visibly. One of the procrastinators noticed and sniggered scornfully. Ursempyre turned to look at what could easily be a common thug in the streets of Pyr, and stared at him intently, a hint of suppressed wrath in his gaze. The procrastinator lost his grin, and stared away, averting his eyes. He would remember that face, Lord Remis thought.

Night had only just fallen outside, and servants could be seen running about the Disciplinarium, lighting up braziers and chandeliers where appropriate. Halls, corridors, and chambers were being lit up one by one, staff and officials grinding on at whatever kind of work that needed to be done during these times of war preparations, work that would probably keep them up all night.

They went past the administrative areas, through small warehouses and store rooms. Lighting was at a premium in these parts of the Disciplinarium, only a few torches spread thin, darkness and lighting exchanging places with one another at uneven intervals. One of the procrastinators paused and unhitched a torch from its post to carry along.

They were descending deep down in the lower levels of the Disciplinary, places that Ursempyre had always been loathe to visit, for he was aware of the acts usually being performed in these levels.

Kept hidden from prying eyes, this was the place where the enemies of the state, the sinners and the ones considered dangerous and unruly were brought to be chastised and enlightened. His face grimaced at the euphemism.

Chastisement and enlightenment came at the price of torn fingernails, pried tongues and flogged backs. And then there were those who utterly disappeared, the dungeons of the Disciplinary their last murky, cold abode. Oh, he knew what was coming.

He would be thoroughly interrogated by the Patriarch himself. The die was cast, it seemed. There was nothing more he could. He hoped he would be able to escape with his life, but if it came to that, he had made arrangements. Everything would be put in motion if the hours passed without him emerging. It was all planned and primed, ready for what was in the end, only inevitable and long ago decided.

The uprising would begin. These thoughts seemed bitter and morose, unfitting of his determination, his purpose. He would try and beguile the Patriarch, a task that genuinely seemed desperate, but he would. And if he failed at that, he would endure as long as he could, until his body failed him, until his mind and soul were utterly crushed. He had no misgivings, no fantasies of standing against the Patriarch for too long.

He knew not what tools of torture he used, but he knew that none had been left unbroken. Those that he touched, they all gave up in the end. They all talked, they all begged for their lives like lesser men, like cornered animals, their instincts making a last attempt at salvation. But there was no mercy to be had, no humanity in his work. If he could not outsmart him, outplay him in a game of his own devising, then he would be gone.

Perhaps later rather than sooner, but he would be done for. All that mattered was that the uprising would succeed, that it would indeed take them by surprise. And if he perished during that, it mattered not. His memory would live on, his legacy and story told as part of the Liberation of the Territories.

They would be free, again. Free to live their own lives as they



saw fit. Damn the Patriarch and the Castigator and all their cronies, henchmen and little thugs, and devils, the men that willingly gave up their souls in exchange for a whip, or a quill or a sword. Damn them all, they would be free.

Having lost himself in thought, he hadn't been aware they had descended so very deep. Instead of stone masonry and man-made walls, they were now walking amidst tunnels, wide enough for two men to walk in, dug in the rock and granite of the Disciplinary hill. These were old, older than the Disciplinary, carved in a time lost from memory, that no annal had recorded.

Though he was privy to most of the workings of the Disciplinary, he had not known the dungeons extended to such a depth. He was surprised. He felt wary of what other surprises lay in stock.

Soon they reached a grated gate, sentry guards posted in both sides of the gate. Where the far side lay, there was little or no light from torches or any other kind of lighting. No candles either. Simply darkness, eerie and silent, like ink blotting the senses.

One of the procrastinators nodded to the sentries to leave their posts. They would be taking over. The sentries looked at each other and knowingly and without protest, question or remark, opened the gate, handed their heavy cast iron keys to the procrastinators and quietly and without further ado left in an organized fashion, forming a single file.

One of them looked back and cast a passing gaze at Ursempyre, an expression of surprised recognition formed in his face and then it was gone, replaced by a fearful, stung furrow. Even the guards around this place realized the importance of what would follow. The Noble Representative would be tortured, questioned, and killed by the Patriarch himself. An ill omen, but who would challenge the will of the Law and the Patriarch, Reverent and Beloved of the Gods, the Holy Avatar?

One of the men that had led him into the caves, spoke with a restrained voice, somewhat confused about whether he should refer to Ursempyre as a Lord or as just another lost soul, knowing he was at the non-existing mercy of the Patriarch. He chose the later, fearful of the walls having ears:

“On you go, in there. To your left. The Patriarch awaits.”

He was then mildly but forcibly pushed, as if he had to be made

aware that they were there to ensure his concordance and cooperation. Or club him unconscious and fetch him themselves in front of the Patriarch, if needs be.

Ursempyre's steps were measured and slow, but steady and unwavering. He steeled himself for the confrontation, muscles tensing and relaxing in quick succession. He was as ready as he could be, he thought.

The cave seemed to be hollowed out artificially, swaths of incandescent light pouring out from the large orifice he was instructed the Patriarch was awaiting his presence.

As he entered the chamber, the intense light made him squint reflexively, but his eyes adjusted. It seemed as if light was pouring out of some strange, tall, glass columns that seemed to extend beyond the floor and the ceiling of the chamber, as if actually grown out of the rock itself.

Ursempyre's interest was at once piqued by what he was seeing all around him: Four large glass columns like huge rods brimming with light, seemingly supporting the tall, wide rocky chamber. The Patriarch was standing with his back turned to Ursempyre right amid the four columns, his bald scalp glistening under the blueish-white light of the columns, gossamer shadows of himself cast in the shape of a cross across the rough, uneven, rocky floor. Small wet brown lime stone indentations and juts with tiny spots of shadow dotted the ground. A faint humming noise echoed faintly throughout the chamber, which was otherwise dead silent.

Ursempyre was drawn into the scenery, taken by surprise, but not overwhelmed. He felt curious. So much more as to what the intentions of the Patriarch were. He had been expecting a torture chamber with a multitude of tools and instruments. Instead, he was being shown something very few people, if ever, became privy to. Perhaps the folk tales about the Ancients and the Curator's ramblings were not all for naught. But then again, what reason did the Patriarch have to reveal such a place to him?

His thoughts were interrupted by the sly, surreptitious voice of the Patriarch, which broke the silence of the chamber, sounding as if it resonating with the columns and the rock walls, each adding to its effect:

“These are plasma conductors. Part of the energy grid of the Disciplinarium. Basically I barely use most of the amenities involved. I consider myself adjusted to my surroundings. I find the use of servants most to my liking.”

Ursempyre frowned quizzically at the Patriarch’s words. He could neither understand exactly what he was telling him, or more importantly why. As always, scripture in High Helican decorated its hem discreetly. He didn’t look resplendent or intimidating. The Patriarch turned to face Ursempyre, hands neatly hidden inside the folds of his robes, simple and utilitarian yet finely crafted from quality cloth. It was as if he sounded sincere for the first time when he spoke again:

“I see that you are taking all this in your stride. I’d expected as much. It will make things easier, I suppose.”, indicating with his eyes the glass-like columns of light he had called plasma conductors.

Ursempyre was still looking at the columns when he asked the Patriarch in a straightforward manner, one that almost demanded an answer even though he knew he was in no position to make any worthy demands:

“Why am I here? I am the Noble Representative. I demand that you extend some courtesy and respect to such a person of significant office.”, Ursempyre’s tone of voice authoritative and steadfast, even though a trained ear could feel it frail at the edges, an evidently great determination holding it together barely at the seams. The Patriarch sounded amused when he replied:

“Would you keep on performing on a stage when all the viewers had left? I could admire you for your dedication, but I generally hold fools in low esteem. I suggest you, ahm, revise your way of thinking, Lord Remis. While you still can.”

“Is this some sort of threat? I came here of my own free will. I have nothing to hide, your Reverence. I insist you make your intentions clear before long. Whatever they may be, I will be a faithful servant and abide by the Law.”

Ursempyre’s voice had deep, grave undertones etched in it. He meant to come across as serious and truthful, yet non-plussed-plussed, not just a lackey or one of their goons to be simply expected to obey unquestioningly. He wanted the Patriarch to know that he wasn’t terrified by the Patriarch. Even though in his gut he knew that was a lie.

The Patriarch stifled a laugh in mere disbelief, a terrible smile forming in his lips:

“Is that so, Lord Ursempyre Remis? It almost always has to be that way, hasn’t it? Please, have a seat.”, and before he could finish his sentence an ornate chair appeared out of thin air, as if it had been there always, but was simply invisible to the eye.

It was supremely decorated with fine leather and silky surfaces, girdles of gold and silver on the armrests. In concert, an even more ornate and large chair with a large backside, plush with red velvet and a green granite girder appeared behind the Patriarch, with a similarly decorated desk, its surface a hard green-veined black marble.

It seemed preposterous, but it looked like as if even more extravagant events were about to unfold, so Ursempyre decided to let the Patriarch put on his own show, and he would go on with his theatricals as far as possible.

The logical part of his brain cried out in anguish at the impossibilities unraveling all around him, and wanted to stop and cry out for something that could explain even an iota of these tricks. They had to be tricks he thought, some sort of show to cow him, bewilder him.

The other part of his mind, the determined one, just ignored what was thrown at him and focused at one thing: Making it out of here alive, for starters. And then, he thought, I can work something out of the rest.

The Patriarch realized he had frozen in place, his mind stung by the sudden impossible appearance of the furniture, and beckoned him once more to seat:

“Please, Lord Remis. You seem to be woolgathering. Does not our conversation appeal to your standards? Perhaps, some refreshment is in order as well?”

With that last phrase, a plain wooden jug of wine appeared on the Patriarch’s desk, alongside with two cups, one slightly chipped on its rim, the other visibly older, the wood stained and discolored. The Patriarch added while waving one hand dismissively:

“You’ll hopefully excuse the quality of the cups and jugs. I try to dispense with pomp and luxury wherever applicable. In essence, I am quite a simple man. If only you could see that.”

Ursempyre was still dumbfounded, not as much because of the Pa-

triarch ability to instantly and at will conjure items of his liking, but more so because of what he was saying, or trying to imply. The Patriarch was not, in any way, a simple man. He was being flippant, mocking him in the process. Ursempyre managed to speak though, as if a spell forced upon him had been broken:

“This ability of yours, it does not scare me, Patriarch. The Holy Avatar must indeed have the blessings of the Gods, why not some of their power?”

“Yes, that does make sense doesn’t it? Brilliant on my part, I would say.”, the Patriarch looked almost gleeful. He continued on to ask Ursempyre:

“What does scare Ursempyre? What is it you really fear, if it’s not me? After all you’ve heard or seen, you know what I’m capable of. Would I like to do that to you, Lord Remis? Would you force my hand?”

“I have nothing of which to be accused of, Patriarch. I am a faithful..”

“You are a constant reminder of my failing and nothing more!”, the Patriarch burst into a fit of rage, sending the jug crashing against a glass pillar, red wine spilling all over, running down the glass in waves. The cups were lying on the desk, one rolling on its side back and forth.

Ursempyre thought he had been exposed, and all the niceties had now evaporated. He steeled himself mentally, closing his eyes and thinking of happier, earlier times. His muscles relaxed. He was waiting for a hammering blow. Nothing happened any time soon. The Patriarch drew the his chair, and sagged on it, as if exhausted from copious effort. He flexed his hands and crossed his palms, knuckles pointing upward, almost as if in prayer. At length, he sighed, and then spoke in a raspy, tired voice, more suited to a broken old man rather than the Patriarch, the Holy Avatar of the Gods.

“I’m tired of being reminded of my failings, tired of games I guess. But I’m not willing to lose, not after all the time I’ve spent. Do you understand that, Lord Ursempyre Remis, Noble Representative? Can you, really? Even if I showed you, could you fathom? Or would your lesser, weak mind break down from hopelessness? Could you indeed ride on the wave of apocalypse that would follow, Ursempyre? I have to pity, hate, and envy you, Ursempyre. You and your people. But this

has to end as well.”

Ursempyre was progressively more and more mystified at what the Patriarch was saying. Again, he noticed, it wasn’t the trick show and the flashiness, the strangeness of what was happening. It was the Patriarch himself that was doing it, twisting reality, violating normalcy.

He was acting out of character, for one thing. It was as if he was trying to make some point, but had not done so ever before in his life and was unable to make himself understood in human terms. He was somehow circumnavigating the point in question, never directly touching it, uttering generalities and giving cryptically hints, as if his annotations alone sufficed.

Ursempyre hated that quality in a man, evasiveness, mucking about rather than doing or saying what one had in mind. Just tell me what you really want to you raving old wolf, he thought to himself, before asking the Patriarch directly:

“What do you mean? Do you mean the rebellion? The kinsfolk will rise and cast you down, rightfully claim their right to freedom. And if we shall fail, we will give our lives willingly. And I will be the first one to do so, if needs be. Strike me down if you must, if that’s the reason I’m here for. Spare me the theatricals, and the mirror show as well.”

Hilderich words came out sharp and proud. He managed to even surprise himself with his clarity and aboveboard voice and manner. His face was taut, he felt the veins in his throat throb with every pulse. He felt relieved his mask was cast off, primed and ready for everything that the Patriarch could throw at him.

He wasn’t thinking clearly now, he knew, but he imagined he’d go for his throat and neck, possibly try to snap it or strangle him with his bare hands. His determination had walked him through from an innocent noble Lord to a hot-blooded rebel in mere moments. The Patriarch’s answer stunned him with its simple ruthlessness and unprecedented audacity:

“Do you wish to become the Castigator of the Outer Territories?”, he said, idly checking his fingernails for blemishes and dirt.

Ursempyre frowned instinctively, as if his hearing had failed him, and blinked a few times before feeling a complete idiot that was unable to constrain his physical reactions. He managed to ask the Patriarch,

his voice rippling with incredulity and disbelief:

“Become.. The Castigator?” and then he broke down in laughter, his hands behind his head, as if failing to grasp the joke behind the Patriarch’s words, but still finding it funny enough.

The Patriarch reached out for a small goblet of wine, its contents sloshing as if it had just been poured. In fact, it had just appeared on his desk. He sipped some wine, all the while Lord Remis quieted down, his laughter made still by the Patriarch’s lack of an answer, physical or verbal. At length, after seeming to savor the wine properly, like a man who found meaning in the tasteful little joys of life, like a good wine, he said with more authority, gravity weighing his words, the rocky chamber echoing them, magnifying the effect:

“I know you do not take me for a fool, Ursempyre. You must know I do not either. I simply find that you are ultimately, a man of your time. But unimpressively, you’re not a man quite ahead of it. Nevertheless, as things stand, I offer you the sovereignty of the Outer Territories and the office of Castigator.”

The Patriarch had risen from his seat, hands behind his back, and was very slowly pacing around the columns, his form every once in a while disappearing behind a blaze of blue and white light, each time a sliver of his figure and face appearing grotesque and malformed behind the glass column, as if it had the ability to see behind the facade of the Patriarch. Ursempyre felt suddenly naked, as he had been bared against his will, but he had not protested. He felt ashamed, for not erupting in anger, as well as for finding out that in the end he was so transparent.

“You are wondering if I can read your mind. Well, perhaps I can, but I’m only actually guessing what you must be thinking. I have knack of being spot on though.”, the Patriarch grinned viciously before adding:

”You’re thinking if I had known about your people, your organization right from the start. If I know about your rebellious plans, the killing hour. I’ll indulge your inquisitiveness, for the sake of argument. Perhaps, you’ll rarely hear me admit it, I have to revel in my superiority. It’s an obnoxious trait, being such a snob. If you knew me better you’d find I couldn’t help being otherwise. But I digress.”

The Patriarch paused and put a hand to his chin, stroking his beard lightly, a finger to his lips, as if he was searching for his next words,

engrossed in thought, careful of what exactly to say. Ursempyre was transfixed, at a loss for words. He thought he shouldn't be doing this, he shouldn't be even listening to this devil. His heart told him to try and rip this human terror apart, for everyone's sake. His mind told him to stay his wrath, and listen. He was being told things he would never know otherwise. Thing he might use if he came out of this alive. The Patriarch resumed what was beginning to look like a monologue, or rather, an explaining of sorts:

"You'll have to excuse my earlier outburst. These are trying times, even for me. I have already admit to two things I consider weaknesses, dear Lord Remis. You should do well to think that this is not only a rare occurrence, but rather unique. I might be lying, indeed, but what difference would it make to you?"

He had made a full round of the columns, and he was now standing in front of Ursempyre, his desk behind his back. All this time Ursempyre had not moved from the place where he had been left standing. The Patriarch motioned with a nod that he should be seated, but Ursempyre declined in kind with an almost imperceptible shake of his head, his gaze fixed at the Patriarch at all times.

"Very well, if you insist.", said the Patriarch and the chair blinked away in the same logic defying manner that it had manifested. The Patriarch went on:

"This is a unique offer. For reasons you will come to understand in due time, I'm offering you rule of these lands. Of course, it will be mostly in name only. As is the case now, you will mostly be a figurehead of sorts, a leading personality.

As always, I will be the real Law and effective ruler of these lands, and you will be acting as my proxy in setting policy. Of course, in all the lesser matters, like economy, judicious activities, trade and the like, you will be left alone to your devices.

My immediate concern though lies elsewhere: This rebellion you're planning, is happening at an opportune time. I do have some matters of urgency to attend to, and you appear to have set up quite a formidable and perhaps effective as well as skilled fighting force.

I really cannot be bothered to lose precious little time over suppressing what will be, in the end, a failed rebellion. It would be most prudent and cost-effective if we avoided all the unnecessary bloodshed



and came to some sort of agreement, between me and you, the newly appointed Castigator.”

Ursempyre tried to take in the Patriarch’s words, but he felt unable to. It was an overwhelming thought. There were so many questions and possibilities going through his mind. Would he actually consider such a proposal? Did have any merit? Would the Patriarch keep true to his word? Was the Castigator really that powerless against the Patriarch? Then, what chance would he stand against Patriarch once he felt like he had served his purpose? If he was so powerful, why did he need him? Why not crush the rebellion altogether? Why did he need him? What were his limitations? An bloodless uprising, but to what a future would it lead? This rotten system would not go away. The Patriarch, and the Council, and all the tyranny would still be around.

No. He felt dirty, almost soiled that he had even began to consider such an offer, that he actually tried to put it on a scale and weigh their future against a parody of one. He had decided. He would not become a willing pawn.

That last temptation, the easy way out, a bloodless shadow of a victory, a postponed defeat and utterly, treason. He had not thought himself as a fanatical rebel up until now. He had always thought that he was, as ever, the pragmatist.

That was the quality in him which had led him to believe that change should occur, even if it meant full-scale rebellion, and ultimately war and possible annihilation of those who would carry the weight of the change, a change worth dying for.

He had studied as much of history as possible, he had seen behind the veil of religious propaganda and dogma. He weighed and balanced everything and he believed he could prove, by way of reasoning, hard facts and certain numbers, that this was a stagnant situation. A situation where nothing new and worthwhile would ever arise, a steady circle of people giving birth, and dying, too busy and occupied with the endless toils of life and too frightened of losing what little breath they had been spared.

Too frightened to lose the smell of cinnamon bread-pies, and the laughter of the young and innocent children, before they too became in essence obedient slaves, aspiring to long life of toil and harsh, bitter pain and misery, as if it was the only right thing to do.

And people like him, the Nobles, would praise the Gods and their luck for been born a step above the simpletons that tilled their fields, worked their mines and brought them wine. As well as being more than careful not to upset anyone, lest they end up with dirt on their hands and sweat on their brows.

Fear. Fear ruled them first and foremost above all. Fear misguided them and made them wake up from their dreamless sleep, and be happy they'd just live another die. It had sickened him, when he realized it for the first time.

They were prisoners of fear, all of them, from the nobles to the scum in the streets of Pyr. Every last one of them, all they knew their whole lives was fear. It was time they learned something more of life. Go a little further down the road.

He was curious to see what they could accomplish once they were free of fear. All of them, free to think, and act, and hope, and dream. He had a sudden flash of recollection right at that hour.

He had gone fishing with his grandfather, near a lake in the late summer, when he was still a boy curling up in his mother's bosom to sleep at night. His grandfather had showed him how to hook the bait on his line, but when he had tried it himself, he had gotten stung. He had cried in anguish, pain, and fear, but his grandfather had laughed out with all his heart and had said to him, quite unperturbed by his discomfort:

"It's only a sting, Urse. It's not going to kill you. Unless you're a fish."

He wasn't a fish, and he wasn't just going to give up now. He was Lord Ursempyre Remis and he was about to change everything, even if he ultimately failed. But first he had to go through this immediate predicament, and the smartest way to do that was to let the Patriarch think he's won. In any case he couldn't think of many ways of forcing his way out.

Even if he succeeded in killing him right here and now, he doubted he could make it out alive. So, thinking of bait and fish, he was determined to see the Patriarch outwitted, outmatched in his own game. Deception.

"You seem to be thinking hard into the matter, Lord Remis. As I had anticipated, you are taking this seriously, and weighing your,

very few I should remind you, options. So, what will it be Ursempyre Remis, will you vainly turn brother against brother and father against son? Will you have all that blood in your hands? End it before it even starts.”

Ursempyre’s reverie was broken, and upon hearing the Patriarch responded with a burst, his words were spat from his mouth rather than spoken:

“Lies! Deceit! You would have me believe all that just so you can bring the Kinsfolk out and pick us off one by one. And still, if you wouldn’t do that, if you only care for things to remain as they were, what will you do once I am named Castigator? Will you change the Law? Will there be reform? Will the people achieve some measure of freedom, of independence? Will your Gods, show mercy? Inspire prosperity and progress? Will the people enjoy better lives? Will your grasp upon them become lighter? Or will you squeeze and squeeze until not an iota of strength or resolve remains? Will you see the error of your ways and let the people free? Or will you keep making the same offer to other men, again, and again, and again?”

The Patriarch remained calm, and seemed unhindered in his efforts to force Ursempyre’s submission, or his hand:

“I think you’ve misunderstood my intentions. This is not a political bargain. Indeed any bargain of sorts. It is merely a possibility I am willing to entertain, because it suits me. Perhaps I haven’t been too clear, and at the same time I have misjudged your intelligence and powers of reasoning and extrapolation. I am not sharing power, or recognizing my decisions and rule as mistaken. You will not be handed real authority, and yes the people will continue to be oppressed as you put it, until I deem otherwise. You have no real lever against me, apart from certain time constraints that I must keep in mind. In other words, I am offering you a much more civilized way out, because I haven’t got the time to grind your puny rebellious followers into oblivion. Is that much understood now? Am I coming across? Can you reestablish the true position you are in now? Can you fathom that in my greater scheme of things you and your ‘people’ are a nuisance I want to deal with efficiently and move on? Or are you that infatuated with your pet idea of a free world that you have been completely cut off from reality? Perhaps you might think that can all act in every way you feel

like, that chaos can somehow lead to wonder. That it all sorts itself out in the end, doesn't it? How preposterous a notion! I can only find it natural to nurture such gross misconceptions since you are little more than infants, barely able to stand on their own two feet. How could you possibly know the truth of the cosmos? You still think of the stars as prickles of light, some of them falling down as they die. You would know real fear and awe when you saw the death of a star, I can assure you of that. But you still would not believe me. As you do not believe me now, thinking I am playing you like a fool, tightening and loosing an invisible line, as if you were a fish caught on my lure."

Ursempyre involuntarily flinched at the uncanny remark and was terrified at the thought the Patriarch was actually reading his mind. If that was true, he had been a fool from the start, all his hopes now laid to waste. He tried to compose himself, not to allow any more of his fear to show itself. The Patriarch was grinning malevolently when he said:

"I told you, I am not reading your mind. I could, but then I would have to kill you, and that would not expedite my goals. I have already devoted enough of time in this affair, what should have been a simple case of a 'yes' or 'no' has evolved into a time-consuming situation that only serves to further aggravate me as well as stall me, as you might be thinking is in your best interest. I might also be giving away details and information you would never even have dreamt of, but it will matter little because if you live you'll become my new Castigator, and if you die, well, dead men can't talk. Not that the rumors have hurt me much over the years. It seems that people will only believe what they are willing to. Suspension of disbelief can be a powerful weapon. But I digress. You make me so restless I cannot help myself. But seriously, what will it be? My patience is at an end. Whatever you want to happen next, tell me now."

Ursempyre's face was stern, contorted from the anxiety. He realized perspiration was running down his temples for some time. He had to make a leap of faith, and trust in himself like never before. Still, he knew he was walking in a territory far more dangerous than he could have imagined from beforehand. The Castigator, another pawn. These weird abilities of the Patriarch. Like the stories of Old, before the Pantheon. Folk tales they had seemed, but now they were inescapably

real, made manifest before his eyes. He did not know their true nature, and was loathe to find out. Still, why was he being offered this now? Should he not refuse? What made the Patriarch so certain of his superiority? What was the true extent of his power? Why had he not crushed them at their inception, while they were still a handful, weak, their organization still a dream, a footnote of history and legend brought back from oblivion, nothing but a speck against the power the Council held all over all? He had to find out before he plunged in a path that may well damn him and all those who believed in him. So he asked him directly:

“Why should I accept your offer? What makes you certain, what can you do to us that you have not done already? Haven’t you stifled growth, education, trade, economy? Isn’t almost everything under your control, in one form or another? Except perhaps the air we breath. Even the earth and the water, so indispensable to life itself, has become a commodity, something to be sold and acquired, according to your sick whims and desires. Even though that has held true for generations, we are willing to give our lives to stop this. And believe me we will, unquestioningly, unflinchingly. How will you break that resolve, I ask you? Since you are the one that has caused this, its your Law and your rule that has brought things too far. What good will the vanishing tricks do? Will you just vanish when the crowds of free men will be running after you? Demanding nothing less than your head? Or will you put on another light show like the one around me, hoping that the people you consider animals will be dazed, so sublimed that they’ll beg you for forgiveness for their sins? Tell me, oh Holy Avatar, why should we capitulate?”

“I never thought you were capable of such blandishment, dear Ursempyre. Yes, it is marvelous they way you people have been ground down to little more than mere animals. I must admit I sometimes feel a certain measure of pride at what I have achieved here. As for your other question, I believe that you should be careful not to confuse what you have seen here with the true extend of my powers. This is not a show I put on for you specifically, Lord Remis. It is merely an extension of courtesy, in good faith. I simply meant to cast off my mask, to create an honest, conversational atmosphere, in which I could nurture a more direct relationship with you, vis-a-vis. I simply showed

you that I am not the man you might have thought I was, but I am far more resourceful, and much more dangerous than what you think. Tell me, Ursempyre, have you heard of Shan the Traitor? The terrible Betrayer? And the Day of Redemption?"

"I have. It is supposed to be a part of history that has been wiped clean. I believe it is a myth, an insidious lie spread purposefully to dishearten, discourage any who would even think about opposing you, suppress their anger with fear and awe, with a promise of terrible retribution and divine wrath. An angel of the Gods who would come down from above and wipe us all in one sweep, one fell blow? Is that what you would have me believe? That you have that kind of power? That you will pray to your Gods and they will crush us like ants? Is your purpose to turn me, Patriarch, or make me laugh?"

"Yes, it would stand to reason to think of it as a mere lie, a fabricated tale, another piece of propaganda, but I the truth is much more simple. I do possess that kind of power. Let me demonstrate."

The Patriarch took a step back, and extended his arms. He took on a solemn expression, as if praying or concentrating deeply. A strange smell assaulted Ursempyre's nostrils. It seemed to emanate from the Patriarch, as far as Ursempyre could tell. A smell that reminded him of metal against metal, the smell of blacksmith's shop but he all he could see was that the Patriarch was now a bit taller than before. No, he thought, he is not taller. Something's wrong here, his mind voiced with concern. He noticed the Patriarch's feet were no longer touching the ground. Then, faint bluish crackles of light like tiny lightning's and sparks of light coursed through the Patriarch, his bald scalp having taken on an eerie sheen, as if it was suddenly a shiny metal mirror. The Patriarch grinned and uttered in High Helican:

"Behold, the Holy Avatar."

With that, the Patriarch tensed and a bright shiny aura began to emanate from him, as if turned on suddenly. Then his robes were drawn in, tightened around his body as if instantly shrunk. They visibly outlined his figure, and Ursempyre was surprised once more to see that such a body did not belong to an old man. It was an immaculate body, perfectly carved as if it was a statue, a penultimate monument to the human body, its musculature detailed beyond any artisan's capabilities and talent. It was the body a demi-God, exuding awe by sight alone.

The Patriarch's face began to twist and reshape itself as if it was made of water or mercury, all the facial characteristics turning into a pool engulfed in bright light as fire was about to scorch it. And all the while he could see the grin of the Patriarch, even though his face was no longer there. His mind reeled from the sight before him. It was true then, this was a monster beyond comparison. the stories and legends were true. And the Day of Redemption had happened. And it was him. It was him all along. Even before, all those years past. It had always been him. The realization left him wide-eyed struggling for breath. The robes around the Patriarch were absorbed into his flesh, which was now a rippling pool of molten metal, incandescent with a fiery aura around it, levitating a few feet above the ground, resplendent and regal in its unique and terrible form. At length, this figure spoke at him, with no visible source for the voice:

"I hate to show off but you forced my hand. I would really hate to raze a town just to convince you, Ursempyre. I believe you would hate to be the reason of such a slaughter. Do I have your attention now?"

Ursempyre could not know whether he was hearing the voice through his ears or simply in his mind. How little it mattered now, he thought. He only managed to nod, still staring at the majestic being in front of him.

"Please say it Ursempyre. Do you capitulate? Will you become my Castigator?", said the perfect, floating fiery figure of the Patriarch.

Ursempyre felt shocked, minuscule, unimportant. They were against a being of unimaginable power, not based solely on its manipulations, schemes, and outright terror practices. This was something else entirely, an terrible force. A demon that left you mesmerized in awe. Why couldn't this be a mere show, he thought. How could he have lived so long ago? How could he have brought such destruction by himself alone? How did he know he wasn't just lying, as was his usual practice?

He knew. When he saw him change into that thing, he saw. He felt its corruption overwhelm him, its malevolence flow around him, its power beaming right through him. It was true. He didn't know how exactly, but it was true. He could wipe them out if he needed too, if he wanted to. he did not believe that thing could be hurt, not in any real sense. He did not know whether the Patriarch himself was still

vulnerable, but he now believed this was his true form, and the old man a mere charade he found more practical. Or perhaps it was another one of his whims. It didn't matter, this was inescapable. He had no options now. All he had been planning was for naught. He would play along. But he would not give up. No, he knew they were at a disadvantage, but that was now a blessing. Had they went on with their plan, they would have been culled like sheep. It was almost as if he was trying to give them a warning, a second chance. He would capitulate he would accept, but only for now. Only until he knew what was going on this world of his, what was the truth behind all this, who was this being that had ruled over them for untold years with iron and steel, and whip and truncheon? He'd do what he could, and perhaps find a way to bring him down. The others, though, who had not seen what he had seen, would they believe him? Or would they just curse him as the traitor he would seem to have become? He could do little about that. he only hoped they'd forgive him before his end. That somehow this would workout. He turned to face the fiery figure, and looking at were its eyes should have been, managed to utter levelly:

"I will. I only do this because I now believe you when you say lives will be lost to no avail. Always remember that. Always remember that I only do this as a lesser evil, nothing more. I will only serve my people, not you, ever. If I find a way to turn against you, I will do so, without hesitation."

"Yes, indeed. I'm sure you will. Now that we finally settled this matter, I'll issue the relevant orders and perform the Ceremony of Kyryksis. Naturally, once you ascend to office you will also issue a statement for your men to stand down, and reconcile their grievances, as reforms are sure to be made and an arrangement has been agreed upon for a gradual transition into a free society. I believe the majority will accept such a turn of events with relief. No one likes dying. Except for a few fools that will probably follow your plan to the end anyway. Nothing important that my people will not be able to handle. Congratulations on a well-informed decision, Lord Remis."

The Patriarch returned to his human form in mere moments, the transition this time a lot quicker and much less dramatic. He offered his hand grinning profusely, but Ursempyre did not accept it. He rather looked at the Patriarch's hand with boiling contempt and disgust. The



Patriarch insisted, the hand still extended for a handshake, and said:

“Please, Lord Remis. I only rarely bite people. It is a simple handshake. Once you become the Castigator, you will be required to kiss my hand. For the sake of appearances, naturally.”

Ursempyre’s face was tense, as if carved of stone. His equally hard glare at the Patriarch, his eyes like fiery pinpricks of unyielding light, indicated that he was expending huge amounts of patience and self-restraint in order for him not to lunge at the Patriarch right then and there. But he would bide his time. With obvious reluctance and slow, deliberate motions that brought to mind a man in pain, he managed to shake hands with the Patriarch. He felt like he now carried a stain he could never wash off. He paused in thought, and at length asked the Patriarch who was about to call out to the guards:

“Tell me one more thing. Why didn’t you make me do it? Why didn’t you force me, with some of those bewildering powers of yours?”

The Patriarch paused in his step, turned to look at Ursempyre and smiled brightly before replying:

“Oh, my dear Castigator Remis, that would feel like cheating, wouldn’t it?”

## All in good time



tall, bleak man in a uniform approached a couple of soldiers that were standing over a fire, with a kettle on top of it brewing something with an uncharacteristic, though quite off-putting smell. They were sitting on some sacks laden with what must have been rice or wheat, having a smoke, sharing a pipe of what one knowledgeable in the art of uwe smoking could make out to be stale uwe. That is only when every once in a while the wind blew off the stench coming from the kettle. They were unaware of the tall man coming their way, since their backs were turned to him, and they were admiring the ships loading and unloading their cargoes in the distance of the harbor, the suns setting in quick succession, painting the sea mauve and bloody red, the sails casting their last shadows for the day. Their calm reverie was broken by a harsh, raspy voice:

“What’s in that kettle? Smells worse than the cow dung you’re smoking. I can only imagine you’re smoking it to cover that gods-awful stench you’re giving off. Last time you bathed, it must’ve been when the midwife rinsed off your mother’s blood.”

One of the two soldiers turned around and with a passing look of small surprise offered the pipe to the tall man, in spite of him sounding provocatively belittling. The other man remained indifferent, his head seemed to follow a flock of seabirds in the distance, swooping over the sea, probably hunting fish, or perhaps idling away their time, just as they were. The tall man was now standing with one foot on a stack of sacks. He took the proffered pipe and took a quaff of smoke, savored it before exhaling slowly, and then spoke to the two soldiers:

“Truly, worse than cow dung. I’d have you flogged but I’d be wasting the procrastinators’ time on some thickset pachyderm hides.”

The one soldier that still hadn’t turned to look at the man and was gazing at the harbor almost sleepily, asked him, his tone of voice revealing a genuine ignorance:

“What’s a pachyderm, dekar?”

“From what I’m told your wife for one, and perhaps your mother too.”

With that, both the dekar and the soldier who offered him the pipe laughed heartily. The other soldier seemed taken aback, shuffled himself on the sack uneasily and responded with some bitterness and a childish tone:

“Well you can have your laughs for dinner, cause I ain’t serving you no Mott’s famous Langarfan stew tonight.”

The dekar, their squad leader, went wide-eyed in apparent disbelief, a wide grin on his face:

“That’s the stench? Lanra.. Langar.. Whatever, that’s supposed to be stew? Mott, save us the trouble and run us through with a sword right here were we sit. I’d wager it’s faster and less painful for my innards. Can’t speak for Lanris here, he seems to be brave or stupid enough to eat that snot of yours. I think it’s because he’s stupid.”

“Let’s just say it’s an acquired taste, dekar.”

“Where did you acquire it then? The swamps?”

The dekar broke in laughter once again, but this time Lanris did not accompany him.

“No jokes dekar. It is an acquired taste. It’s taken me the better part of four years now to finally begin to enjoy Mott’s cooking. So don’t spoil it. As they say, dig in or get out.”

“There’ll be no digging in for dekar Pirru tonight. Or ever. I’ll leave those lowly menial tasks to you two men. Or what remotely resembles men. Ha.”

Dekar Pirru shook his head, grinning at the same time. Mott was now stirring his broth with a thick wooden stick that just seemed to be lying around handily. Lanris was putting some fresh uwe in his pipe. Twilight was upon them, the smoke from their kettle barely visible now. Dekar Pirru seemed suddenly engrossed with thought, his gaze stuck on the boiling kettle, eyes seemingly out of focus. Lanris took notice, waved his hand to check if indeed the dekar was in touch with his surroundings, and found out that was not the case. He said with a taste of lack of conviction:

“Dekar? Dekar Pirru?”

The dekar slowly turned his gaze to Lanris and made a sort of grumbling side, eyes focused again and brow furrowed now. Lanris continued:

“You seemed lost in thought. What’s on your mind? New ways to

drill us to death? Make us more miserable? Take away our cir rations? What is it that's had you day dreaming?"

"Hmm? I'm not daydreaming, mind you. Plain old bothers, that's all. This mobilization. Doesn't seem right. Not to me at least. You think this is all well and dandy?"

The dekar was standing upright again, arms folded, his sword sheath dangling about his belt, his expression a bit sour. Lanris on the other hand seemed quite relaxed, resting on the sacks nonchalantly, seemingly more concerned about the serving time of Mott's stew. He took a drought of smoke from his pipe, before answering his dekar without turning to look at him:

"Not my place to tell, dekar. I just sharpen my sword, fill my pipe and gulp down what Mott fancies each time. Though his menu is kind of repetitive. It must be the fourth time in a row we're having stew.", said Lanris with a mixed feeling of resignation and indifference.

Mott interjected Lanris abruptly, as if he was chiding him:

"Fifth time in a row. I'm getting us some karch tomorrow. Makes fine soup. You can piss off if you don't like karch soup, rummage about the camp. Perhaps you'll find a nice boot to munch on."

Lanris leaned over and slapped Mott on the shoulder jovially. He was smiling when he said:

"That'll be fine Mott. Karch's soup's fine. Don't get jumpy on me. If I can eat the sludge they serve on marches, I can sure as hell eat some of your cooking. It's not a gray ooze and that's enough in my book to make it *gourmet*."

Lanris intoned his last word with a certain character and an outlandish accent that made everyone laugh, especially Mott whose sullen mood was eased, and was now up on his feet, stirring his stew with a certain air of culinary dexterity. Around them, more campfires could be seen, soldiers like them who were about to cook something of their own, usually broths of wheat or barley which were the main staple food the army provided.

They were about to relax from the exercises of the day, as well as their other various duties. Some would eat something quick before heading off for sentry and patrol duty, and some would rest their aching muscles, have a pipe and something to fill their bellies, and sleep heavily until the next morning.

Some would have made their own arrangements concerning food, perhaps going out of their way to procure some meat, either by hunting, or by making certain trades, sometimes of a dubious nature. Most of the soldiers that did so, traded wine for meat or eggs. Wine and spirits were strongly forbidden, but vinegar was allowed to be carried, as it was a proven way of cleaning up wounds as well as used in the soldier's personal hygiene. At least for those that cared about it.

Some had a knack of mixing some vinegar with wine right before consuming it, in case some of the officers or procrastinators were making their rounds, checking up on morale or discipline in the latter case. Some had dubbed it winegar, and the name was in wide use in the army.

Even the officers partook sometimes, as it was known to them that the morale and cohesion of an army was far more important in battle than mere discipline and adherence to Law. It might be a sin, they knew, but who went through life as immaculate and free of sin as they when he was born?

And as long as those buffoons, the procrastinators, were none the wiser, everything worked almost as it should, and the army served its Castigator, and the Pantheon, in a most untroubled fashion. After all, as some of the older officers used to say, you can't make soldiers if you don't break open a few casks first.

Mott announced with some enthusiasm in his voice:

"Ready to serve! Dekar, you sure you don't want some of this? Works wonders for the stomach?"

The dekar was sharing some of Lanris pipe when he replied, after exhaling, wisps of smoke coming out of his mouth and nose:

"I'd rather not empty it right now, if that's what you mean. You can relish it all by yourselves. Don't let me stop you, no way."

Mott simply shrugged and went to his backpack to fetch his canteen. Lanris did so with languid motions, probably certain that the broth in Mott's kettle would not disappear any time soon.

They each helped themselves to a serving, and sat down on the ground, their backs against the sacks. They split some leftover bread-pie from their midday meal, and each began eating from their canteens, Mott clearly more than pleased with the quality of his cooking, gulping spoonfuls away with vivid enjoyment. Lanris seemed much more

reserved in his appreciation, and seemed to just be thankful for having something other than the drab, gray gunk the army called food to fill his stomach with.

Pirru was looking idly at them while they were having their supper, and at length said:

“You know, I heard the Castigator came around to visit the day before yesterday. No pomp and ceremony though. If that were the case I’m sure everyone would have known. We’d probably still be marching up and down parading our asses off.”

Lanris paused momentarily and furrowed his brow before continuing to eat slowly, more so because he wasn’t too fond of Mott’s stew rather than because he was savoring it. Mott on the other hand was scraping the last spoonfuls in his canteen, and was quite possibly going to refill it soon. Dekar Pirru went on:

“I see that didn’t get your attention, did it? Nothing short of your discharge papers would, I guess. The thing is, seems he had a talk with the General. Didn’t last long. Short and to the point, his staff officers seem to say.”

Mott was up on his feet once more, pouring some smoking hot stew in his canteen. He asked Pirru while sitting down to enjoy it:

“So, did word get out of what they talked about? Perhaps, his Piousness had gotten word of a fine chef among the Army’s 15th, and wanted some of my recipes?”

Lanris threw a sideways glance at Mott, before throwing a piece of bread-pie to his head as well. He did not add a verbal insult though, and kept trying to consume the broth left in his canteen. Pirru grinned at Mott’s comment and said with a slight edge of worry in his voice:

“No, I’m afraid his Holiness has not expressed any sort of death wish. I’m sure you’d be happy to serve in that case. In the most literal sense. Word around the staff officers is there has been a change of plans.”

Lanris left his canteen unfinished, broth and bread-pie still mixed inside. He placed it near one side of Mott, who surely not let it go to waste once his second canteen was emptied. Lanris wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and started filling his pipe from a pouch he had not opened before. He asked Pirru then:

“Dekar, how come you got by all these news? It’s not like you to

run around staff officers like Himmdal and Rynse do. You've said it yourself, if we even get a whiff about you sucking up to a staff officer, we can strip that dekar badge ourselves. So shall we each grab an arm and do the deed?"

Dekar Pirru looked at Lanris with one eye, pointing a finger at him, his rasp voice making the threat almost believable:

"Wise-guys get picket duty on the northern face. I'll make sure we stick you on the fence itself. You'll make a good scarecrow."

Lanris lit up his pipe nonchalantly. Mott was taking care of Lanris' leftovers and Pirru went on:

"As I was saying, word is easy to pass along. I didn't fetch coffee and wash uniforms for the staff officers to get by that important piece of intelligence. I used my cunning and my sharp mind. As well as some coin that I'd won on the zar game the night before. Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

Mott put down Lanris canteen empty, and burped loudly, feeling his stomach with one hand. He turned to look at his dekar with an evident smile of satisfaction on his lips, and said:

"So you went to the 'Cent."

Pirru started to say something in apparent protest, probably a mild reprimand, but Lanris added behind a small cloud of pure uwe smoke:

"Yeah, he went to the 'Cent. Probably ripped him off too. Like the last time when he asked ten coin for some real Iolathan wine that turned out to be vinegar. Not even winegar, mind you. Plain old vinegar from the pharmacium stores. He even had the nerve to insist that it was a vintage bottle that had could be easily mistaken for vinegar by someone who wasn't a connoisseur. I think he meant you, dekar."

"You can make a fool of me all you like, Lanris, but I won't be on the earthworks tomorrow morning, digging up dirt like some other soldiers I know."

Mott was enjoying a bit of rest, one leg propped up against the other, hands behind his head, his back flat on the ground. He added with a naive feeling of surprise:

"Oh you mean Guilemont and Howe? I knew you didn't like them a great deal, but putting them on the auxiliaries list now that must mean they really pissed on you proper."

Lanris was hugging his face with one hand, always surprised at the

ways Mott could sound like a complete dolt. Pirru went on:

“Something like that. Anyway, yes, I went to the ‘Cent. ‘One hundred per cent guaranteed’ Tibodot, the little rat. But I got my coin’s worth now. He wasn’t selling cow dung this time. I asked the Centarch somewhat sideways if all was going as planned, and he too said there was some upheaval upstairs. Some stuff would be put on hold until further notice. That’s probably the reason I’m not putting the pair of you on auxiliary tomorrow. The auxiliary’s been abandoned. All men are rotating back in their usual duties, as per regulation. Lanris, you lucky bastards.”

Lanris took a quaff from his pipe, savored it and exhaled, the smell of fine uwe smoke permeating the air around them. He said to Pirru:

“Actually, I learned about the auxiliary from a guy I trade regularly with at the 4th. He comes up with uwe, I come up with.. Stuff. Told me auxiliary’s gone starting by tomorrow. So, I figured you couldn’t push is into something worse than what we’re already at. Didn’t hear about the Castigator or the General though.”

“You should’ve pushed for rank, Lanris. Field Maggot Lanris has a ring to it, doesn’t it? Anyway, spare me the dung talk. I got some details on that talk, too. ‘Cent says that we’re waiting for some new marching orders.”

“Not the Widelands then?”, Mott cut in with enthusiasm, a glimmer of hope in his words.

“Can we ever be sure? If the marching orders do not explicitly say ‘Widelands’, they could well be saying ‘No-man’s land’, or ‘West of the City of Pyr’, or ‘Middle of Nowhere’. It still wouldn’t change much, would it? All it means, is there’s something serious going on.”

Mott cut in again, this time puzzlement in his voice:

“Where’s Sirius going to? Got transferred, like he wanted?Steam-gunner Battalion?”

Pirru sighed, before uttering a mild curse concerning Mott’s mother. He went on, concentrating his focus on Lanris, who was now listening more intently, having sat up and facing the dekar. He offered his pipe to Pirru, who refused it with a nod, and went on:

“Mott, just shut up and go to sleep. As I was saying, there’s a lot going on. I just hope the General knows his stuff, and we don’t end up on the wrong side of the turf.”



Lanris thought about what dekar Pirru had been telling them, and at length said:

“Well, going into the Widelands seemed strange. But orders are orders, right? So now, when we get new orders, they’ll still be orders. I don’t think it changes anything. About me at least. As long as I get my uwe, and even if I have to put up with Mott’s cooking, it doesn’t mean much. Just one thousand four hundred and thirty one days to go, dekar. That’s all that counts for me.”

“You’re all the same, you conscripts. You just want to get on with your lives, like it gets any better out there. Still, I don’t blame you. If something’s going to kill you, it doesn’t really matter where that will happen. I just happen to find change bad, that’s all.”

“You’re not trying to drag me down in one of your morose spells, are you?”

Pirru nodded while shrugging, an almost disarming and childlike reaction from a dekar almost six feet tall. He grinned to Lanris before replying:

“I got wine. Not winegar, real wine.”

“How did you get by that, I wonder?”

“Smuggled off some from the centarch’s cabinet. This stuff is guaranteed.”

“I see. So, we’re both risking forty lashes.”

“Twenty for me, I’ll pull rank.”

They both laughed somewhat bitterly in spite themselves. Pirru checked hastily around, not really bothering to indeed look for procrastinators or senior officers lurking in the dark, but rather as an instinctive reaction to fear of getting caught. He reached into his uniform and produced a small leather flask, no bigger than their water flask. He unsealed it and gave it to Lanris. He said with a wide grin of accomplishment:

“Smell that? Pure Decau wine.”

Lanris took a whiff, grimaced and shuddered reflexively. He gave the flask back to Pirru with exasperation in his voice:

“Gods dammit dekar, why the hell does the centarch buy his stuff from ’Cent? That’s winegar.”

Pirru looked genuinely surprised. He took a small sip from the flask and gulped it down. His face lit up with a look of recognition:

“It really is vinegar. Seems the centarch bought ‘Cent’s dung speeches as well. But still, it’s better than nothing, right?”

Lanris had a sour look on his face, but he nodded in agreement:

“Guess it is. Lemme have a swig.”

Pirru handed the flask of vinegar to Lanris. Mott could be heard snoring smoothly. A rather unfamiliar voice was suddenly heard from the edges of the darkness around them:

“Let me see that flask, dekar. It’s not vinegar is it?”

“Dekar Pirru and Private Lanris of the 5th, under the command of Cilliarch Romenthos Isoract were put to the sword today at dawn, right after roll call, by a squad of procrastinators. Expeditious procedures were followed and their files of death were officially sealed by both the Procrastinator’s Office and the Strategium Proper. Private Mott of the 5th, was given fifty lashes and almost bled to death for, and I quote: ‘Not being vigilant enough in the prosecution of vile deeds that promoted sin, incurred the wrath of the Gods or were an affront to the Pantheon and the Ruling Council’. He was not allowed to return to his duties as an active soldier and as such was denied of medical attention. He was rotated to the work gangs as per the Cilliarch’s orders. Also, Cilliarch Isoract relieved centarch Littmo from his duties and has petitioned that he be discharged dishonorably. The vinegar in question seems to have been stolen from the centarch’s personal cabinet, from what the procrastinator investigation revealed.”

Major Guighan saluted crisply, and remained there standing like a statue, immovable, his one hand holding his reports and the other hand a fist touching his shiny, unadorned breastplate, right above the heart.

General Tyrpledge saluted briefly, almost touching his breastplate with his relaxed fist, and sighed. Major Guighan, clicked his heels, resumed a more relaxed, but still attentive posture and asked the general:

“Sir, will that be all? Should I continue with my work, or is there something else you’d have me do, sir?”

Tyrpledge seemed to ponder that suggestion for a little while, briefly considering what he could have the Major do. He was rather disenchanted by everything today. He was looking at the ceiling, the expression on his face lacking the usual austere, professional look. He took a look in his mirror earlier. He supposed he looked kind of glum, morose, even outright sad. There wasn’t much he could do about it, he

thought. Neither was there something for the major to do as well. He waved him away with one hand, while he kept tapping a marching tune on his desk with his fingers on the other hand.

At length he spoke:

“No, that will be all major. Nothing else you can do for me. I’ll bark if I need anything.”

The major was about to laugh when he saw the general was not smiling when he said what the major thought of as a joke. He then clicked his heels, made a couple of paces backwards still facing the general, turned about smartly and left, careful to close the door behind him.

Tyrpledge sighed more audibly this time, thinking this day had started off more badly than usual. Though the term ‘usual’ was rapidly evolving from day to day, this was as bad as bad days can become. And it was still only morning. Major Guighan had just given him the latest situational report. These two men were the first dead in this campaign, and a single shot had yet to be fired. They’d been executed for drinking winegar and stealing from an officer. The centarch’s career was gone. Perhaps at an opportune time, though.

Last night a message had arrived, complete with high-ranking ministers and a squad of the procrastinator elite. Tyrpledge had been notified that the army was now officially mobilized and legally at war. Of course, he thought, there were no specific orders included, other than that he should await for further notification at a later time. In essence, they were leaving him and his men to roast on hot coals until it suited their purpose. Such was the fate of soldiers, he mused bitterly.

Actually, those orders had cost those men from the 5th their lives. As it is, they were at war even though they didn’t know with who, and that meant that by Law, the procrastinators dispersed among them had more authority than he did in matters of discipline, persecution of sinners and the relevant penalties that might apply.

It seemed that in wartime, theft and consumption of spirits and other substances that ‘occluded the mind’ were punishable by death. Tyrpledge was thinking that the centarch whose life was destroyed was lucky compared to his men. He then spared a few moments thinking about the soldier who was found asleep, next to the ones that had been drinking.

They had given him fifty lashes because he wasn't vigilant enough. And then they had left him without even a towel to soak up his blood. Tyrpledge's thoughts on the matter was that it would be a miracle if he made it out alive. But that's what war is about.

"Logic is thrown out the window.", he voiced his final thoughts in a low voice, almost a whisper, and sat upright in his chair, hands outstretched, his gaze focused outside beyond his window, where he could see the majority of his battalions forming up. He could discern a sullen mood. It was not that the pace of the men milling about was slow. They were preparing their equipment fastidiously, checking their armor and their packs so as to make sure everything was in order. They had that unmistakable air of professionalism about them. But they seemed to be lacking the blaze in their eyes. The glimmer in their eyes, the red flush cheeks that let you know their blood was boiling, their hearts pumping with excitement. There were no such signs here. No nervous humor from his staff members, no raunchy jokes from the enlisted men. At least he could see any of them laughing. Every face he could make out from that distance, was stern, frigid, cold. This, he thought, should not be the faces of men going to war, knowing they might be dead before the night falls, wishing their death would be worthwhile, remembered, even praised. This was the face of men knowing they might be dead and wishing they were someplace else.

The execution of the men from the 5th had taken quite a toll on overall morale. They might be much more cowed now, but that's not what he needed to wage war. He needed hot-bloodied men with vices and things to wish for. Not little meek children fearful of the reprisals of the Law. Why didn't the procrastinators understand that?

For the briefest moment he thought about contacting the Procrastinator Militant, asking for his assistance, perhaps telling him even to go as far as relaxing their vigilance, bending but not strictly breaking the Law.

He immediately thought better of it, since he reminded himself that GomerMont was above all, first and foremost an idiot. And telling an idiot who has spent a considerable amount of time and effort to become leader of a pack of idiots to smarten up a bit suddenly, was if not a one-way ticket to the gallows, a certain way to scream in despair and agony at the mind-numbing foolishness the Procrastinator Militant

exuded with his every utterance. In essence, it would be a lost cause.

There was a time for war and a time for peace, security, stability, lawfulness. War was lawlessness in itself, a grandiose lawless fair where people died horribly and for reasons beyond their understanding, where nothing mattered more than victory. When would they understand that? Probably not soon enough.

His bleak thoughts were accented by the lack of a good cup of uwe. He decided he wanted a nice distraction, something to take his mind of a situation he now felt powerless to amend. He would just have to swim through the wave of the coming difficulties as they arose stoically. To do that, he had to have a good cup of uwe, fresh and steamy.

He now felt determined to turn his thoughts around, wish for the best, keep his hopes up. The uwe would be critical in that respect. He went for his bell in order to let his aide-de-camps know he wanted some uwe urgently, but before he could do that, as if by a miracle or a mind-reading ability that the major had not exhibited so far, he entered through the door in a hurried fashion, stood to one side, saluted briskly and clicked the heels of his boots, his sword smartly tucked away with his free hand.

Before Tyrpledge could utter a single word, the Castigator of the Outer Territories walked in the general's office, resplendent in his war gear, a match for what he was wearing on the anniversary of the Pacification of Zaelin, the brightly polished metal casting off intense reflections of the suns.

The major tried announced the Castigator, but he was cut short by a wave of the Castigator's hand, barely having time to utter the word 'behold'. The Castigator was dressed for wartime, that much was certain. His lavishly plumed helmet under his one arm, he asked the general directly, who was still sitting down in his chair, too flabbergasted to remember about adhering to protocol and paying proper respect:

"General Tyrpledge, are your forces ready to march?"

Tyrpledge rose up from his seat, cleared his throat and replied in a clear, steady voice:

"The Army is ready to march for war, your Reverence."

"Very well. Signal your brigadiers to assemble, general. We move as fast as possible."

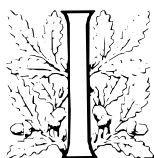
The Castigator nodded and made a turn to leave, before Tyrpledge

asked with some hesitation:

“Thy will be done, sire. May I ask though, sire, where to?”

“The City of Pyr.”

## Devoted Servants



Is the refreshment to your liking, my lady? Please, do not hesitate to ask anything else you might desire. Definitely let me know if the piiri juice is not quite tasteful, I can assure you it is part of my job. I merely wish for the guests of House Remis to feel more than welcome. That involves knowing if I have performed my task adequately. I strive to fulfill my duties in the most impeccable way possible. A matter of professional pride. So, please let me know if anything is not as you would wish it.”

“I think I understand. No, everything is fine. The juice is quite refreshing, especially after the walk here. Thank you for your concern. I feel fine. I’ll let you know the moment I don’t. The one thing that worries me now is that I might give birth under the circumstances. I’m due pretty soon. As far as I can tell, I’m perhaps overdue.”

“Please, my lady, think nothing of it. If the time comes, the servants in House Remis will be more than eager to help you with your labor. I will inform the maids to have hot water and fresh clean towels ready at hand. I’ll sent for the doctor immediately and notify him to be ready to attend. Until the doctor arrives, I’m sure one of the maids, Hrund I think, will be able to act as midwife. So, settle your mind and your worries. You and your child are safe here.”

“I.. Am at a loss. I could never hope to repay your kindness, dear sir. You have not told me your name, though, and I haven’t given you mine. The rapidity of the events has quite overwhelmed me and my manners have gone begging. I am Celia Ptolemy, daughter of Turil Olom and wife to Amonas Ptolemy. I am quite pleased to be in your care, and I can only promise you that my husband and I will repay you by whatever means possible, in due time.”

Ikebod smiled and waved one hand dismissively before answering:

“Please dear lady, you are among friends here. No loss incurred, no debt outstanding. You owe nothing to me, perhaps one of your smiles to brighten up the room. But even if you did, it would not be to my person, but Master Remis, the Lord of the House. So, if you still insist on expressing your gratitude and feel that a debt has been accrued, then you must take it to Master Ursempyre. I am barely the man to quieten

down your fears and relieve you of such petty worries as debt. I am sure that when he arrives, he will properly make you feel comfortable enough and shatter your notions of indebtedness to House Remis.”

Celia stare grew somewhat hard, and fixed, her face stern, her usually sweet features marred by a certain hardness, an unyielding quality, as if she suddenly wore a veil of hurt:

“I am sure he will, but please allow me at least some modicum of decency and pride. I am not a beggar off the streets, I am simply a woman in distress. No matter what your Master says, I feel indebted and I shall repay him in whatever way I can, when I can do so.”

Ikebod went wide-eyed with shock and surprise, having not realized that he had somehow offended Celia. His hands wavered and trembled slightly before he instinctively knelt on one leg, a heartfelt lament in his voice, imploring Celia:

“I am most sincere in offering my apologies, dear lady. I would have never thought of hurting your sense of pride and decency. Had I such an intention, I’d prefer to have my tongue cut out so as not to utter a single word of insult. I had no idea. Please, lady Ptolemy, it would hurt me to no end to be the subject of your perpetual animosity. I beg you to find it in your heart to forgive me. If you cannot, I will take leave of my master and begone since I can no longer serve him with honor.”

At these words, Celia grew mellow and was stricken with worry that she had hurt the servant’s feelings more than he had hers. She stood up from her chair slowly, took the venerable servant by one arm and helped him to straighten his back, a soothing voice with hints of grief and regret issued from her lips:

“It seems my words stung you more than I could imagine. I spoke out of turn, I did not intend to cause you such distress and discomfort. Please, sir Wirf, I should be the one apologizing. I took your words too strongly. I know you meant no ill or disrespect. You are too kind a soul for such things. Please, call me Celia. And if that would make you feel any better, I am sure your Master could not have wished for a better man to serve him.”

Ikebod seemed to relax upon hearing such words, and although welled up tears seemed to have formed in his eyes, he managed to smile faintly and resume his more professional manner.



“You are most exculpatory, my lady.”

“Please sir Ikebod, can we sit someplace else? Preferably somewhere I can lay down? My back feels strained.”

“Let me help you to a comfortable couch. You will lay there will I let the maids know of your situation and inform the doctor to be alert as well. Lend me your hand and follow me to the waiting room.”

Celia gave her hand like Ikebod asked her, and he led her through a small corridor into the waiting room, which was in essence, a large guest hall, lavishly adorned with paintings, complete with what appeared to be well-lacquered hand made quality furniture of very fine and delicate taste. There were even crystal chandeliers full of lit candles, brightly illuminating every corner of the more than adequately large chamber, fit for a grand banquet rather than a mere waiting room.

The paintings seemed to be portraits of the ancestral Lord of House Remis, numerous indeed. Celia had no intimate knowledge of the House's history and tradition, but it seemed like they were truly an old, venerable family of illustrious heritage. She took a closer look of some of the portraits, and the plaques on each one confirmed her thoughts: Some had been Generals of the Army, some Noble Representatives just like Lord Ursempyre. But she took more notice of the ones who seemed not to have taken a liking in politics or the army. Their portraits were mostly family portraits, including all the close members of the family: their children and wife, as well as their grandchildren where applicable. Some portraits were quite large, others much smaller, rather undistinguished. Most depicted smiling, warm, inviting faces. House Remis seemed to be bred and raised as good-hearted, wholesome people. It seemed only natural to her now that one of them would choose to side himself with what many would consider dangerous, traitorous, spiteful, blasphemous people. The thought that any man would consider people like Amonas as such, depicting them as worse than murderous scum, made her giggle despite herself. Her thoughts went briefly to Amonas. She stopped giggling then, but did not feel despair and sullenness like before. She simply felt a keen longing for her love. That made her touch her swollen belly reflexively, as if to share her thoughts with her unborn child.

At length, she said:

“I'll lie down now, if you don't mind.”

“Certainly, my lady. This is only temporary, while the maids make arrangements for your room. Until I serve the uwe, you should be able to lie down in comfort in a bed. Please, a few more minutes. I’ll be back shortly. If you’ll excuse me.”

“By all means. Thank you for your consideration once more.”

“Nothing but my duty to serve you, lady.”

She sat down on a wide couch with red velvet lining and only one arm. It must have been purposefully designed as such, for people to relax comfortably in a lying position. With slow, careful movements she laid herself down, her head relaxing on a plush soft pillow propped against the couch’s single arm. She felt her back throbbing slightly, faint echoes of pain coursing from her feet up to her neck. She was tired, she had to admit to herself. The tension and the urgency, the walk here, all that had been too much for her in her situation. She thought for a minute how she could hope to outrun any possible pursuers. She hoped she’d give birth before such a necessity arose, and if that was not the case, she hoped she’d find the strength to do so. Her gaze wondered around the luxurious but not pompous chamber. Small objects of art were to be found on most furniture, like the grand table and some fine cabinets. She thought the decoration was very appropriate and measured, to her surprise. She had thought rooms like these were designed to impress with their ornate luxury, flaunt the owner’s riches and resources. But this was not the case. It was an elegant space, that very much invited pleasant, quiet, reflection and sincere conversation. A place to spend quality time, she thought. As she closed her eyes, eagerly welcoming the onset of a much wanted sleep, her gaze was locked on plain but beautifully crafted vase of pure crystal, the shimmer of the candle light forming tiny little multi-hued rainbows on the crystal’s numerous faces. It reminded her of summers gone past, she and her father alone by the like, him teaching her about the water, the sky and the light. She could only remember him fishing quietly, almost reverently, with never-ending patience and almost complete devotion. With that warm memory, she fell asleep on the couch, clutching her abdomen because of an instinct none could hope to suppress.

She woke up drenched in sweat and threw the covers laid on her in frenzied panic. Her breathing was fast and heavy. She had seen a nightmare. This time she had been captured by men with no face.

The memory of it was still vivid. The men had tried to kill her baby, without killing her outright.. She had made every effort not to let them, but in vain. They had their way and left there where she lay, a damp place that smelled of metal and rust. They'd left her there to die, right by her baby. She shivered at the thought and felt dry tears staining her cheeks. She must have screamed when she woke up, because Ikebod was running down the stairs, a glass of water in one hand.

"Lady Celia! I heard screams, are you alright?"

She nodded in acknowledgement, visibly somewhat shaken from her bad dream.

"I am better now. I saw a nightmare, that's all."

Ikebod offered her the glass of water, which she eagerly accepted and sipped a little, just to wet her mouth and feel its freshness.

"I had not the heart to wake you from your sleep, so I brought some covers and left you at peace."

"That was very sweet of you, Ikebod. Thank you."

A smile crept up in a corner of her mouth, but it was not as warm and glittering as usual. It would be a little while until she recovered fully from her nightmare.

"You seem a little pale. That will not do in your situation. I have prepared dinner myself. I was waiting for Master Ursempyre to return but that has yet to happen. I admit I am more than worried for his safety. He was summoned by the Patriarch himself. His delay could mean a lot of things, most of which I dare not think about from consternation. In any case he would not want a guest of his to starve to death, especially a lady carrying. I would be happy to serve you dinner, even though it is now past midnight."

Ikebod's tone belied his fear. He sounded calm and accommodating, professional as ever. As if the danger his master was probably facing was no more than a hindrance, an annoyance at best, and that he would soon be surely meeting them at the dinner table. Celia on the other hand sat upright with a jolt, her eyes went wide and her face wore a mixed expression of anxiety, disbelief and exasperation. Her voice was pitched high when she said to Ikebod, staring him with a frown:

"Went to meet with the Patriarch you say? Under the circumstances that does sound too fortuitous for comfort. Could it be that the uprising has been revealed? Your master could be in grave danger,

Ikebod! Surely you must've heard the stories! The Patriarch makes people vanish as if they never had been born! And you ask of me to have dinner at such a time? How could I ever?"

Ikebod took the courage of sitting right beside her, a gesture he would have normally found insulting beyond forgiveness, indeed beyond absolution. Nevertheless, he felt lady Celia would not be offended, and he wanted her to understand him wholly on the matter:

"Dear lady Celia, I know all that, and still I would ask of you to have something to eat. For your child's sake. Do not think of me as a cynic, or a bland acquiescent servant. I dearly love Master Ursempyre, for I have almost raised him as my own ever since his parents passed away when he was still just a little boy. When he left the estate, he gave me specific orders in the event of his disappearance. I too believe in the kinsfolk and the purpose that drives them. I would be betraying my master if I wavered, if I gave up without a fight, if I thought him dead and gone so easily. But even without him, lady Celia, life must go on. We must try our hardest to have freedom for all, for once. If anything should happen to him, I will grieve like a father who's lost his only child. But I've learned there's a time for grieving, and a time for hoping, a time for fighting. And so I shall hope, and fight, until I have reason to do nothing else but grieve. Do you understand that, my lady? I hope you do. Please now, come and have something to eat, if not for your sake, for your child's."

Celia looked in the old servant's eyes with compassion and a sudden care she had not felt until now. He was opening up his heart and soul to her, exhibiting trust she had thought rarely found. She thought she understood. In a manner, that was how she felt for Amonas, who though was nowhere to be found, and had not seen or heard from him for days now, she still knew he was alive. Against reason, she knew he was alive, somewhere. And she'd better give up her life before she gave up hope. Because, she thought, even if Amonas would never return, their child would be born. And she would have to do her best to deliver her child in a new, free world. Even if her love would not be there to greet their firstborn.

She stifled some tears that welled up in her eyes and sniffed slightly. She nodded her understanding to Ikebod, and without further comment or remark she tried to smile uncomfortably and asked

him:

“What will we be having for dinner then? I believe the baby will not mind at all.”

Ikebod rose from the coach and offered his hand as leverage to Celia. He smiled and told her:

“Well, then. I’ve prepared some fawn soup with some beaten egg and lemon, a variety of sweetmeats, smoked ham and roast potatoes with butter, some lamb stew with uwe and some nivoa fish with a beet-root puree. The salad is a mix of cabbage, lettuce, and radishes, dressed with oli and goat’s cheese. For desert, I’ve prepared some cherry pie and the master’s favorite, nutmeg and chestnut maffle. I apologize for the lack of salad variety, but I was in a hurry.”

Celia smiled more brightly and shrugged before saying:

“Though I’d be interested to see what you would have prepared if you weren’t in a hurry, sir Ikebod. Please, do not lay out all that. I think I’ll have the soup and perhaps try the dessert as well.”

“As you wish my lady. Which dessert should I serve then?”

“Oh, both. I’d hate to be picky.”

Ikebod smiled knowingly and Celia could swear he saw him blink an eye as well. He gestured for her to follow him up the stairs, and she did so with eagerness.

“Please, right this way. The table is set.”

Celia nodded her thanks and smiled. She felt very lucky to be treated so warmly by, in essence, complete strangers. She was almost feeling guilty of overindulging herself, but she withheld such thoughts, since she felt they’d only serve to insult Ikebod’s hospitality and hurt his feelings.

They went up the stairs and they were greeted by a large dining-hall, dark green and gray marble columns supporting the high ceiling. Exquisitely ornamented chandeliers adorned the roof and cast bright let across every corner. The dinner table was made from a fine solid piece of wood that seemed old and venerable, but judging by its healthy sheen, was thoroughly maintained. It was probably hundred of years old and from its size, Celia thought it could seat upwards of three dozen people, perhaps even four. She noticed there were no plates of food or dishes of any kind set and she was slightly puzzled. They were probably to be seated somewhere else.

He led her to an antechamber through a utility corridor, meant for the servants to have access to the kitchen. Celia asked with evident interest:

“Where is everyone else by the way? I haven’t seen a soul.”

“Oh, most are asleep by now my lady. The maids tended to your room, and it’s ready for you. I suggest you lie down there right after your dinner. Some of the other servants and the guards have certain duties to attend to in other parts of the estate, mainly the stables from what I can gather. House Remis is not always this silent, perhaps in the morning you will see for yourself.”

Celia inquired no further and soon they entered the kitchen itself. Dimly lit by a few candles, it was full of utensils and large wooden surfaces for chopping meat and foodstuffs. She could see there were more than one stoves and at least large ovens. Large empty bowls, cauldrons and kettles were gathered in one corner. Though quite large for a kitchen, Celia felt the place was cramped and imagined it would be close to asphyxiating when people were working here in full swing. Ikebod pulled a chair for her and gestured for her to sit.

She thanked him with a smile, and sat down to a quite normal table that seemed to have seen its fair share of use. It was indeed laid out with a simple linen, the bowl of soup in the middle, a glass and a wooden jug of wine side by side. Her plate was already filled with steaming soup, which gave off a light aroma. Indeed, the kitchen smelled of a lot of things, and the odors seemed to fight each other fervently but to no avail. She realized the smells exacerbated her hunger and she started to sip her soup eagerly. Ikebod asked Celia:

“My feet ache. They tend to do that at my age. Would you mind if I silently kept you company?”

“I might have asked you that myself. Please do, by all means.”

She felt indeed in the presence of a friend long lost, or more likely, long sought after. Perhaps Ikebod reminded her of her father. She was too young to remember much about him, but she knew he was a good father, a good man. She was certain Ikebod was such a man as well.

As she finished her plate of soup, she briefly thought about having another serving. The child must be hungry as well, she thought. But another serving this late at night wouldn’t help to ease her bad dreams. Ikebod, as if he could read minds, had already served her a plate of

cherry pie and that maffle he had mentioned earlier. She attributed Ikebod's forward thinking to his long experience as servant to a noble house, very much so the Noble Representative's estate. No matter why or how, his timing was perfect.

He nodded to her and said:

"I'd advise you to start with some maffle, then savor a bit of the cherry pie. It has a nice sour touch to it. Then I'd mix and match at will."

She nodded appreciatively and happily dug in the maffle with a small fork. She felt genuinely happy and thankful there was time enough for her to enjoy a nice dessert. It reminded her of happier times, as if everything was alright in the world.

Her thoughts were disturbed by what seemed to be sounds akin to yelling and shouting coming from other parts of the house. She could hear there was some uproar, voices from rooms above conversing loudly. It was all too sudden. Ikebod was already leaving the kitchen. He turned to her as he stood at the open door:

"Please, stay here. I'll come back right away. Don't worry, you are safe. If we had been under attack I'd known from the sounds. There's some uproar that's all. Probably important news. I won't be long."

Ikebod was at once gone from her sight. She returned her gaze to the table. The desserts were lying in her plate in front of her, half-eaten and unruly. She noticed she had not restrained herself from eating as she pleased, but she had rather enjoyed it. Which was only natural not to last forever, she thought. The dimly lit kitchen which had felt warm and full of wholesome smells, now seemed vacant, cold, dark. She felt like leaving the room immediately, and did so with some haste. She wanted to see and hear the news herself. Perhaps there was news about Amonas; her heart skipped a beat at the thought, but she brought her mind to its senses. That would not cause such an uproar. "Something awful's going to happen", she said to herself in a hushed voice that echoed uncomfortably inside the empty kitchen.

She went through the corridor into the dinning-hall. She could hear voices from below, and she raced to the stairs leading to the waiting-room with wary expectation wrinkling her face. When she reached the feet of the stairs below, she could see Ikebod hurriedly conversing with three men, two of them clad in metal armor, and one of them bearing

a disheveled cloak, with mud and perhaps blood on his face. The two men must have been guards and were being issued orders probably, nodding emphatically at something Ikebod was explaining. The other man was evidently fatigued, perhaps injured, and he seemed exhausted from running, breathing heavily, once every so often gulping down some water from a tall jug.

She just stood there, not knowing if she should interrupt them, probably fearing she would ask something silly or impertinent. She thought that this was no time for being shy, and just called out for Ikebod, not harshly, but demanding his attention:

“Sir Ikebod? What is the matter? What has happened?”

Ikebod and the other men turned to look at her with what felt like concern. After a brief pause of silence, Ikebod answered her:

“The army is on the move. Castigator Olorius Menamon the IV th has fled the city, and it seems he is in command of the army.”

He paused again, this time his face visibly contorted by a strange mix of exasperation and sorrow, his eyes torn between shedding tears of anger or rueful weeping. Celia was transfixed where she stood, her breath coming in shallower with every word Ikebod spoke. At length he continued:

“And.. And Lord Ursempyre Remis has been named the new Castigator.”



**Part III**

**Ad Veritas**

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# The burial of the dead

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“I believe I have gathered conclusive evidence as to the function of the various artifacts known as keystones. In fact, it can be safely proven by virtue of experimentation that these are in fact devices of a highly evolved civilization from an ancient past that perished long ago, leaving in its wake nothing but seemingly non-nondescript memorabilia as the remains of a monumental metropolis located in the Widelands, as evidenced in the writings of Esphalon. I can honestly say that such an unprecedented work as I am engaged in currently will be proven to have earth-shattering effects and verily change our world forever.”

- Curator Cimon Olom, *A treatise on the nature and function of the keystones*

## Memory and desire



MONAS had been watching Hilderich for what seemed to be the better part of an hour now. Hilderich was intently

studying the surface they were standing on, as well as the base of the horns themselves. He kept clutching the keystone, scratching it with a finger at times. He seemed to be quite absorbed in thought. Amonas had felt he could not contribute at this time, and did not bother Hilderich with questions or other small talk. He saw no way out of this situation and certainly no way to “ride the flames” as Hilderich had put it with enthusiasm.

As Amonas replayed what Hilderich had tried to explain to him, the idea seemed extravagantly far-fetched, more like a Curator’s wild fantasy than anything that seemed to hold any ties with the realm of reality.

Hilderich insisted that they keystone was what would enable them to realize “the plan”. The plan was to signal the flaming sphere, bullet, missile or “train”, whatever one might call it, to stop and pick them up. Amonas thought that first and foremost, it was preposterous to consider that thing that rushed over their heads could be tamed, indeed made to stop. It sounded as if a man could command a falling star to cushion its fall, to peacefully glide to a stop so he could touch it. So the idea that one could actually even board such a thing defied any kind of logic Amonas could summon. Hilderich was either totally insane or on the brink of an ingenious discovery that could dwarf everything Amonas had seen, including the things that had been revealed to him when he stepped into the damnable pillar of light in the first place.

He truly hoped the latter case would hold true. In the meantime, while Hilderich seemed to be muttering to himself, pacing about the flat, matte black floor of the summit, Amonas’ thoughts turned to Celia. Had she given birth? Was she safe? Had the uprising began? So little time had passed, but he was absent at a time that could prove to be the important one in history. He was afraid he would not be able to keep his promises to Celia. It all rested with Hilderich. It was a liberating emotion, in a sense, to have someone else hold the keys to your future. Someone else would to blame, someone else’s success or failure was, in essence, what would gain him a trip back home or a slow, harrowing death filled with guilt, remorse and memories that would haunt him forever. But was it really only on Hilderich’s efforts? Was there nothing he could do or think of? Had he given up on them already?

This damnable place afforded him no real rest, toying with his fears, his doubts, his ignorance. He threw a fist to the black floor, which remained unyielding, unbroken. The pain that swept up from his hand joggled him back into a more determined stance.

Even if he had not the slightest idea about this place and the flaming sphere, Hilderich seemed to have at least some idea, something to follow through, something that could work. And if it didn't, they'd find something else, move on, think of another idea. Perhaps study the bullhorns in depth, find out their purpose. The land could support them, so they would keep on trying to get home.

They would endure. All they had to do was endure and there would find a way. There must be a way. He'd do his best to help Hilderich, even if that meant he'd have to trust him with his life. They'd get back, that's all that mattered in his mind. He would get back home to Celia, and their child. He promised to himself he'd get back even if he'd have to walk back.

The clutches of reality were inescapable though and he snapped back to it when the sweat running down his forehead had turned into a small, steady trickle. The heat even under the shadows was uncomfortable. They did not have much in the way of water left, only a couple of the hard-skinned fruit.

He was wary of leaving Hilderich alone while he went back down to collect some more of the fruit, and perhaps locate some source of water. The fruit were watery enough, but their sweet taste would soon feel sickly if they kept consuming them all the time. He'd have to breach the subject sooner or later, but he decided to give Hilderich some more time with his musings first.

They did not know when the next flaming sphere would appear and that only served to increase Amonas' uneasiness. He believed it would be much more useful that they went down to the base of the bullhorns, where they could find shelter from the sun, as well as food and drink. He also thought that they could forage while going around the base of the bull-horned structure, which Hilderich was now calling 'horned pyramid', an architectural reference Amonas was not familiar with.

Anyway he thought that was a much more sound, safe, and logical plan. Hilderich had argued against it, saying that there should be enough time between passings for them to figure out how to use the

flaming vehicle, and they should not wander away when they could be so close to escaping this place. Amonas had resisted the idea in more depth, by pointing out that even if that were so, they had not heard or seen the passing of such a thing ever since they arrived here, which would imply that whatever that thing was, it did not make frequent overpasses.

Hilderich counter-argued that as was the case with wagons and carriages, arrivals and departures did not have to be evenly spaced and sometimes schedules changed without notice, because of necessity. Amonas had left it that but they at least agreed to go down once their water supply had run out, rest, re-supply and at the same time search around the base of the horned pyramids for a possible way in. He hoped it would not come to that, but he was fairly sure that was a most optimistic view of things.

Hilderich seemed to be lost in an inner circle of conjectures and theories that did not seem to produce any tangible practical benefits. At times he would stop and ask if Amonas had noticed anything new about the structure, especially the floor and the horns, and regrettably Amonas had quietly and calmly insisted that if he had noticed nothing new, and that if anything to that effect did happen he would surely notify him immediately. Hilderich would then nod and go back to his calculations.

He had already paced around the edges of the floor, and had even walked over the shadows of the horns, seemingly measuring their length, for reasons Amonas could not even hope to infer. It seemed like utter charlatanism, a madman in the wilderness trying to make sense of something bewilderingly distant, like the suns or the stars, the color of the sky, and so on. But he would have to be patient and see.

At any rate, they'd soon have to go down to the base of the pyramid for water, mostly. Hilderich must be feeling dry as sand by now, and he'd definitely developed a sunburn by now.

The keystone in his hand was more like a sigil to him, a charm, something he had to connect himself with. He kept feeling for it, touching it, running his fingers around it, but he had yet to use it as a device, or as a measure or something that would seem somewhat pertinent. It was a greenish stone that gave off blue, almost turquoise reflections. It seemed to have a certain depth, a reflective quality.

It could be a raw gem, or something similar. Perhaps a glass, he couldn't be sure of its nature, and he certainly was no expert. It was just that it had a very strange appearance, one that could not be easily compared to whatever stone or gem he had seen or heard of. It must be really rare, Amonas thought.

Rare enough for someone to keep collecting them, and rare enough to seal Olom's fate. He'd certainly miss him. Celia never knew, perhaps it was for the best. Now that he's really gone beyond.. It was just, Amonas felt, a bit unfair on her. He felt guilty for not telling her, but it was a promise he would never break, and so did not. Perhaps, in time, he could find it in his heart to tell her the truth about her father. On second thought, he felt he was obligated to do so, actually. Just as soon as they got back. A time that seemed quite indeterminate at that point.

Amonas decided then that he had stay quiet long enough and at length asked Hilderich, who was standing almost at the far end of the summit, peering downwards over the edge:

“Any progress?”

Hilderich did not turn around, did not even stir or notion somehow. It seemed he was rather absorbed in thought. Amonas disliked shouting in principle, so he sighed and walked over to Hilderich. He noticed the man was standing at the lip of the summit, a step before falling over to the steps below. His arms were in front of him, the keystone in one hand, finger opening and closing in quick succession on the other. It looked as if he was counting something. Amonas cleared his throat audibly, more as a way to gather Hilderich's attention and perhaps guard him from a surprise that could set him off balance in a most precarious fashion.

Hilderich paused in his counting momentarily, looked distracted for a moment, hastily checking his left and right with a small motion of his head, and then resumed counting, his fingers moving like playing the harp. Amonas closed his eyes in a show of mild exasperation, and said in his usual husky voice:

“Hilderich. I'm right here behind you. Hilderich..”

Hilderich paused, and turned about slowly, a frown of surprise on his face. As he did so, he instinctively made a backwards motion with his head back, tipping his upper torso slightly aft. That was enough

to jerk him off his feet, towards the slope of steps he was surveying. Arms flailing wildly in a vain effort to steady himself, he clutched the keystone hard to his chest and stretched out his free hand as a desperate last ditch attempt to reach Amonas who was no more than two steps away.

Amonas reacted instinctively with cat-like speed and lunged forward, making just one step forward and bending his body slightly towards the ground, making a kneeling motion that brought his center of mass lower, stretching out both of his hands, one reaching for Hilderich's arm and one for his shirt about his waist.

A still moment passed when Hilderich seemed doomed to fall and tumble down like a rag doll to his almost certain death and most certain grievous injury, with Amonas failing to do anything other than watch, his grasp failing by hair's breadth. His mind was much faster than his body, so the terrible thought had time enough to coalesce with feelings of guilt and failure, curses and a repetitive voice that seemed to echo from afar, a simple form of denial, yet so piercing that it lanced right through his head, even before he could think he had uttered it:

"No!"

Amonas stood there in a kneeling position, his body tense, almost rigid. He just sat there transfixed, wide-eyed and out of breath, his last one cut suddenly short. He gasped for air, and only then did he realize he was holding onto Hilderich shirt and palm. Not very tightly, but he could feel some of Hilderich's body weight pulling at him. He came to his senses and pulled back, edging Hilderich closer. He grabbed tighter with one hand and pulled harder, bringing Hilderich right back on his feet, safely on the summit's surface.

Hilderich looked surprise, the frown on his face even narrower. He had certainly began to show signs of sunburn. Perhaps he was stricken from the sun and the light, and got dizzy all of a sudden when I called out to him, Amonas thought.

Hilderich was looking about the floor, his hands going through his pockets. Something seemed amiss to Amonas. Hilderich cried out suddenly:

"The keystone! It must have fell off! I need to go get it!The keystone!"

Amonas took him by his arms and spoke to him calmly, steadily,

an hint of assurance in his voice:

“We are going to get the keystone. We were running out of water anyway. Perhaps you were out on the sun for too long. Don’t worry, no one’s going to steal it from you. There’s just us around here. I’m sure it’s somewhere down there.”

“What if it’s broken? What if it’s damaged, chipped, marred? What if it broke? What if I broke it?”

“Control yourself! I’m sure it will be fine, it’s a mere inconvenience that’s all! Now please! Calm down.”

Amonas was forcing Hilderich to look him in the eyes, to convey a sense of safety, security and calm. It was as if Hilderich was going through the shock of battle. Was the keystone so vital to him? To their survival? Was the keystone that sensitive, prone to damage? Had their chance to return home tumbled down into oblivion by the slip of a foot? He shouldn’t take it as granted. Everything in its right time, Amonas thought.

Hilderich turned around to look at the steps below, searching for the keystone, this time with a healthier distance from the lip. He put a hand up to offer his eyes some shade, but still he squinted as he tried to make out such a small thing from such a distance. He was obviously disgruntled with what happened, and after some more searching in vain, he turned around to Amonas and told him:

“We have to go down now, Amonas. It could be coming any time now, the keystone is crucial. Please, I’ll explain to you on the way down. I think I know how it works. Please, we need to go find it now.”

“Alright, alright don’t fret. We were going anyhow. I’m sure it’s not as far down as you fear.”

Amonas jogged briskly to pick up his sack that was lying under the shadow of a horn, and as he came back to Hilderich, he produced one of their last two ‘brown ones’ from the sack. He chopped of one end and gave it to Hilderich, then got out the last, did the same and they both drank greedily. As they went about the lip ready to start their descend, Amonas told Hilderich:

“Remember, once we find the keystone, we continue down to the base. We need water, and you’ll feel it yourself in a pretty bad way until we get down. The sun here is scorching hot, we’ll need shadow, water and sleep once we get down. Then we search around the base.



Like we agreed, is that alright Hilderich?"

Hilderich was hesitant, almost reticent to answer but at length he must have thought about it in a more sensible way, so then he nodded and started climbing down carefully but briskly. Soon, Hilderich was making good speed, seeing that going down was much easier because one could easily slide across the surface of the steps with his bottom, then dangle his feet and make a little jump onto the step below and so on. It might even be a fun, merry activity, especially if they were children and if the sun wasn't trying to boil them alive. Amonas found out Hilderich's unorthodox way of descending the step to be quite efficient and fast, so he copied it and they were both making good progress, rapidly descending steps. At each step Hilderich would peer left and right quickly but certain enough that not a glimmer of the keystone caught his eye. Amonas had advised him to talking, breath through his nose and tell him all about what he had come up with when they got down. It was supposedly a good way to conserve one's water, but Hilderich at one point told Amonas:

"If we miss it on the way down, we're walking from corner to corner of the pyramid, each step up the way."

"I doubt we can do that with no shadow to protect us from the heat. We were exhausted when we climbed up the shadowy face. We'd be sun-burnt to death if we walked every inch of this side."

"No keystone, no ride Amonas. We'll have to if we don't find it."

Amonas did not reply and instead carried on climbing down, and put himself in the lead. At length, after a little while, and while Amonas they had already climbed down half the steps, Hilderich cried out:

"There! Over there! I've found it!"

Amonas stopped to look as Hilderich ran across the step towards the keystone. He knelt down and seemed to examine it closely from every side, look for signs of damage or any chipping he might hope to collect. Instead he found a perfectly shaped keystone, and what appeared to be a small dent on the steps.

It appeared quite strange to him that the keystone could actually do that, if the stone was indeed the cause for the dent. He decided he'd better try something like that later on. It perplexed him at a time when he thought he had most things figured out. It didn't seem that

important, but it was too strange even under the circumstances. He let the thought go for the moment, and when he stood upright again he was smiling, waving his hand with the keystone tightly gripped, and cried out to Amonas:

“It is fine! Impeccable as ever! Not a scratch!”

“Glad to hear it. Now come, let’s make haste.”

Amonas was indeed glad to hear but he was not sharing Hilderich’s enthusiasm. He had yet to understand the importance of the stone. The only thing that stood to reason and supported somewhat Hilderich’s claims was that someone had been collecting keystones in every way. It had even cost Olom’s life, and perhaps other lives had been lost in a similar manner as well. Perhaps, the keystones were parts of ancient technology that had yet to be made working again. Perhaps not all keystones were as important, and some were different unique. Perhaps they were all unique, indispensable parts to a whole. He couldn’t know, and he couldn’t imagine what Hilderich had come up with. It would all remain a mystery until they could get back. He reminded himself that first and foremost, he had to get back. And right now, he thought, I have to keep myself from drying out. And so they descended, with a bit more speed now that Hilderich had secured the keystone.

The sun had taken its toll on them; they were sweating profusely, their bodies glimmering with perspiration under the hard greenish light of the lone sun. By now, they had both been sun-burnt, their skins bordering the color of the meat underneath. Hilderich seemed to be in a much sorrier state than Amonas, his every movement by now painfully evident on his face, and with each thrust of pain from his limbs making him flinch in reflex and aggravate his pain, the skin of his face wrinkled and coarse like a thick sheet of paper.

Amonas came to his side and tried to help him a bit, lending some of his strength for Hilderich to go down the stairs. Hilderich at first seemed glad to be offered some relief, but then cried in pain and waved Amonas to leave him be. Before he resumed his painful descent, he told Amonas:

“It hurts, everywhere you might touch me it hurts. I have to do this alone. I ache all over. Even speaking hurts.”

Amonas nodded his acknowledgement and looked sympathetic, understanding. He replied kindly:

“Alright, Hilderich. You can see the trees now, can’t you? We’re not that far off, just a few more dozens of steps. And then..”

Amonas was cut in mid-sentence when Hilderich collapsed from what must have been a deadly mixture of heat exhaustion, dehydration, and searing pain. He lunged forward, head over heels his hands gnawing at the air for an instant as if trying to catch on invisible ropes, and then they fell limp, together with the rest of his body. Amonas did not have time to react like before, and this time Hilderich went tumbling down the steps in a state of unconsciousness, no control over his fall and no protection. He seemed to fall really badly on the first step, his chest thudding on impact, and then swiveling slightly to his side, he rolled two, maybe three steps before coming to a stop, his limbs sprawled at almost impossible angles. Amonas feared the worst and came rushing down the steps as fast as he could without challenging a similar fate. The way he fell, Amonas thought he might have broken almost every bone. He hoped his head was as intact as it seemed, and that he would be able to move him. When he got there, Hilderich was not communicating. He tried crying out to him, but he could not rouse him. He was definitely unconscious, probably the reason for him collapsing.

He did not know which bones on Hilderich’s body were broken, but nothing seemed to jut out gruesomely, so that meant that if something was broken, it was not visibly. He tried to feel Hilderich arms and legs, as well as his ribs, but he was not an expert man of medicine and he could not make any seriously correct assessment. He believed his arms and legs were fine, but some of his ribs felt funny and might be broken. He might be in pain when he woke up, but he could still walk probably. Under the circumstances, he felt he should be counting Hilderich’s blessings.

With strenuous effort he managed to lift Hilderich’s waist on his right shoulder, his body laid out so as to bear the least burden on his probably broken ribs. Amonas’ movements became difficult and strained, with Hilderich’s limp body seemingly protesting at their every move, feet and legs getting in the way, sliding uncomfortably along the steps.

Amonas felt very close to collapsing himself under the strain and the heat, but he pushed on heedlessly nevertheless, trying to make it to

the tree-line which was only a few dozen feet away. He was coming down the last steps, when Hilderich started coming around, moaning deeply from the numbing pain. He managed to croak a whisper, while wheezing, his breath troubled:

“What.. happened..”

Amonas shushed him and answered with strain in his voice, his gruff voice exaggeratedly harsh, literally dried out:

“You fainted and fell down the steps. You’ve broken some ribs. Don’t talk.”

Hilderich was silent again. Amonas thought he might have fainted again, but that was not his principle care. They had to make it to the tree-line and the little shadow it offered.

He was walking over the canal-like indentation on the ground, tall grass around him, dragging his feet with admirable effort and determination. His face was contorted from the pain of his aching muscles and the extra weight they had had to carry for these last few minutes. A little while longer, Amonas kept thinking to himself. A little while longer into the shadow, and I can rest. He closed his eyes and kept on walking with the same pace, Hilderich slung over his shoulder like game, him gritting his teeth, his breaths coming short and hard.

When at last he reached the relative shadow of the trees, he could still feel the heat, but the scorching rays of the sun were gone, dwindled as if kept at bay by the forest. With one last bit of effort, he knelt down to the ground and offloaded Hilderich as carefully as he could, trying not to hurt him much. Hilderich came to for a moment, moaned deeply and grimaced from pain, and then was out again, his breathing shallow, as if his body knew anything more would hurt like stabs of red hot iron in his lungs. Amonas then braced Hilderich from under his armpits with both arms, trying not to cause him any more pain, and dragged him over to the wide trunk of a tree, propping him up against, so he could breathe without fear of drowning. He felt he could do nothing more for Hilderich for the time being, so he crawled a bit farther away under the shadow of a tree with a bark as wide the wall of a cabin, closed his eyes and just slept without dreaming a single thing.

He opened his eyes to the sight of the green canopy, a labyrinth of shades of green, large and smaller branches criss-crossing it like a net cast out onto a sea of leaves. His mouth was parched, he felt his

head heavy, a headache pounding his mind like a hammer on an anvil. He was thirsty, he needed water. Hilderich was still unconscious it seemed, just laying there, his breathing laborious, a raspy, unhealthy sound. He needed a doctor. They needed to get back to civilization, back home. Amonas judged Hilderich was in no shape to walk around the base of the pyramid. The most immediate need was water though.

Amonas stood up with a lot of effort. He felt disoriented, his senses failing him, his vision slightly blurry, unfocused. He misjudged the location and distance of things around him. The dehydration must have been more severe than he had felt it. And the heat was only making things worse. He slowly paced himself through an opening in the vegetation, a path that offered less thick greenery, more easy terrain. He was looking for the, usual by now, tree with the brown nut-fruit, the one with all the watery juice inside, but couldn't see any. The trees did look a bit different, as if this was another part of the forest, less thick, with more space. Fewer but larger trees, wider openings and more upwards space. Like a vast hall, supported on wooden pillars.

But no fruit. Or something else to eat, most importantly no water. He could still make out the clearing in front of the base of the pyramid where Hilderich lay. He had not gotten very far, though he felt already tired, worn out. The dehydration was severe now. He paused and sat by the exposed root of a tree. He thought it was too dangerous to venture farther away from the pyramid and Hilderich. He was looking up, a vast net-like congregation of saplings extending from one tree to the other, like ropes meant to build a bridge. They were probably carrying water or some juice, but he could not reach them, they were too high up. He'd need to try and climb up a tree like a mad cat, and he was certainly in no condition to do so.

He then turned to the thick root he was sitting up against. It looked healthy and vital not gnarled. A young root, a young tree. There should be some water flowing through it, he thought. He brought out his knife and tried to put a stab to the root, deep enough to go through its skin to the veins of the tree. Hopefully some water would seep, at least enough for him to drink now, make him able to go on, search further.

He stabbed as hard as he could, then worked his knife, twisting and bending it as if trying to cut out the tree's heart. At length, pieces of the root came out with a strong, pungent smell, something like oil

glistening on the knife's blade. Amonas ran a finger on it and sampled it, the taste woody and bitter. It felt indeed more like oil rather than water.

With some more effort, his head now feeling like a ministry bell tolling incessantly, he dug deeper into the root, trying to get past its meaty part, into the core of it, where water coursed. He dug with his knife, and his hands, feeling the oils giving way to moist, soft wood matter. A final chip with the blade, and he saw a trickle coursing down, dripping on the ground.

With sudden greed, he put his mouth on the wound he had inflicted on the root, and sucked like a newborn baby. It was water after all. He wet his lips and his mouth thoroughly, letting the cool liquid refresh his flesh, and spat it out. He then let the trickle fill his mouth, while he filled the two flasks he was carrying, patiently waiting for the trickle of water to fill them drop by drop.

All the while, he sat more comfortably, leaning against the trunk of the tree, almost as if ready to take nap. He swallowed small portions of the water in his mouth, savoring it. He had been dehydrated before, and knew it was a lot of worse if a man that had been denied of water for too long, just dived straight in a lake or drank to his heart's content. He had seen men die of it, for reasons he could not know, or even the doctors explain. He thought it was a sick way of nature to make men pay for their greed as well as their lack of respect to water, and thinking about how important it is to them from beforehand. The irony was, he had been none the wiser, barely carrying an extra flask with him.

His mind did not wander or drift as it had done so before in the days before. Necessity drove him, and his instincts. He took things as they were, his mind enjoying a numbness while both it and his body recuperated slowly, the effects of the dehydration slowly withering away, vigor reappearing in his face, his head throbbing gently instead of being about to explode.

Once the flasks were filled to the brim, he had drank a couple more mouthfuls by now. He was feeling markedly better, and he believed he could find another such root with more wandering, but with no way to carry more water, it would be in vain. So he decided to get back to Hilderich, and tend to him, rouse him, and give him badly needed water.

When he got back to where Hilderich was sitting, he tried speaking to him to rouse him, shake his head, but to no avail. Then he used some of the water, letting it run down on Hilderich head, face, and back, dousing him carefully so as not to waste a lot of it. The cool water slowly coursing Hilderich's body had more effect. He fluttered his eyes momentarily and then gasped, and a sting of a pain immediately ran through him, the bones in his ribs stabbing him without warning. Amonas offered him the flask of water and told him in a soothing, reassuring manner:

"Breathe lightly, or it'll hurt like death each time. You have broken some ribs, that much is now certain. You are dehydrated, your head must spin and hurt like being swung at with a mallet. I am too, only I drank some water and feel good enough to stand on my two feet. Now, you just sip some of this very slowly and carefully. Don't gulp down on it, it might kill you, and I'm not known for my humorist streaks. Now flex a bit your arms and legs if you can, you've been lying there for hours, your muscles will go dead stiff if you don't. We'll wait it out, you'll drink till you feel a bit better and then perhaps I can make you a splint out of some wood I might rummage. How does all that sound?"

Hilderich managed to lift his head and look at Amonas briefly. He was evidently in a lot of pain, and in a pretty poor state. He needed genuine rest and this was not the place for it. Hilderich nodded silently in acknowledgement, and Amonas smiled bitterly. He said then:

"If you agree then, let's keep to that plan."

Hilderich seemed then to be trying to flex and move a bit his arms and legs. But one hand he laid on Amonas arm, who was kneeling down beside him, and then rasped in a low whisper:

"The.. keystone. Not lost again?"

"No, no, it's safe and sound. Don't worry about it now."

Hilderich nodded once more wearily, his head moving imperceptibly. He managed to say something else after he sipped on some water:

"Perhaps, you were right. We need to be here."

"Where do you mean?"

"The base. The pyramid. I'll tell you. I hope.. we have time."

"We have all the time in the world, Hilderich. Now, drink, don't talk, and rest."

Hilderich was insisting that Amonas listened to what he had to say, tugging his cloak with a grip that belied his feebleness and injuries. He spoke with a rasp, his throat still too dry for comfort:

“The keystone. The wall. They’re like water and sand.”

Amonas furrowed his brow intensely, puzzled at what seemed a very vague half-statement especially when coming from Hilderich. He motioned Hilderich to shush himself, putting a finger to his mouth, but Hilderich went on, in spite himself, after coughing with what appeared to be blood in his sputum:

“I know it doesn’t make sense. The stone can be absorbed into the wall. It is a keystone. The wall is a door. It should work. Please, try it.”

Amonas nodded condescendingly and said:

“You can try all you want to when you get better.”

Hilderich gave off another cough and a splutter of bloody saliva forced him to look away from Amonas. He then turned his face again to look into Amonas eyes, wheezed while breathing harshly and told him, this time with what seemed to aggravation in his voice, even annoyance:

“You need to listen to me! Use the key, force it into the pyramid’s wall, anywhere really. Let it be drawn into the pyramid.”

“Where have you been getting these ideas Hilderich? You must be delirious, running a fever surely. Please, stop exerting your self and drink some water. Here.”

Then Hilderich’s face was suddenly contorted, wildly disfigured from anger and despair at the same time, and with a jerk he threw the open flask Amonas proffered away, spewing its precious water content along its flight. He was now talking fast, anger in his voice, pain underlining every word, gasping between every phrase:

“You’re not listening! You think I’m seeing things! I saw the keystone left a dent on the stone, a bump that wasn’t there before. There is some affinity with the pyramid stones. What are you going to lose if you try? Your vaunted pride? If you don’t do it now, there’s every chance we are going to miss the next fireball and that might be our last! Do you want to die here? Use the keystone! Find a way in!”

Amonas made a backwards step, like being physically pushed and had to re-balance himself. His face wore an expression of disbelief,



hints of feeling awkward, hurt. He felt like he had been lied upon, whereas he had trusted Hilderich almost unflinchingly.

“But you said it was like hitching a wagon, that there’s a schedule and so on!”

Hilderich coughed once more, his lips now red with his blood:

“Haven’t you heard of wishful thinking before?”

Amonas stood up while staring down at Hilderich, accusation in the tone of his voice, a finger pointing at him waveringly, as if he wasn’t sure whether this man was to be blamed or not:

“You.. You’re injured, you’re seeing things, that’s all I can know for sure.”

Hilderich rasped once more, this time with more volume in his voice, making it sound rather inhuman and menacing:

“You wouldn’t know your head from your arse. Now use the damned keystone! Just push it through the wall!”

“What do you mean?”

Hilderich looked at Amonas with fiery eyes that stung and looked as if embers were burning inside, and told him slowly, painfully, with fear, pain and real anger showing on his face and in his voice:

“Just push it through the wall! Like driving a nail! Gods dammit!”

He coughed once more, blood spewing forth, running down his lips and chin. Amonas thought that since he could do nothing more, he could perhaps indulge him and that might bring some sense into him. He nodded without genuine assent, stoop upright and walked to where the flask had landed. He picked it up, exchanged strenuous looks with Hilderich and carried on to the wall of the pyramid.

When he reached it, feeling the sun blazing hot upon him, he took some time to study it. He could not hope to really understand to what purpose it was made, the fiery bolt that ran through the horns before only adding to the puzzle. The black matte stones were strange, glass-like to the touch, but hard, not brittle. Not much of all that had transpired made any sense though, either. So he just did as Hilderich told me, took the keystone and placed its longer side flat on the stone that stood right in front of him, forming the first step, waist-high.

Nothing happened, as expected of something that the delusional mind of a seriously injured man had come up with. Then, for the sake of proper procedure and carrying out the idea to the letter, he pushed

the keystone down with one hand, feeling quite unwarrantably stupid. As he pressed down momentarily he somehow felt the keystone give way. He let it go, and then used his index finger to press ever so lightly. Nothing that his senses could grasp ensued, and he kept on pressing slightly harder and harder, when after a certain threshold, the keystone indeed gave way and it seemed to bury itself gradually in the black stone. To his untold surprise, once he had indeed pressed it halfway deep into the black stone, the green keystone lit up with a rainbow of colors cast from an inner light that could not have been a reflection of the sun, as his shadow was blocking it. It was as if somehow the stone had come alive. Unable to contain his surprise and sudden enthusiasm, Amonas started yelling back towards Hilderich:

“You were right! It’s doing something alright!”

The flaring lights suddenly stopped, and the keystone remained inert, half way there into the black surface of the pyramid’s blocky stone step. Amonas did not know what to do next. An instinctive fear raced through his mind, preventing him from even moving or thinking. He stood there almost impassively, not knowing what to do next, fearing the unknowns that he had been hunting down. It was ironic that now that he was able to actually progress past theory, thought and conjecture into something that seemed to work, react, do something even though it remained unknown, he had frozen. From his basic, human fear of the unknown. He knew he had to focus his mind, force himself past such notions. So, with his indecision hidden away he touched the half-buried keystone, one more time with his palm, and then it was gone, like being swallowed by the blackness of the stones alone.

And then the most amazing thing he had seen, only comparable with the fireball from before, unraveled before his eyes with astonishing speed and seeming complexity. The stones in front of him became somewhat transparent, letting some light through. Their smooth surface became crystallized, faceted, rough, but not coarse and random. It looked rather like wrinkled paper that was folded a thousand, a million times and then laid out again, perfectly patterned.

The stones started to part, dissolve, each little part of absorbed by the facets next to it, like the stones were eating themselves away. The sight reminded him of a half-frozen lake being shattered and the ice sinking down instead of floating though in a very fast and methodical

way.

This transfiguration, this certain proof of the otherworldliness of the place, was over before Amonas could even blink twice. And what was left in the place of the stones, was a corridor as if carved in the stones, wide enough and tall enough for a man of Amonas size to walk in. He was stunned from awe, unable to fully comprehend what he had witnessed. It was as if magic was as real as the ground, as real as stones and air and the sun.

With some effort, he gathered his wits and cast aside the protests of his mind to see, and hear and touch and wonder wide-eyed at this inexplicable, majestic building that challenged reason every time. He focused on the harsh reality and its necessities, and peered over the half-lit entrance that had not been there moments before. He could see no lights coming from within, no other sort of emplacements or provisions for torched or the like. It was pitch black in there, but the important thing was that it was now open.

Instinctively he thought about the newly built entrance closing suddenly in a manner similar to how it had been opened and trapping him inside, or even worse trapping half of him inside. He made two quick steps back, as if he had been warned in advance, but nothing happened. He shook his head in disbelief and disapproval of himself. They had a way in and that was all it mattered, though. There was a way in and Hilderich was right. They had to move inside now, and that meant moving Hilderich as well. That would be troublesome, Amonas thought as he made quite a few steps backwards before running to Hilderich, almost unable to let the sight of the wondrous entrance depart.

Hilderich was still propped up against the trunk of the tree, wheezing as he drew his breath with painstaking effort. Amonas noticed he was grinning now though, and his spirits flared high anew. With a broad smile he knelt next to Hilderich and said:

“It worked you were right. Once the keystone went in, an entrance opened up as if by magic, a wondrous affair. Filled me with awe and that rarely if ever happens. You should be proud of yourself, Hilderich.”

Hilderich flinched painfully as he repositioned himself in a more upright position using his hands and replied, grunting some of the

words:

“I shouldn’t be in this.. mess. Then.. I could be proud. The.. keystone? Do you have it?”

Amonas face turned into ash and froze at that question. In the tumult, amidst all the surprise and awe, he had forgotten all about the keystone, that had just disappeared into the stone. That made him uneasy. He licked his lips with his tongue, and tasted his sour sweat. He had no answer that might quieten Hilderich’s fear, so he simply told him:

“No. It went into the stone, the entrance into the pyramid opened, and that was all. The keystone did not reappear. I’m sorry. I think it has served its purpose.”

Hilderich’s face lit up somewhat and then he burst into a painful mix of choked laughter and blood-sputtering coughing. He tensed up and restrained himself, the pain from his broken ribs becoming unbearable while he laughed. He grimaced while the waves of pain coursing through him settled down, took a shallow breath and replied to Amonas, who was now sitting down with his legs woven together, looking quite perplexed with Hilderich’s strange reaction:

“You talk as if.. it were alive. Could be, for all I know. That’s alright.. I guess.. We’ll find it, further inside.. I believe. Made me.. laugh. The way you seemed so.. pensive. Almost, mourning. The keystone’s fine, you’ll see.”

Amonas face relaxed and he seemed to accept Hilderich’s thoughts as if they made sense. In any other context, he would still believe the man was making up things in his mind, but he now felt indeed compelled to take Hilderich’s every word seriously. He couldn’t know why, but he had been right so far.

“Alright, Hilderich. So, now we have to figure a way to get you in as well. It only fits one man about my size. That means I won’t be able to carry you through on my shoulder like I did back then. How are you feeling? Have you had any more water to drink? If there’s no water left I can always go back and hack at some root, fill up the flasks. Hope you don’t throw half of it away though this time.”

“I feel horrible. I think.. it’s understandable, under the circumstances.”

Amonas shook his head briskly in acknowledgement, but insisted:

“I can see that Hilderich, but I need to know if you can move on your own now. I guess that would be, as you’ve put it, wishful thinking. You also need water. Here, have mine for now. I’ll fill both later, somehow.”

Hilderich grinned and replied:

“My head is still buzzing.. I feel weaker than an ant, but.. I think I’m doing somewhat better. But walking would be.. quite wishful. Perhaps.. You could fix a stretcher of sorts. Something to.. to drag me with. Sorry about the flask..”

Amonas waved Hilderich’s last remark away with one hand and looked him up and down, thoughtfully, as if measuring him. Then, he looked around him, trying to identify something around him within sight that he could put to good use. He said to Hilderich while standing up, his head darting in every direction, searching for anything that he could use. At length, he asked Hilderich with a certain degree of hesitation:

“Will a sort of harness do? Something I could wrap under your armpits, around your shoulders too perhaps? It should hurt anyway I go about it, but I think it’s the most practical thing I believe I could manage in reasonable time.”

Hilderich looked at his feet, sprawled as they were, his vision evidently out of focus. He seemed lost in thought, but then he coughed, still traces of blood in his saliva and replied to Amonas:

“Whatever makes sense to you. I’m pretty.. useless at these crafts, so I’ll make do.. I guess.”

Amonas nodded with a slightly comforting smile, and hurried away, headed to a cluster of trees and bush that Hilderich could not clearly make out.

Hilderich’ body was constantly assaulted from the heat and moisture that had only been bearable under the shadow of the bullhorn pyramid. Now, with his ribs broken, his skin sun-burnt and his body dehydrated, he felt like someone had left out his mind to dry over white hot sand and stone. And every breath felt like he had been dismantled and put back somehow wrong, the bones in his ribs turned into blades set against his insides, stabbing him every chance they got.

His throat felt like a dusty canyon and what little saliva was left in him was bloody and thick. He needed more water, that was true. But

more than anything else he needed to get in there. Get in the pyramid. See for himself. After all, he thought Amonas could not make it without him, he'd have no chance to understand what surrounded him. But in this sorry state, they both needed each other, more badly then ever before. He just decided to wait though, and in doing so slowly and despite the constantly painful and irritating coughing, fell asleep fitfully.

Amonas woke him up, gently shaking his leg. He woke up without really wanting to, and saw Amonas had indeed prepared a sort of harness, a piece of paraphernalia that must have been tacked together while he was asleep. It was made out of thick straggles of some kind of vine that seemed to be abundant here, a somewhat flat branch of sappy wood, and a quite large, thick deep green leave, shaped like a flattened arrow's nose. Amonas was grinning, as if he had intended for this appurtenance of sorts to look like an exotic mule's rein, and was certain that the irony would not go wasted on Hilderich.

Hilderich indeed looked at what Amonas had fashioned, and though still in a sort of after-sleep haze, he managed to point at it and snigger, as opposed to laughing outright which was rather painful. Amonas came closer and holding the various parts together told Hilderich:

"Now, I know what you're thinking since you're in such a good mood, but any similarity with a donkey's strap and rein is purely unintentional and simply a product of the same basic design principles that define both pieces of gear. I'm sure you would agree in the end, but let's try and get this on now, shall we?"

Hilderich nodded in agonizing agreement, and Amonas grabbed him by the arms and lifted him upwards, propping him upright against the trunk of the tree. Hilderich let out a cry of pain as his ribs must have had his insides jarred once more. Amonas tried to be quick about it since he saw Hilderich was barely able to stand, much less walk. He placed the branch of wood as a backplate, a support to keep his torso, chest and ribs strict and unbent, to prevent further aggravating his wounds inside, as well keeping the bones somewhat steady, if they were to build a proper splint once they went back and found a doctor. The prospect seemed ever closer now, and filled Amonas with ardor. He completed fastening the gear on Hilderich, binding the ropes and

setting the large leaf across Hilderich's back, as a sort of cushioning, without which he believed he'd be unable to move him more than a foot.

Once he was finished, he lowered Hilderich down to the ground again, and then passed the other end of the rope around his waist belt and tightened it. He said to Hilderich who was evidently uncomfortable, his arms sticking out in a weird fashion:

"Ready when you are."

Hilderich nodded in a disgruntled fashion and Amonas then started to move, at first rather sluggish, but soon he was able to walk slowly with Hilderich in tow. Soon, they reached the large ditch which proved somewhat of a pain because of the angled banks. Hilderich almost slipped down and Amonas barely avoided being dragged down and falling head first into the ditch. In a similar fashion, heading up the ditch put evident strain on Amonas, who reached the entrance with Hilderich behind him, sweating and out of breath. He stopped a few steps behind the actual entrance and gestured at it with one hand:

"This is it. You were right. It just, sprouted open in a most perplexing way. The stones acted on their own, remoulded themselves somehow."

Hilderich was still attached to Amonas via the makeshift harness, and was craning his neck in an effort to somehow see better inside the passageway that led deeper inside the pyramid. He told Amonas:

"Let's go in."

Amonas nodded in agreement and started to walk inside. As he reached the foot of the entrance, he noticed the passageway in front of him starting to flicker and shine. It was doing it again, the stones in the structure were rearranging themselves, like before. Hilderich let out a gasp of surprise and enthusiasm and asked Amonas instantly:

"Is that what it did before? That's wondrous! It makes way for us! The passage is wider now! Look!"

From what it looked like, the corridor was widened a bit more to more easily accommodate Hilderich as well. Amonas was surprised once more, but he wasn't feeling mesmerized this time. He believed though it would take him awhile to greet this as normal. Without further ado, he took a few steps more, and they were both now inside the pyramid proper. The sunlight could not reach them here and a cool

fresh air greeted them. They were following a corridor that seemed to glow faintly from within its walls, strangely illuminating their way as they walked through it, a spot of soft light between harsh darkness. As it was they could not see very far into the pyramid, the radius of lighting comfortable enough it simply followed them and did not extend beyond a few feet. Amonas stopped then, and asked Hilderich:

“Are you sure we should be going inside like this?”

Hilderich was looking with amazement around the walls and the ceiling, the black matte stone having turned into a semi-transparent glass, the light casting hues and specks reminiscent of a artisan glass-work, perhaps even a gemstone. It took Hilderich a while to respond to Amonas question, but he did so in a gleeful voice despite the condition he was in:

“More than ever! It’s a wonder in itself, this material!”

Hilderich coughed then and spat some more saliva with blood. Amonas trudged onwards bearing Hilderich in tow and simply said:

“Just be patient, Hilderich. We’re getting somewhere. The draught is getting stronger somehow.”

It was indeed a matter of a few more minutes spent in silence and awe, before they reached a sullen, gloomy opening, with a single column of light shattering the darkness, illuminating a blocky metal or stone artifact, its surface a mirror with a bronze-like sheen. Amonas was awestruck when he saw his image reflected on that surface, even while there was still a wide gap of shadow between them and the artifact. Hilderich noticed Amonas had paused and asked him in what seemed to be like a worrisome voice:

“Why did you stop? Is something the matter? What do you see? I only see blackness.”

Amonas replied while still measuring and looking at the block of stone, a monolith of sorts, his voice a low whisper, like men fearful of awakening something terrible:

“There’s a block made of, something like stone, metal, or glass. Something like the rest of what this place is built from, but not quite so. It can.. See me. Through the darkness. My reflection is right there.”

Hilderich went silent with thought after Amonas’ answer. Amonas waited for Hilderich to make a remark, perhaps give some advice, but



he said nothing. He said then:

“I’ll just walk over there. If it was dangerous, it wouldn’t have let us in, would it?”

Hilderich answered with some uncertainty trailing his words:

“That would be quite illogical, so I’d have to agree with your.. assessment.”

Hilderich coughed right before the last word, pain traveling up his throat feeling as if it was about to choke him, his lungs burning. He was almost used to the pain now, but that did not make things much easier for him.

Amonas did not reply but simply headed for the bright area where the monolith stood, the reflection of Amonas on its surface beginning to look somewhat strange. Firstly, Amonas noticed it did not reflect the harness or the bulk of Hilderich that should be visible. Secondly, the reflection did not seem to grow larger the closer he came to the stone. It seemed to be the same size as Amonas, all along, from when he noticed it first. He thought to himself he should be feeling wary by now, but all he felt was puzzlement, interest. Fear had not crossed his mind, which was either a good sign, or extremely stupid of him. If they were in danger, he had no such notion.

Hilderich was mysteriously silent, but then again his injuries made it that difficult to speak his mind as Amonas would’ve thought he should have been doing constantly since they had entered the pyramid, especially now with this intriguing artifact laid out before them. Hilderich then took him by surprise when he said:

“Tell me. What do you see on the stone?”

Amonas was surprised and stopped. Light was shining down on them, bright and white, but not hurtful to the eyes. As if it poured from around them, not from the ceiling of this chamber or cavern the size of which they could rightly assess. They had noticed no echoes whatsoever, and their eyes could not see beyond the illuminated area around the monolith. They could be anywhere. Amonas responded, offering a simple description to Hilderich:

“It’s about twice my height, thrice my width. It looks black, but that’s not exactly right. It gives off a feeling of glass, and has a bronze sheen. I can see my reflection on it, imperfect, like what it would like through a thick sheet of cheap glass. I look somewhat deformed, a

honey-like hue on my image.”

Hilderich took a few moments to digest that information, and asked Amonas again:

“Do you see me in that reflection? Shouldn’t you be seeing me?”

“I don’t. I think not even the harness is visible. But I can see myself talking, waving an arm and such. It’s uncanny, I’ll admit. Like someone is standing there. Mocking me.”

Hilderich shuffled where he lay, and said to Amonas:

“Please, help me stand. I need to have a good look.”

“Are you sure?”

“We’re only wasting time. If I need to make some observations, I need to do them myself. Please.”

Amonas then lowered Hilderich carefully and undid the ropes. He unclasped the wood on Hilderich’s back, and offered Hilderich his hands. They embraced, arm with arm, and Amonas gave a questioning nod. Hilderich nodded in acknowledgement, and Amonas pulled him upwards hard and fast, so as to minimize the after-effects of splintered bone against Hilderich’s raw flesh. It didn’t work all that well and while Hilderich was gripping Amonas’ shoulders for support, he almost fainted from the stabbing pain, his cry splitting the silence in the chamber in two, but still no echo. His shook his head as if trying to shake the pain away, and after a few more moments of shallow breathing he managed to stand on his two feet, and slowly turn around to look at the monolith himself, Amonas supporting him by his side.

“You are right, it only reflects you. It’s as if I am non-existent, indifferent. Like it doesn’t recognize me. Like it.. only knows you.”

“You are saying this thing could be, thinking?”

“I don’t know if that’s true but it, whatever it is, seems to be able to recognize, identify. Perhaps that’s all it does, its chief function. Like a guard, or a gatekeeper.”

Hilderich coughed somewhat hard, and flinched before spitting out a blob of bloodied sputum. To his amazement, he saw it reach the floor and then seep through it, like it was absorbed. A mere moment later, Hilderich’s reflection appeared on the slab’s surface, as if it had always been there and no one noticed. Amonas pointed and said:

“How can that be? Suddenly it.. Why?”

Hilderich’s gaze was locked where he had spat.

“My blood. It tasted my blood. It knows me now as well.”

“And how did it get to ‘know’ me as you put it? I did not bleed.”

“How did you open the entrance?”

“I used the keystone. I pressed it, it went inside the stone half-way, and then just touched it and it was gone, like the stone had sucked it.”

“It seems it did. You touched the stone, and then this place knew you. I certainly do not know how, and it does sound like magic or what people would call ‘divine powers’, but it must be some kind of elaborate ancient technology. I knew it wasn’t just a myth, but I had never imagined it would still be around, certainly not in working condition. And not at this scale.”

Amonas glanced upwards frowning, and then spent a few moments surveying the darkness, the light, and the monolith before saying:

“But where is this place? Where have we been for the last few days? If it is ancient technology, what is it doing here? Where is *here*, Hilderich?”

“Do you really wish to know, Amonas? We could stay and find out. Investigate. It would be a singular chance in man’s history.”

Hilderich’s voice hinted at genuine passion and untold possibilities, real enthusiasm in his voice. Amonas looked him in the eyes sternly, dispassionately, almost coldly:

“No. We are going back. You can stay if you want but you won’t get far like that.”

Hilderich nodded painfully with a grin and said:

“I was only thinking out loud. I want to go back. I have a job to do, didn’t forget about that.”

“Well then, focus at going back. What now, Hilderich? Any ideas?”

Hilderich spared a few moments of thought and then with some reluctance in his voice asked Amonas:

“Could you, touch it?”

“What should I expect?”

“Nothing awful has happened so far, so I’d think that nothing awful will happen. Of course, there’s always the possibility something really awful happens in the end.”

“So, I just touch it and see?”

“Well, yes. Like with the keystone.”

“Alright.”

Amonas touched the monolith without letting go of Hilderich and they vanished in an instant, their shapes horribly deformed and twisted right before a final flash of light made them disappear. Not an echo of them remained.

They were comfortably seated in a white, non-nondescript couch, in what would more or less pass as a common room, with a small table, also white in color. The predominant color of their surroundings was, in fact, white, and all around them, a white wilderness seemed to stretch, and it was impossible to discern between sky or ceiling and the ground, since it all was white.

There was no visible source of light, but everything was softly lit, the white objects around them, like the couch and a small low table casting the faintest of shadows. The effect was, strangely enough, not disconcerting or disorienting. It all felt, quite normal to them, and actually soothing. A part of their minds was screeching in horror for it could not comprehend how they had ended up in this friendly but evidently inconceivable place.

The better part of their minds though decided to just feel comfortable for a change, perhaps worry about such things and details later. Hilderich was feeling much better, being able to move his arms and torso without feeling pain. No bloody coughs either, no sunburns, no dehydration. He was actually feeling quite fit, fitter than ever. He felt he could run a hundred miles without breaking a sweat.

Amonas, who was sitting beside him, was similarly in the best of shapes, feeling well beyond normalcy. He turned around to look at Hilderich who was still checking their surroundings and making sure with his hands that his ribs were in place just as he felt they were. Amonas took notice of Hilderich’s much improved state, and simply said:

“You look better. I look better. This place is, great. I have a nagging sensation though this is extremely strange.”

“I have that feeling too. I actually think I can hear my voice in my head screaming loudly in protestation that we shouldn’t be here.”

A voice from nowhere interjected suddenly, vibrant and warm, but somewhat stilted:

“I should be fixing that. Strong residual harmonics in the transi-

tional field transmogrification phase. The effect should diminish soon enough.”

Amonas reaction was immediate:

“Who is this? Show yourself! Where are we?”

Hilderich remained silent. The voice was heard once more:

“The question is odd, but I am required to answer, indeed inclined to indulge your questioning nature. So, to answer in the same order: ‘I’ am part of a vast network of hyper-dimensional computational self-aware matrices that effectively keep this whole world running. You could call me avatar, or thing, if you like, but that would not only make this conversation even less intelligent. I do not have anything to show to you as ‘myself’, since my genuine physical form is a hyper-dense cloud of matter in an amorphous plasma state. If I did, you could possibly distinguish a small prickle of light the size of a hairpin. I like to dispense with physical form whenever possible, I find it serves no purpose other than easing the fears of fairly primitive cerebral cortices like yours. And to answer your third question, you could be said to exist inside the buffer matrix of the conveyance sub-system of the Support.”

Amonas looked at Hilderich frowning intensely, as if he had understood almost nothing of what he had been told, and Hilderich was somehow able to make sense of everything. Hilderich returned him a wide-eyed look that brought down Amonas hopes crashing.

“I can see you are perplexed. More like dumbfounded, actually. I can explain somethings if you like, others I literally cannot. Some, will prove unfathomable to you even if I do explain in length. I believe we do have some time available until the next conveyance.”

Hilderich looked upwards as if addressing God when he spoke next:

“The next conveyance? Could that be that you are talking about the fiery ball that overpasses the pyramid?”

“Your choice of words is surprisingly pertinent, though very crude indeed. Yes, I am talking about the conveyance of a highly energized, high-mass, extra-dimensional inner space, self-contained plasma-propelled atmospheric ballast vehicle.”

Hilderich looked as if he wanted to learn everything at once, his face almost split from the effort of containing his thoughts and questions. He managed to ask once more, while Amonas walked around

the small white space that surrounded them:

“So it is a vehicle? I had been right all along! Amonas, we’re going home!”

Amonas turned and grinned, and was about to say something when the voice chimed in:

“Well, I happen to know the centron is devoid of human habitations, so I can safely conclude that you are mistaken. You will not be going home.”

Amonas looked at Hilderich with shock and indignation and then shouted, vaguely outward, at the unseen entity that had been talking to them for the past few minutes:

“We will not be prisoners no more! We demand to return to our home! You, with your ancient technology will certainly be able to accommodate such a want. We will pay in whatever acceptable currency you demand, if that is necessary. If you are in league with the Patriarch, we can buy back our lives.”

The voice sounded as if it sniggered, and it then added:

“Pay? Currency? Primitive indeed. You are not prisoners of any kind, you are merely being conveyed. All conveyance is to the centron, there is no other destination. If you will, it is a design limitation. It is not within my powers to alter that. You are going to the centron, that is why you entered the Pylon. Or maybe not. Well, you had the pass, so I had to comply. Really, you had no idea what you were doing, did you? Fascinating. Hasn’t happened in a long time.”

Hilderich looked like he was suddenly drawn by something the voice had said. He asked with some degree of meticulousness, carefully, slowly:

“By pass, you must mean the keystone. What happened to it?”

“Oh, the pass will re-materialize integrally when you do.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, it is quite uncommon to walk around with a physical form of the pass. I understand it could be stolen, lost, even destroyed under certain circumstance. So, as is the usual case, I took the liberty of reintegrating it in your helix, your bodies, in a cellular level. Much more practical that way.”

Amonas hands went to his heart and stomach instinctively, as he was indeed looking like he was searching for the keystone to jut out

someplace. He shouted in anger:

“You put it inside us? What kind of devilry and sickness is this? Why not kill us outright and be done with us!”

Hilderich grabbed him by the arm and looked him in the eye, feeling his rush and white hot anger pouring out of his eyes. He said:

“Amonas, it’s alright. I think. It’s not there as a keystone. I think he means that it is now part of us. We are the keystone. We are, a keystone each, I believe.”

Amonas looked at Hilderich wide-eyed, in a further show of disbelief. He gasped but could not speak a word. The voice continued:

“You really are from a primitive civilization. I rarely keep account of events on the outer shell but I was certain that at some point there was some quite advanced civilization active. No matter, millenia pass along so quickly when there’s not much to do.”

Hilderich asked then, his mind trying to focus on what he should ask next, the unknowns branching off each other like a mystic tree, the questions gnawing at him vying to be voiced first:

“You said we exist in a buffer matrix, a system, something like that. What did you mean?”

“Right. It will be difficult for you to follow, perhaps you’ll think I’ve stolen your souls. Your friend will surely do. Well, this place with the white furniture and all that light, doesn’t look very realistic now, does it?”

Both Hilderich and Amonas nodded, though Amonas face was slowly building up creases of anger and perhaps even wrath. He very much disliked being indirectly referenced and not spoken to, especially when he was right there. The voice went on:

“Well it’s not real. It is an energy grid field-inducing construct. Think of it as a temporary room for your minds. All this is in your mind, for the sake of understanding. Your bodies are, right now, non-existent. You have been disintegrated into a complete series of information. You have been thoroughly, digitally and quantically, deconstructed, in order to be reconstructed, at the place of your destination, which is the centron. The ballast vehicle will provide the actual transportation of the total information via quantum entanglement on board. Somehow ineffective, I know, but I did not design this system, I have to insist on that.”

Hilderich was puzzled. Amonas was beyond puzzled and the total sum of unknown and impossible to believe or comprehend things had already overcome his tolerances. Instead of boiling in anger, he simply gave up and let Hilderich do the talking, since he seemed to understand some of what they were being told. He lied down on the couch, and closed his eyes, as if he was about to sleep.

“So you are telling us we have no bodies? We have become, something like ghosts? Or angels? Beings of pure energy and light?”

“Ghosts and angels is definitely the wrong picture here, quaint but wrong. Pure energy and light is kind of superfluous, so let’s just say light. Yes, right now you are made of light. Kind of.”

“Is that somehow similar to how the pillar of light that brought us here in the first place works like?”

There was a small pause, as if the voice took a while to gestate what it had been asked, like it found the answer difficult or somehow restricted.

“I don’t understand what you are talking about.”

Hilderich swung around to look at Amonas, who had now opened his eyes and was looking back at Hilderich, exchanging glances of disapproval and disbelief.

Hilderich insisted:

“The white pillar of light that brought us to this world of yours? Somewhere in the opposite direction of the sun? A small crest overlooking the forests?”


“Perhaps you are confused. This is the same world. Ah, perhaps you are referring to the service matter transference beams. I can see that could be interpreted as such, yes. Yes, it does work quite the same way. Though these service beams do not have a buffer matrix. You simply pop in, and pop out the other way. Instant. While here time is a.. ooh, will you look at the time. Well, enough talking. Pleasure to be of assistance, though I’d have hoped for a brighter conversation.”

The voice stopped, and suddenly the scenery around them became dark. Amonas was no longer lying down on a couch and he felt he was floating in mid-air, the darkness all consuming. He called out to Hilderich, but no answer came, then in an instant he saw a flashing bright well of swaths of light passing by him in horrific speeds. He could see no hands indeed he felt disembodied, unable to move. The



well shot past him and now he was looking at little bright pin prickle of blue light, like a lonely star at night. Before he could see what it was. It came rushing at him, filling his entire field of vision, glistening on his every sense, a blue-white hot light engulfing him, as it was ready to devour him whole. He tried to shield himself, he felt like turning his back around and running. But he was more than unable. He had no body to flee with.

## A dead tree gives no shelter

HE Pilgrim aroused Molo from his fretful sleep with a nudge. Molo woke up with a gasp, his body tense, his face and palms sweaty. The Pilgrim thought his brother was troubled, as he had been for the last two nights. It was as if the spirits of the land and sky were not in his dreams, safekeeping him from the malevolence of the archenemy.

He would pray for his brother at dawn, perhaps something else was troubling him. Some lover, or wife. His children. He couldn't know yet, he wasn't learning his brother's tongue as fast as he could. But he had understood his pilgrimage was different. The had taken the same path, for the same reasons, but there were different customs to be obeyed.

Perhaps, his brother was unlucky enough to have a wife and children that he had needed to leave behind. Perhaps a lover was awaiting his return. That might be the reason he suffered at night. He embraced his brothers arms reassuringly, and he nodded.

He started walking again, towards the direction the walking stone pointed to. The night was chilly but dry, the desert a harsh, rocky field of red and brown, good enough for walking, but useless for everything else.

Very little was to be found in the way of a shelter, and water as scarce as snow flakes in the summer. And little more than burrowing furry creatures and small sand lizards in the way of eating. God provided, as ever, but his brother was uneasy with what they were able to gather. At first, he would not even taste the food, even when cooked on fire.

When hunger took over him though, he mellowed, and grew wiser to the ways of God in his Holy place. Still, he seemed to be somewhat reserved in his adoration, somewhat aloof at times, his mind wandering at times. He could hear him sometimes speak in his native tongue, other times in the tongue of the Pilgrim's people.

In his sleep, he talked as well. He could not make much, though he sometimes spoke of the Forge of Stones. He is young, I'll give him that, thought the Pilgrim. He has not yet had the time to fully embrace

God in his true, purest, unblemished form. Here, in his Holy Land, where he is most welcome, were his Truth sublimates us all, even the rock and sand. He would learn though.

The Pilgrim saw in him a fervency, an ardor. He saw the determined glitter in his eyes, the way he looked at the Path, the awe when facing the suns setting over where His Gardens lay. He was worthy of the travel, and the peril. He was a brother sent from God, indeed. Though his brother's purpose was still to be revealed, the Pilgrim knew his own was renewed, that he would act as this man's mentor, tutor, as a wise and benevolent father, to fill his heart and mind with the joy that was God and Truth.

The Pilgrim's heart burned with vigor and his mind raced in these warm thoughts of God and His work and plan. He was so enthralled with what God had in stock for them both, that he had barely noticed his brother was not walking alongside him. He checked behind him, and he could not make out his figure in the blooming moonlight. He must have fallen asleep again, the Pilgrim thought.

So he walked back, over the small sandy crest where they had curled and laid to sleep. He would be cold now that there was no god-stone to bring them light and heat and comfort. I should have been more thorough when I woke him, the Pilgrim thought, while he walked with a sure pace, slowly climbing to the top of the crest.

There, he saw him sleeping, serenely this time. The Pilgrim momentarily thought he should leave him be for a little while longer, but the moon had been up for sometime now, and they had to take advantage of the night as best as they could. When the suns rose again in the morning, the heat and the cloudless sky would make traversing the desert an insufferable affair.

They should be at the Dunes by morning, where the sea of sand could claim a man's life if he wasn't ready for its tribulations. God would provide, but man should be wary as ever. Many Pilgrims before him perished while traversing the Dunes, and left nothing but bleached bone as a warning to those that came after them.

The Pilgrim shook Molo more violently this time, making sure he would wake up, stand on his feet and walk with him. It was for their own good, and the good of the Pilgrimage. It would not serve God if they tarried and indulged themselves. That was one of the lessons his

brother had still to learn.

Molo stirred and moaned a complain, something unintelligible even if the Pilgrim could understand his language. He rose from the ground wearily, languidly, and put a hand out as if letting the Pilgrim know he was really awake this time. He said in low Helican, the commoners tongue, signs of exasperation in his face, a disgruntled voice:

“I’m up. I’m up, you heartless driver. Don’t you get tired? Don’t you need to sleep? I guess you’re used to this sort of thing. When will we be getting there? Do you really know or are we wandering aimlessly? You still don’t understand a single word, right?”

The Pilgrim smiled and made the hand gesture for ‘God will provide’, turned around and started walking, faintly motioning Molo to follow him with a flick of one wrist. Molo sighed wearily and started walking behind the Pilgrim, in a disheartened fashion, almost shuffling his feet, kicking up small clouds of fine dust in the process.

The Pilgrim said something that Molo could not understand perfectly, something about the weary man finding consolation in God’s plan, but he wasn’t sure that was a proper translation. The man spoke High Helican, but it was somewhat mutated over the years probably, flex and intonation varied from the original.

Maybe it was the other way around, maybe the High Helican Molo had learned was the mutated form, but it mattered little since the only thing the man ever talked about was God, his plan, and this Pilgrimage he was on. That was alright, he didn’t care if the Pilgrim was a half-mad ascetic fanatic, as long as he brought him to the Necropolis. Then, he would see what he might do with him. Perhaps he knew more than he let on from time to time about the place. He talked of gardens and a citadel, of a forge of some kind.

He’d stick around, as long as he proved useful for. If they ever got there, that was. They had been wandering farther into the desert for a couple of days now. They had left the marble road behind two nights before, and that was about the time when Molo had run out of food. Perhaps the man had saved their lives, with his uncanny ability to find food in such a forlorn and inhospitable place.

Though lizards and rats were not real food, it somehow became agreeable when one had not eaten in three days, and the smell of cooked meat wafted into his nostrils. Molo shuddered at the mem-

ory of Pilgrim cutting the lizard's head off, skinning it, and eating it raw, limb to limb. The man was a savage, that much was certain, but he somehow knew more about the Widelands than any man alive. The man had only identified himself as 'Pilgrim', but that much was enough for Molo to call him by when the need arose.

They were walking through a rocky desert, passing through low crests sometime, their direction unchanging. From what Molo could gather from where the suns rose and fell each day, they were walking roughly towards the northeast, and that seemed logical. The terrain had progressed from a rough savannah, into this rocky desert, and it seemed like soon they were about to enter the great sand dunes he had read about in Esphalon's accounts.

And from then on he'd be almost lost. Esphalon had written down that once they entered the sand dunes, the pack mules they had brought with them died, choking to death in a sand storm they themselves barely escaped alive through sheer luck and perhaps, as Esphalon put it, providence. That was when they met the girl, that went on to lead them to the Necropolis per se, which they had failed to enter after fruitless labors of days.

The girl was the one who sustained them through these perils, producing food and water out of what seemed to be thin air. That was not all though: The girl was quite insistent in preventing them in their efforts to enter the Necropolis proper, what Esphalon described as 'a gargantuan cluster of megalithic buildings that either shone or absorbed light, tightly packed together, as if they were wood on a basket, encircled by a wall that itself defied logic, in size, shape, and function'.

She had even used some kind of invisible force on them, on more than one occasion. She had begun to weep and talk incessantly, begging them to halt their efforts, as she 'pushed us away from what could have been an entrance point to the dead city, what Master Umberth called a Necropolis. She did not seem to be angry or wrathful because of our attempts, but rather terrified, pleading with us to leave the place'.

Molo hoped the Pilgrim would be much more helpful in that respect. After all, he had told him he had to enter the Holy Gardens, and pay his respects in the Citadel of God, reaffirm his people's faith in him, and be rewarded with the Forge of Stones. Those were the exact words he used, in perfectly proper High Helican.

To Molo that sounded like the man was planning to enter what Umberth had dubbed the Necropolis of the Widelands. Indeed, he was not simply planning it, but was driven by a religious fervor Molo had not seen even in the Ministers of the Pantheon, or the most pious and faithful of lowly people that clung to such notions like a man about to drown clinging on a driftwood. This Pilgrim, was different.

His faith drove him, inspired him, made him determined, unwavering. The contrast with the Ministers of the Pantheon was sharp: they instilled fear, caution, piety, obeisance, misery. A faithful man for Molo was a fool, a person reduced to a muttering idiot who felt the Gods were in his favor if his children were not taken away from him, and his crops were not dying of thirst or the cold of winter.

The moon was high above them now, the shadows it cast hard and short of stature, the only mark in the horizon the outlines of the small crests they had left behind. All around them the land was still, not even the sounds of scurrying desert rats, or the rush of the wind from a night gale. All he could hear was their feet on dirt and sand, and perhaps the sound of gravel on gravel, as they trod their feet over patches of it.

He had noticed how much his boots were worn out by now. It was not the many miles he had traveled until he met the marble road that had made them so. It was the relatively few days he had been walking in the Widelands, that had made him feel he should've packed a pair of boots with him. The hot days and chilly nights had put some stress on the boot's leather skin, but it was the asperity of this place, this outer desert, the abrasive nature of the rocky ground, the mix of dust, sand, dirt and gravel that had made his boots little less than sheets of leather about to slit themselves open.

It remained a mystery to Molo how the Pilgrim seemed to be unperturbed by the roughness of the terrain, the adverse conditions, and the unforgiving miles he had walked to get here in the first place. As far as he knew, his people were nomads, living in the cold, harsh tundras of the north. It was understandable that he would be proficient in survival skills, but his ability to adapt to changes in climate and terrain must be one of a kind.

But there were also the strange stones Molo had noticed the Pilgrim carries with him. They were small stones, but regularly shaped, as if they were cut by human hands, on purpose. They were dark green,

with violet and cyan lights flashing in the morning suns, their surface smooth but with mysterious shapes looming right below, like patterns that kept moving each time you looked at one.

One of the stones the Pilgrim uses as a guide, for getting his direction straightened out. Molo had noticed that every time the Pilgrim used it, always after offering praise to his God and praying, he slightly changed course, as if adjusting to what the stone showed him. Molo deduced that the stone points him somehow to the direction of the Necropolis.

He had briefly entertained the idea of killing the Pilgrim and getting the guiding stone off him, but had decided against that because he believed he would be much more useful to actually enter the Necropolis, rather than just reaching it. The other stone was much more interesting, Molo thought.

It was what the Pilgrim used for shelter in this forsaken land, and probably something his people also used to stay alive in the harsh tundras of the north. The stone was a marvelous object: It offered them a small glowing light, enough to see each other's face, and it exuded warmth, but unlike a fire, the warmth did not seem to radiate from the stone. It felt as if they were enclosed in a bubble of sorts, where pleasant warmth occupied it, and the sounds and the wind outside were kept at bay.

Indeed, as if they were suddenly put inside an invisible bubble of glass, protective and mindful of their basic comfort. From what he had seen, he believed that whatever the conditions outside, such a stone could keep them warm and dry, exactly what a human body would need to stay alive in any climate. Molo thought of the stone as a fantastic artifact of mysterious origins and unheard of qualities, in the hands of a savage that could barely use a wheel, if in fact he had ever seen one in his life.

But Molo felt there was probably so much more he could learn from the Pilgrim. So many mysteries that could be unraveled just because the Pilgrim knew these things, like he had always known them. As if it were rote, custom, and legend that was passed on from generation to generation.

Molo thought more about how the Pilgrim had introduced himself at first, and remembered that he had referred to himself as 'a' Pilgrim.

Which meant that there were others. Or had been others in the past. He had not broached the subject because when he did ask the Pilgrim about things, even about relatively simple things like what will they eat or when will they stop for a break, the answers he received from the Pilgrim were nothing short of enigmatic, or occluded by religious reverence and pious deference to God and his plan.

Molo thought that asking him about his Pilgrimage would make the man erupt in a series of prayers and gestures, long recitals of stories and tradition as well as many other minutiae that would only complicate his efforts at understanding whatever useful information and knowledge this Pilgrim could offer.

He believed that it was best he gathered what the Pilgrim would share without knowing, and infer knowledge from that alone. When the time came, perhaps he could press him for more, or outright do away with him. He did not think the Pilgrim could be extorted with fear or driven to betray his beliefs, especially know that he was on a holy mission, a Pilgrimage.

Even if his life was forfeit, he would rather think himself as a martyr, a holy failure. In that regard, Molo had to endure his presence, and learn as much from him as possible through what little interaction they had. Truthfully, Molo did not think he would have been able to survive the tribulations of the desert had it not been for the Pilgrim and his stones.

He grinned when he thought that how ironic it would be that in the end, it was most likely that the man he had saved, would take away his life. When he did so, the Pilgrim had turned around to check up on how far behind he was, noticed the grin, and smiled with puzzlement and naivety. Molo took the chance to build more of a rapprochement with the Pilgrim, something he could use later on.

He remembered that according to Esphalon, the moonlit nights were held as having special significance to his people, for some reason he had not stayed long enough to decipher and understand. He had noted down how they paid homage though, which was by turning to face the moon, kneel down with folded arms and kiss the ground. That last part made Molo uneasy for a moment, but he proceeded to do so.

When he rose again, he saw the Pilgrim was wearing a sad expression on his face, as if he was sorrowful all the while. That made Molo



try to copy his mood, as if such was the appropriate thing to do. He suddenly looked sullen and respectful, just like the Pilgrim. He noticed then that the Pilgrim simply told him a single word: 'apalgos'. He then bowed his head and made the sign of God, and resumed his walk as normal as ever.

Molo had not known that word, never saw it in scripts or texts, and seemed to have no other common root or sound like something he could understand. It was as if the word was new, or his vocabulary incomplete. It baffled him, and made a mental note to himself to perhaps ask the man to describe it.

He had seen how the Pilgrim had reacted when he had by error used the word 'Gods' instead of 'God', and he had known the man was dangerously fanatical. It would not serve him well to have to kill him if he found out he was not a fellow believer as the Pilgrim believed. He used the word 'our' when referring to God, as well as 'brother' and 'believer' when referring to Molo. Molo had never thought that learning High Helican would ever be of such a use in his life's quest.

The Pilgrim felt he understood his brother better now. Everything made much more sense, if the man was on a journey of sorrow. It was only natural if he was grieving that he'd be troubled in his sleep, aloof sometimes, disenchanted and forgetful in his devotions.

In a way, the Pilgrim thought, it was even harder on him, having lost a loved one on such a day, to walk through the Land of God, with its many trials, and hidden dangers of the mind and soul. It was indeed a mixed sign for the Pilgrim: a grieving man on the Land of God that needed guidance and help to make it through alive and be free of his sorrow, along with a Pilgrim that needed something to focus lest he stray from the path of Truth, and fail his people and his God.

He had not heard of such a Pilgrimage before. He felt like the moonlight shone upon him with the brightness of his God's light. He felt inundated with honor and love. He felt wary of such sudden rushes of strong feelings, and breathed slowly, carefully rearranging his thoughts and feeling to protect him from the sins of pride and arrogance.

It was in God's hand alone the manner in which his Pilgrimage would take place, and that was all that he needed to know. It did not mean he was special. It meant that he carried a special burden, and

had a special purpose in life. Himself, he was but a man of God, as was his brother. They both had their reasons to walk this path. He felt reassured now, and he troubled his mind with such no more.

They walked in silence from then on, until their legs were sore and their throats dry. In the middle of the night, with nothing but the moon light and the stars to shine upon their eyes and let them find their way, reveling in a divine solitude, the Pilgrim stopped walking, and gestured for Molo to do the same, with a repetitive downward motion of his hand.

He did not like to use the words of God in His Holy Land in vain, or for mundane things such as simple communication. He found the hand gestures and nods to be enough, and his brother understood most of the time. He was also mindful of using the Holy Tongue, and only did so after he had done so himself.

Sometimes he spoke in this other tongue of his, a somewhat crude, harsh tongue, that seemed to resemble the Holy Tongue somewhat, but was very far from it. Maybe it was a way to speak a form of his tongue without speaking the Holy Tongue vainly. Maybe their tribe was older, and their customs still clung to the time before the Purge, whereas they, the God's chosen children, had been instructed in different ways.

It was a miracle indeed to find another believer, another man of God, whose people had survived the Purge, so far away. The wise men had always said that God works in mysterious ways, and lo and behold, a brother long lost is found wandering in God's Holy Land. The Pilgrim thought to himself that if that was not an act of God, then all this was nothing but a fantasy woven in his head.

But it was real, as real as his purpose, as real as the True Path, as real as anything he had believed in since he was born. He was sitting down, legs woven together, when all those feeling of certainty and faith, the warm knowledge of God's plan working so delicately through him, left him with a smile on his face, tears welling in his eyes. He held those tears, feeling he would be misjudged by his brother, and that would only serve further to his befuddlement, whereas he should be enlightening him by action alone.

The Pilgrim offered Molo his leather flask, filled with water they had gathered from a meaty, barbed plant, its juices nothing more than water. Soon though it seemed to Molo, they would be entering the real

no man's land, where nothing ever grew, and the only change was the shifting of the dunes, slaved to the whims of the wind. Molo accepted the flask with a nod, sipped cautiously and dived in a sea of thoughts.

Esphalon's tales of this part of the Widelands, the inner desert were sparse, and yielded little information. They were mainly concerned about the lack of water and the sandstorm that had almost killed them and denied them of most of their supplies and all their animals. It was a race for survival, and the telling of Esphalon focused more on how their lives were coming to an end day by day, rather than anything really useful about their survival.

It was the girl that had actually saved them, if that indeed was fact and not mere fiction or the wild imaginings of a man brought to the brink of death. In any case, he would have to trust the Pilgrim on their survival. Unfortunately, he had not seen yet the Pilgrim use a stone that would produce food or water like the girl in Esphalon's account presumably did.

He had no idea how they would make it further into the desert, closer to the Necropolis. But he strongly believed that the Pilgrim was somehow prepared for the ordeal, much better than he could ever be. It was ironic, Molo thought, that a man that bears a grudging disbelief against all sorts of divine creatures and indeed faith itself, has such a strong belief in a man wholly devoted to a fantastic person, a lingering myth from an older civilization.

It was very opportune that at that specific moment, the Pilgrim rose again and asked for his flask. Molo drank once more, a greedy gulp running down his throat, refreshing and invigorating, exactly what he needed for the rest of the walk. They seemed to have a few hours until the sun rose, and from their brief period of rest Molo assumed the Pilgrim was not planning on making any other stops. That was just as good, since the more they walked through this landscape, the less time they would have to spend in this treacherous desert, and the sooner they would arrive at their destination.

They started off once more, and trudged onwards, Molo right behind the Pilgrim. They were silent again as ever, and after a couple of hours weariness and boredom overcame Molo. His pace lessened and soon the distance between him and the Pilgrim began to grow. The Pilgrim took notice at some point, paused, and urged him onwards with

motions from his arms and nods from his head. He pointed at the moon that had started to sink lower and lower. It meant that dawn was near, and they'd soon stop, rest and sleep. Molo gathered what little of his stamina remained, and with painful effort picked up his pace for one last time that day.

Soon, the colors of dawn were starting to paint the sky. In a matter of minutes, the suns would make their bright entrance and wash away the night. The Pilgrim stopped then, and beckoned Molo to come sit right next to him.

They were atop a rather wide crested hill of rock and dirt, with coarse sand covering its very ridge. Molo indulged the Pilgrim and as he climbed the last few feet, he saw the sand dunes before him, eating away at the horizon, the crests of the dunes like waves of sand, their ever-changing nature imperceptible to the naked eye.

A thin line of blood red, sun yellow and sea blue hung between the sky and the desert. It was the break of dawn, and the Pilgrim seemed to marvel at the sight, which Molo could not help thinking was indeed a sight to leave a man speechless. The Pilgrim made his morning prayers, and Molo followed suit, as had been the case since they met on the marble road.

Then, he started looking around him as if searching for something that he had dropped. He moved over to a patch of sand a few steps away, and with deliberate movements of his hands, he began digging into the sand with his bare hands. Molo frowned in puzzlement at this weird behavior, which topped everything the man had done so far.

Molo was even more surprised, when the man briefly paused digging, turned around and nodded to Molo for help. Molo could not even imagine the purpose of the Pilgrim's toils and he thought this entire scene to be acutely comical and would have made him laugh profoundly if he had not been part of it. He acquiesced though, and soon enough found himself to be digging right beside the Pilgrim.

Within a few moments, he felt the sand damp under his palms. Perhaps, there was reason in this, and the reason was water. Soon enough, a grin formed in his face, while the Pilgrim remained apathetic, almost indifferent. They had dug out a small hole in the sand, where there was enough water to fill their flasks, and perhaps drink a handful each. It was downright astonishing that the man simply peered through

the sand and found a spot where water was only two feet underneath.

He could have never guessed such a thing for the life of him. The Pilgrim was proving his value to Molo with each passing day, and he couldn't help but feel genuine respect for the man, even though he suspected there had to be some aid from the stone, albeit he had not seen him use one right then and there.

When their flasks were filled and they had some water to drink, the Pilgrim motioned for Molo to sit in a somewhat flat space of sand. As he did so, he brought out his shelter stone, and set it down roughly between them. He made the sign of god, and laid down, with his back to Molo. Soon enough, the air felt pleasantly warm. The suns came up, two blinding spots of light walking hand in hand, rising across a violet-blue colored sky. Pretty soon, daylight became too bright for the naked eye to handle, but where the stone lay, it was pleasantly dusky, and one could actually close his eyes and fall asleep. Molo noticed the Pilgrim had already done that, the outline of his rising and falling ribs following the rhythm of his breathing, slow, deep, and steady. Molo thought to himself he might actually leave the man be, when the time came. 'After all, what harm could he do when the secrets of the Necropolis will be laid bare to me', Molo thought.

They had slept away most the day. When Molo woke up, it was to the recently-made familiar smell of cooked reptile meat. The Pilgrim was handling the roasting of the meat on his knife expertly. Curiously, Molo noticed for the first time it was a knife with a strangely fashioned two-edged blade: one was serrated and the other seemed to be razor sharp.

The knife seemed to be made of steel or a similar metal, perhaps even silver, but that could not explain how it had been able to weather time without being reduced to little more than a useless piece of metal. And it seemed certainly implausible that a tribe of nomads on the brink of savagery could have fashioned a finely crafted blade without expert knowledge, foundries, forges and artisans capable of supreme craftsmanship.

He concluded in his mind that the knife must be a thing of a long forgotten past, a treasured relic handed down from one generation to the next, indeed crafted by a civilization like the one that had erected the Necropolis.

It was fascinating to witness an ancient relic wielded like a common utensil, nothing more than a tool, when it's value to knowledge and the unlocking of hitherto unexplainable mysteries was incalculable. Molo realized he had been staring at the knife for too long, his sight out of focus, as if he was still drowsy from sleep, as if his mind raced to meet the dreamworld it had unjustly been forced to escape.

The Pilgrim jogged him back into reality with a slap on the shoulder that he must have considered an expression of brotherhood and amicability towards him. Molo noticed he was also offering him the knife with the piece of unknown meat on it, charred somewhat on the edges and slightly curled, as if it had been roasted on the fire for too long.

Molo thought about inquiring about the origin of the meat, but quickly his inquisitiveness dissipated into a forlorn hope that some of the desert was populated by hares or something equally less hideous than lizards. The smile on the Pilgrim's face assured him of how wildly imaginative he had become concerning food during the past few days, and grudgingly decided to feed on whatever the Pilgrim had caught.

In reality, he thought it was quite important to never know what it was that the Pilgrim had offered him, especially since it tasted much better than the previous things he had been forced to taste by necessity. The thought of actually beginning to enjoy desert-hunted reptilian wildlife made his shiver with disgust at himself for even thinking of abasing himself in such a barbaric way.

Momentarily, the memory of some exquisite sauté veal liver assaulted his senses, and he could almost smell its fine taste and texture against his palate. He felt certain he could kill a man for a glass of Fironian dry white. But all that was just tricks of the mind. He knew he was eating something that was meant to crawl and slither instead of walk, fly, or swim.

The illusion though, when maintained in his mind, was a shelter for his mind. A way for him to ignore the nuances of survival, and proceed to complete his aim, and purpose. And on that day, he knew he was so much closer. The sand dunes beckoned before them, and it would take much more than the mere lack of luxury to prevent him from the most worthwhile of goals.

Once his hunger was satisfied, he took a swig of water from his

own flask and rolled it around his mouth in an effort to wash down the uncannily chicken-like meat. Then, noticing that the eyes of the Pilgrim were lost in the sea of sand, he sat for awhile idly gazing at the dunes, trying to make out anything worth noticing in the amorphous dune crests.

He felt that they should be moving on right away, but the usually relentless Pilgrim had quietened down and was sitting still and cross-legged on the warm sand, the shelter stone nowhere in sight. To Molo, it looked as if he was basking in the light of the suns, like the lizard he must have deftly caught with nothing but his knife.

He was serene, his face almost glowing from within. It was like looking at a man who thought his existence was made just and fair by virtue of his devotion to his God, his Truth, his Path. Molo felt like the man was actually basking in a swath of divine light, his God's gift, a warm and bright light that could fill a man's soul to the brim, and yet could not possibly be spilled.

Molo thought those were very strange feelings, and he could not understand how they had suddenly appeared unbidden. He felt a strange kind of sympathy for the Pilgrim, one he could not put down in all detail. Something evaded him, and though such feelings were not totally unknown to Molo, he had spent a great deal of his life hurtling them aside, uncovering the truth underneath such deceit of the heart and soul, and ascribing the true logic behind such manifestations of the human psyche.

In this case, he was struggling to accept the fact that he had no easy answers, indeed no answers at all. The Pilgrim was a mystery that defied Molo's reason, since he was unable to fathom why this man exuded this air of spirituality, of homeliness, of trust. These were feelings that Molo had years ago cast aside and attributed to man's various futile efforts at making sense of the world and his existence, making up emotions in the way.

But here he lay, a savage man with no ties to such trappings of the civilized man, a pilgrim that somehow managed to cripple his mind with nothing but a smile and a prayer. Perhaps, Molo thought, these are side-effects of malnourishment and dehydration, a prelude to hallucination. Perhaps, there is something very strange about this Pilgrim. Or, he admitted reluctantly in his mind, he might have been wrong

in some of his assertions about various things he had vowed never to revisit again.

The Pilgrim's pull on his shoulder brought him to world of the senses once more. He could see the falling suns, their glare losing its strength as they slowly glided past the sea of sand into a thin velvet horizon of scarlet and violet blue. His nostrils were assaulted by the grains of sand that were starting to float wildly in the air, and he felt his mouth filled with the salt of the earth under his feet. He looked towards the northeast where their path would take them and all he could see was the ashen gray and dull brown-yellow of what he judged to be a cloud made of sand. And it they were going to walk right through it, if his sight was as clear as his mind at that moment. The notion rang a deep bell of life-threatening danger that superseded every other thought, feeling and intention. The writings of Esphalon came to his mind, where he had written down about the sandstorm that almost killed them and left them hapless to roam the desert in vain:

'...clouds the size of mountains no man had never even imagined toppled the reign of the suns and cast them down into the night side of the world. The air was suddenly thick with dirt and cold as a dead man's touch, heavy with the sand and stone of the desert sea.

We made haste to what seemed like a rocky alcove in the distance, barely visible under the cusps of sand that harrowed the very air we draw breath from. The mules would not budge, no matter how much we pulled and pushed them. As the wind grew more intense, and sand began to hurt our very skin, we had to abandon them to their fate, mindful to take as much water and food as haste allowed.

We hid under that alcove, while a maddened storm raged just beyond the reach of our palms. A couple of feet separated us from the unwavering madness of this uncaring place that assaulted any form of life with the same deliberate indignation. For hours on end, all our senses were of no use, except from ears. The howling sounds of the sandstorm ruled supreme, whipping the very earth, tormenting the sky, challenging the moon for the reign of night eternal itself.

When exactly the storm had died down, we knew not. All we could see was the moonlight shining upon the desert once more, as if nothing of import had occurred. It mattered not that the clean-picked bones of our mules told otherwise. That was the Widelands, and life had no



place there.'

The words of Esphalon coiled in his mind like a snake, ready to leap out from his mouth. He saw the Pilgrim was already putting some distance between them. He called out to him in High Helican so he could understand him without needs for further explanations:

"A storm is coming! We will die in there!"

The Pilgrim then turned around and looked at Molo as if he had uttered a nonsensical statement. Briefly, Molo thought he had mispronounced what he had meant to say, and his words carried no meaning to the Pilgrim. A moment passed though, and the Pilgrim stroked his beard and nodded knowingly. He gestured for Molo to hurry up and come closer, fill the distance, while he set out again. Perhaps he had an explanation, or had already seen a place that could shield them from the approaching clouds that could grind anything alive down to the bone. When Molo caught up with the Pilgrim a few moments later, he grabbed him by the arm and forced him to stop, asking him in High Helican:

"What will we do about the storm?"

To which the Pilgrim replied with a gaze to the sky and the sign of God.

Molo was now losing his temper. This man must be mad, he thought. His mind raced with the possibility that this man was indeed mad from the beginning and had somehow made a journey of thousand of miles only to offer himself as sacrifice or something equally idiotic like killing himself because he had sinned.

But no, that was not the case, Molo decided. He looked at his calm, serene face as he turned to face the sky and praise his God solemnly, and knew that he had a solution, he had an answer to this enigma. He was certain of it, and his determination proved it somehow. There was nothing to be afraid, everything is accounted for. It will be alright, no reason to worry.

These were the words that streamed through Molo's mind, and it felt as if the Pilgrim was the source, the reason for these thoughts. He seemed now to Molo like an unyielding, irresistible beacon of hope, unmoving as mountain, stable as rock, a haven for any troubled soul. His gaze was not hard as it was before.

He relaxed his grip on the arm of the Pilgrim, and his jaw slack-

ened. The dust was beginning to swirl around them, the sand getting in their mouths, trying to bore through their skin. It was a very strange feeling for Molo, surrendering himself, body and mind, to an illogical notion. He stood there, transfixed, the Pilgrim knelt down before him, facing the approaching sandstorm head on, while all around them the makings of a whirlwind abounded.

Molo had mysteriously let go of his prohibitions, of his logical and analytical mind, of his reasoning and his fears, and just trusted the Pilgrim. It was all a matter of trust, here in the Widelands, as far as he could tell. And he had decided to trust the man, with his life, and ultimately his purpose in life as well. Which of the two he valued most, he sincerely could not tell by now.

The Pilgrim had knelt down, seeing his brother was filled with fear, worry, doubt. It would be no different to God, for if he had deemed that he should live, he would live, and his brother with him. If he had deemed that he should die, and they should perish, and that would be the end of their lives, for better or for worse.

But to appease his brother, and make him ready for the coming trial, the trial of their souls, he would pray. He would pray loudly, fervently, with ardor and passion. He would sing praise to God, with all the power his lungs could afford, and he would ask for forgiveness for their sins, known and unknown, willing and unwilling.

He would ask of his God to deliver them, but he would also offer his life and soul as a last service, of his own volition, if so God wished of him. He would speak on behalf of his brother, and plead for his salvation, body and soul, because he was a grieving man, born of pain and want, not a sinner whose mind was set, neither a blasphemer who thought himself beyond the reach of God.

He would pray, until the storm had passed and their God had decreed their souls clean, unyielding, fit for a human being. And his brother would pray with him. He turned around and saw his brother was also kneeling down, his eyes closed, his hands buried in the sand. The sky was now bleak, the front of the sand storm coming to greet them head on, the suns almost drowned in its dark gray wave.

He turned around then, and touched his brother's arms, who was already doing as he should. He shuddered slightly at his touch, and then started crying, in fervor or in fear, the Pilgrim could not honestly tell.

And then he started chanting, his clear voice challenging the howls of the rising wind, cutting a clean path through the hurtling sands towards the heart of the storm. And the wind grew louder and stronger, and the sands started to tear at their skin, lashing them like razor sharp tufts of steel grass.

And then, while the voice of the Pilgrim went on unwavering, seeking God, asking him to reach down from where he dwelt and lift them from their fatal fate, the suns could be seen in their last streak of light, for once more hiding until the morning came, leaving behind them a lukewarm trace of violet, stars already visible on the edges between sky and earth. And the storm had cleared, dissolved, like God had simply wished it away.

The wind fell into a light breeze, and the sands quietened down, and became still as the night that had just arrived. The Pilgrim made the sign of God, and stood upwards, gesturing for Molo to follow him. He even offered him his hands, which he rarely did, as he thought it was unbecoming of a man.

His brother was still on his knees, and had just opened his eyes. Without warning, he saw tears running down on his cheeks, the look of a man who was blind and could now see again on his face. His brother made the sign of God, this time somehow different than before. It was quite possible, the Pilgrim thought, that his brother was beginning to learn how to love God properly, like any man should.

He pulled him up by his hands and they both walked away into the night. Now that the trial of the storm had passed, they should be able to see the Gates by tomorrow night, when the moon would be empty once more, and nothing but starlight would shine upon the sacred walls. He briefly considered telling him, but he thought he already knew. Why else, the Pilgrim asked himself, would he be carrying no guiding stone? It was because he knew. Because God had sent him.

## Fear in a handful of dust

**T**HEY were banging at the door, he could hear them getting ready to bring it down. There was not much he could do, other than take the flight of stairs to the upper floor, and then try and jump over to the inn from across the balcony. He could die by the sword, or with his neck snapped in half and his head smashed onto the cobbled street. He might make it though, and keep running. Any chance was better than certain death at their hands though, so the decision was quick.

Just as soon as they barged in, with swords drawn at the ready, he glimpsed at them as he ran up the stairs, their frenzied faces bearing witnesses to their folly and madness. He thought he knew one of them, from the time before he had joined the army. His feet raced in pace with his mind, though in quite different directions.

He could hear their steps heavy on the wooden stairs, its planks creaking from the weight and the sudden rush of bodies upon it. He was trying to remember his name, while he saw a shaft of light falling down on him, for a moment blinding him causing him to squint. His hands barely touching the rails of the stairs guided him onwards, his steps unfaltering, haste in every movement, like a fleeing hare.

Yes, it was Theodorus Fellman, the stabler's boy who worked with him as apprentices to the brewer. The shaft of light was coming from the attic's window, a place he seldom visited and duly avoided when he could. His feet kicked up dust that had settled in during many years, after long winters and hot summers had passed.

Their voices grumbled with vulgar words and curses, demanding his blood. Sinner, he heard them call him, blasphemer and the like. Things he had not thought of himself. Theodorus, he remembered, was not very good as a brewer, always botching the brew, drinking mostly when the master left them to cater the shop on their own.

He had kicked him out after a couple of weeks, and Theodorus had cursed him. Now he was back, hunting him down, a dog of war, unleashed upon meek prey such as himself. As he thought that, his one foot was already on the foot of the window, hands outside, ready to take the leap. He turned around waiting to see teeth upon his flesh,

hear the howls of the pack vying for blood, his blood to be spilled.

In that moment, he only saw Theodorus mad with blood lust, and as his blade tore through his torso, he thought he saw a sad moment of realization, a sparkle of recognition in the eyes of his killer. As he fell to the ground, his eyes looked up to the clear sky and the wonderful day the dawned had promised.

When his body met the ground with a clatter like broken clay, he saw no more, and his blood ran down the cobbled street like red wine from a dripping keg, a waste many would find regrettable but only few would weep for.

The smell of blood, like iron, barely covered the stench of the bodies. But that was only because the slaughter had just begun.

General Tyrpledge was riding his horse, making an inspection of the City walls from a safe distance, his personal guard along with his adjutant following him from a respectful but close distance. He still could not believe he was tasked with the sacking of Pyr, and if it came to that, its razing. The Castigator had been blunt in orders and frugal in his explanations.

He had told him that the Patriarch was in league with a cluster of rebellious religious fanatics that wished for total domination of the Patriarch over the ruling council. He also said the Patriarch had made the first move against peace and prosperity, and we would bear witness to that.

Indeed, a messenger arrived bearing a message from the Patriarch, that the Castigator had been deemed unworthy in the eyes of God, and that the Noble Representative, Lord Ursempyre Remis, was the new Castigator of the Outer Territories. The General was dumbstruck, utterly flabbergasted at the turn of events, and did not know how to react.

The Castigator talked to him in earnest, urging him to uphold the Law, honor his rank and office, protect him and the Council as a whole, crush the rebels before they could take root firmly. He had asked about the Arch-minister, who had seemed a reasonable enough man, to intervene, somehow mediate, so that balance could be restored and things would not deteriorate into profuse madness at the speed of a rushing waterfall, as it seemed to be the case.

The Castigator had informed him then that sadly, the Arch-minister

was found dead, assassinated by the rebel scum, the henchmen of the unholy demon that had posed as their Patriarch. Most of his staff were also cruelly killed, their skin flayed out to the bone, while the Arch-minister himself seemed to have been made the object of a ritual to the Deceiver, the False God.

The Castigator, with tears in his eyes had insisted that there was no better way to avenge his memory, other than to bring those heathen scum that had infiltrated their society to their knees, grind them into oblivion and spread their ashes in the oceans.

The effect on the General was devastating; in one night, everything that he had been taught, everything that he had built his life upon was crumbling down around him, around them all. The Patriarch, in league with rebels? Absurd! The very word had fallen into disuse, and was used only in an historical context, of ages past, or in thought-provoking discussion that rarely allowed its participants to delve deeper into such subjects.

The notion of rebellion was indeed, taboo. It had been since he had learned how to read and write. He thought to himself with bitterness that he might have been spared such skills, but then again, how would the army live and breathe without notices, requisition forms, and orders in triplicate?

And the Castigator, fleeing into the night, beset on all sides by danger and hounds set out for his blood? All under the design of the Patriarch, with the Noble Representative aiding him? Himself, the most noble of the Lords, ruler of a family of great tradition and honor, an arch-demon in the flesh, thousands of men acting his bidding like minions? Incredulous, inconceivable, unimaginable, the General had thought.

Until he had seen the orders written and signed from the Patriarch, have his army stand down, ignore the Castigator before him as a traitor and conspirator set to overthrow the Rule of the Council, disarm the men and dissolve the Army peacefully, under the watchful eye of the procrastinators.

The letter was signed and sealed by the Castigator of the Outer Territories, Ursempyre Remis, the acting Arch-minister, and that buffoon, the Procrastinator Militant, Gomerfont. That was enough to bitterly set his mind, and order the immediate assembly of all fighting units.

Once General Tyrpledge reaffirmed his army's oaths to the Castigator, he ordered that the army march toward the City of Pyr.

They marched in a campaign to uphold the Law, and free their land and people from the tyranny of evil men. Men whose sinister purposes knew no bounds and would stop at nothing other than the utter desecration of the Gods, the dissolution of the Law, and the destruction of their divinely crafted society.

As these announcements were made in front of the whole army, the few procrastinators spread around the staging grounds having received word of the orders sent, fled with alacrity in an unusual sign of intelligence.

And so it had began, the campaign that would forever change the history of the Outer Territories for better, or for worse.

The General had been musing on these recent past events for some time, it seemed, because he could hear anxiety and worry in the words that his adjutant repeated in the same staccato manner:

"Sir, are you alright? Sir? Should I call for your physician, sir?Sir? Are you alright?"

Tyrpledge flashed red hot with anger and suddenly violence seemed to seep from his voice:

"Gods dammit Guighan I'm not bleeding to death, am I?"

The major stood to attention crisply and bellowed as if he were still a young cadet at the Agogeia:

"No, sir!"

Tyrpledge instantly relaxed when he saw the major acting like a young trainee and managed a sigh. He turned to look at his adjutant, seeking eye contact:

"Guighan, this is not a parade ground. This is war. War between brothers, sisters, family. If I am bristling with anger and exasperation, it's not because of your stupid questions. It's because of this stupid war. However, one must choose a side. And I chose what I've believed in all my life. If that fails us, then what hope will there remain?"

"Sir?"

"It was a rhetorical question, Guighan. Don't fret about that. I was ensnared in thought. I still find all this impossible to digest, still it seems I will have to."

"Sir."

“You must be an expert in terseness, Guighan. Let’s continue the inspection. I need to find a weak spot or something we could use to our advantage. If possible, I would like to keep bloodshed to a minimum. The insurgents could be hiding anywhere, posing as innocents, sheltered by anonymity. Unless they put a jester’s hat on with bell’s and whistles, our soldiers will be unable to differentiate between the enemy and the common folk. Though the distinction by the time all this is over could become a lesson in semantics. Carry on, major.”

“Sir.”

Major Guighan saluted briskly and rejoined the guard further back, where he relayed the order to continue. With that, they set off, the horses slowly trotting, and the foot-soldiers keeping a brisk pace.

For the most part, the insurgents seemed ready to hold their ground, and the walls looked well defended, with no exceptionally weak points in sight. No significant breach had been made from the first shots of the siege engines, and the rest of them had barely begun to be assembled at this point.

Once these were completed, and a point of entry selected, they would fire a barrage concentrated on a specific point in the walls, hoping to tear it down and gain entry. His cavalry had made attempts at reconnoitering but had not succeeded in gaining much other than some fatal injuries and lots of worn out horses. It seemed that these men defending the walls would not be caught napping so easily.

The General from this distance could see the milling masses of men, assembling to receive their orders for the day, cleaning their swords and tending to their armor and shields. He could see the pikemen polishing their halberds in an almost ceremonious fashion.

The bowmen were stretching the chords of their bows, testing its tension limits, filling their quivers with arrows. The swordsmen were up and about, ready to be called for action, their longwords a mirror sheen, their chain-mails and helmets gray dull steel.

The General was generally pleased with what he was seeing, the men following orders, adhering to protocol, going about their business as usual. As if this was one of many exercises, as if they were not marching against their own people. A rarity in his career, the General did not know what to make of that? Did his men care not at all? Or was their sense of duty overshadowing their other emotions? That remained



to be seen.

The outlook of his army, he deemed, was a professional, determined force ready for action. But some of the units though required special attention, because of their special nature, and special abilities.

The men of the vaunted Thorax regiment were still trying to put on their monstrously over-sized armor, huge burly men, encased thick sheets of plate metal, almost impervious to arms, even against steel rifles. They would form the front line of the assault, to cover and shield the men behind them.

And far behind at their maximum range distance, while all the rest of the army was preparing for battle, the crews of the steamers were making sure their machines would be ready when called upon.

Everything seemed as it should be, everyone seemed professional, going about his work. It somehow felt wrong for an army to be this distant, so indifferent to an enemy that was in fact their own people, though wildly misled and utterly wrong in their decision to upset the way of life. Or so Tyrpledge felt. He didn't know, and could not know, though what his men thought and felt. He'd have to wait for them to show their true demeanor and spirit in the ultimate test: In battle.

When battle was joined, the true feeling of his men would emerge. Beyond wrath and blood lust, beyond the will to survive and in doing so kill a man, would they show remorse? Guilt? Would they stay their hands in a moment of doubt? When they see their brother coming at them with ax and sword, will they judge him wrong or will the animal inside have the final word. When all this is said and done, will there be victory? Or nothing but loss? It would be for the Gods to decide. Him, as General of the Army of the Outer Territories, would follow his own path to the end.

His look was now veritably sullen, withdrawn. He had reined his horse to stop its trot. He was not even looking at the walls now, or his men, or any of the machines. He was looking at his own hands, gloves taken off, fearing that somehow blood had already soiled them. The blood of his own people. But their lives were forfeit now, he knew. The moment they decided to carry out every unholy blasphemous act ever imagined. And perhaps some that were never. What would they hope to gain, other than seed war, bloodletting, misery, hate? He could not fathom. And he could never remit their folly now. They may have

dug their own graves, but it saddened him very much now the thought that he would have to fill them.

He looked up again, squinting slightly at the bright light of the suns. He noticed from the corner of his eye Major Guighan approaching almost sheepishly, a trait that usually provoked his anger and irritation, even though he did not consider himself an irascible man. It was probably because he did expect men around him to perform their duties to the best of their abilities. Major Guighan was his adjutant, so he was supposed to stay close to him, advise him, confide in him. How could he do that from all that distance? He was an exceptional logistics officer, very capable at handling personnel and men via manifests and report forms, but his communicative skills were somewhat sub-par. Perhaps the major was for some reason intimidated by the general, or his rank and office, but that would not do for the position he currently held, in the General's opinion.

When the Major approached him at a respectful distance, as if the General emitted some kind of aura he did not wish to step on, he saluted crisply and asked him in a most professional, clipped tone of voice:

"Sir. You seemed to have stopped here for no apparent reason. Is there something of specific importance at this part of the walls, sir? You seem to have lost your color sir, if I may add. Perhaps you are feeling ill? Should I fetch the physician, sir?"

Tyrpledge turned and stabbed the man with his eyes, his face a mixed expression of exasperation and wild disbelief. The General thought he would give the Major one last chance before he placed him at the front of a Thorax battalion. With no armor whatsoever. So, with evident effort to restrain himself he replied:

"Should I require a physician, Major, I would ask for one myself. Unless of course I'm bleeding to death. But that's the reason you are my adjutant, it seems. You always remind me blissfully that I am not bleeding to death. You accomplish that with your hollow remarks and repetitively inane questions. I will ask you just this once Major, to act accordingly and spare me the dung. If there is something of import to be said, say it. If you think a question in matters of tactics and strategy pertinent, ask. You've proved to be an efficient man. Now, please prove to me you are an efficient soldier and not a paper-man. There

will be death around here by nightfall. Don't ever ask me again if I'm feeling ill."

Major Guighan stood stock still, as the General's incisive remarks made their way to his heart and mind. Before the General could turn his gaze elsewhere, the Major managed to speak:

"I will not, sir. I realize now I had been wrong to assume you were a cold hearted bastard, sir. I could not bring myself to speak openly to a man who seemed not to care. I know differently now. With that being said, I believe we have made an extensive examination of the walls, and no notable weaknesses have been spotted. The patrols will try again at nighttime, though we are not expecting hopeful results. The men seem to be ready as they'll ever be for such a fight. Should we return to the staff tent and plan our tactical approach on the matter?"

Tyrpledge was stunned to hear the man speak his mind after all this time. He believed no one had called him like that since he became General, and he also felt kind of hurt that a member of his staff would think him so. It actually meant then that the others thought so as well. He guessed the major would make amends though. After a somewhat awkward moment of silence, Tyrpledge replied:

"I'd never thought I'd pass for cold-hearted. Very well, major. Tell the guards to lead on, and stay with me for a change. Tell me what you think about our approach."

Ursempyre was fretfully looking over the tall arched balcony of the Disciplinary's east tower. His gaze was deeply woven with sorrow and hurt. His soul felt empty, broken. Whatever he had been planning, was now nothing but a dream. The gale of the wind brought to his nostrils the smell of ash and cinder.

Fires had started in some parts of Pyr. Fires from the siege engines of the Army. Tyrpledge was leading them, a good man as far as he could remember, as far as he could judge a man. He believed he no longer had that privilege. Who was he to judge others? A consummate traitor, by any account. He was bereft of the things he valued most: Truth, honor, friendship.

He had lied, and he had deceived. He had lost his honor and sworn oaths that had filled his mouth with venom and choler. He had sacrificed everything, to save something. And now this. Within a single night, he had been duped not once but twice. He had been played like

a puppet, and now his people would pay the price. All of his people, not just the kinsfolk, not only those that were prepared to pay some price. Everyone would now pay for his failure, his lack of wisdom and foresight. He was arrogant, he could see that now.

He believed him capable of achieving the dream of countless generations, seeing himself as the leader behind which the kinsfolk, the old-folk, would spread like wildfire, uniting the people against a tyranny as old as stone and earth. He believed he could have liberated them all, usher a new era where every breath would smell of freedom instead of fear and oppression. He loathed him! That was what had blinded him. Loathing, unquenched passion, blinding wrath. He was more than shrewd, he was a demon incarnate, laughing behind their backs, toying with their minds and souls. Every single thread of fate firmly in his hands like reins.

Only last night, he had thought that his the worst fate could have in store for him was horrible meaningless torture at the hands of the Patriarch and his cronies. Now he was in living hell, unable to even scream in agony. There was no point, none would listen to him now. He had been crushed, mind and spirit, in one blow. He had been quite effectively made redundant, irrelevant, obsolete. He should not have given his offer any thought. He should have denied him. Denied his immense powers, his demonic shell and form. He should have told him that his people were not afraid of death. That it did not matter for him if they perished in hellish flames of an uncanny nature, or bled their lives away one by one by sword and bow.

But that would have been a lie, and the Patriarch would have seen through it. There was no hope all along, Ursempyre thought. As fate had brought things together, and life had shaped him into the man he is, there was indeed nothing that could be done. He had lost this fight before it had even began. He could now do nothing but watch idly from afar, hoping his people would survive, that they would endure.

What would become of them then though? What had his mind devised? To what end, these extravagant machinations, this endless pulling of strings and dials, like the movement of wheels within wheels, a dizzying sensation, meant to disorient and mesmerize, while right behind us shadows were setting the real stage, Lord Remis thought in silence.

The Patriarch's purpose might have been unfathomable, but Ursempyre was only certain that it hold nothing good in stock for the people. If there was one thing he might try as a last attempt at redemption, was to try and learn as much as possible from the man. But he somehow felt that was as if trying to squeeze water out of stone, an impossible task either way one might look at it.

Sooner or later, Ursempyre thought, the army would find a way into the city. They had the men, the equipment, and the time to do so. And then the procrastinators would perhaps find a deserving end, unable to put up a fight, under-equipped and overwhelmed by numbers they would lose the fight for Pyr. Even though the total strength of the procrastinators had been summoned, it would take days, perhaps weeks for them to arrive in time to stem the tide of Tyrpledge's men.

Ursempyre tried to imagine what must be going through the General's mind at such a time. Was he torn between his devotion to duty and his feelings for his fellow men? Or did he relish the prospect of exacting vengeance in the name of the rightful Castigator and the Pantheon? What lay in his heart? Was it furious anger? Was it righteous wrath? Blind dedication and dispassionate will, the markings of a professional soldier?

He rather hoped the General was dumbfounded, left vacant inside at the realization of this horrific reality. Perhaps he regarded all this with deep-seated consternation, and was troubled at his every step, haunted by images of the monstrous consequences his actions would have, for all of them. Was he such a man? He could not know, and was deadly afraid that he would like that question to be answered. It was only a matter of time before it did though.

Lord Remis was standing in front of the stone arch, the weight of his body supported by his hands touching the granite, as if they had been attached to it for ages, rigid as if they were not made of flesh. Servants had asked him to bring food and water. He had waved them away, but he could hear the frailness of their voices, their disbelief, their fear. He did not know what they feared most: the coming battle, the Patriarch, or the sudden realization that the world had come upside down in a single night.

His guards outside the chamber had seemed equally perturbed. Though hand-selected from the ranks of the procrastinators, they were

not as blind and unintelligent as their lesser comrades. He had seen the complexion on their faces turn into the color of ash, blood pumped away into their hearts lest it explode in shock, when they saw him appointed Castigator, in the stark middle of the night, with only the Patriarch and a few Disciplinary officials to attend as witnesses. It all smelled wrong, even to simpletons such as these.

He did not question for one second though, that should he try to act wildly, fear would overcome and their instincts would not be reined, and they would bring him down, as the Patriarch had ordered them to, 'for his own good'.

On recollection, it seemed to Ursempyre that the Patriarch was somehow swinging this whole affair, precariously navigating between duplicity and lawfulness, trying to rewrite the Law and everything it had stood for since the very founding of the Territories. It was as if he had no clear view of the future he wanted to create for them.

If indeed, the Patriarch planned for any future at all. Ursempyre thought such a being more than capable of planning nothing more than their complete extermination. The total annihilation of the Outer Territories, starting from here, from Pyr, the seat of power and Law. That would not be beyond a hateful being of such power, malevolence, and intelligence. The only thing that such a path would lack, would be reason. But then again, Ursempyre thought as he smiled bitterly and shook his head, who said reason had any part in all this?

Ursempyre could see now the smoke from the fires rising, procrastinators running in the streets, forcing people to follow them press-ganging them to be used as firemen, workers, craftsmen, and ultimately, he feared, fodder. The siege engines of the Army were starting their baleful song again, the thudding and creaking of huge catapults and trebuchets launching stone and lit barrels of tar against the city, indiscriminately, randomly. They were killing the same people they were meant to protect. How very much like something the Patriarch would have conjured in his ineffable mind and ultimate wisdom.

He sniggered bitterly despite himself. Then he heard a sparkling voice, and could almost see the insipid smile behind the words of the Patriarch without needing to turn:

"Quite a plan, don't you think?"

Ursempyre turned to face him, his eyes sizzling with hatred. He

felt like lunging at him and ending this farce before he had to bear witness to the atrocities that would stain every street with blood and fire. But that would be cowardice, another treasonous step towards the hell that awaited men like him. No, he would try and make something out this charade he had been forced to play in. So, he indulged the Patriarch's cruel sociability and answered with a flat, stern voice:

"You take pride in such things? What are you really, Patriarch, if nothing but a robed demon?"

The Patriarch returned an even wider smile, his teeth sharply white, as if made from porcelain. He started to pace around the chamber, idly examining the various items in it, as if he had genuine curiosity.

"Calling me names, Castigator? How improper for a man of your rank and lineage. It has been my firm conviction ever since I can remember myself that the true nature of things certainly lies in their death. Only when something dies, can anyone really understand what it's true nature was. Trees wither into ghastly dried hulks of wood. Plants rot away and turn into dust, returning to the soil. Man is a beast, and like most beasts, he is made of flesh and bone, and the maggots make good use of him when he is dead."

The Patriarch very carefully intoned the last word with a certain nuance that made it sound hollow. Coming out of his mouth the word sounded like a wooden mallet brought down upon a plank. Ursempyre's blood was coursing fast and hot through his body, but he kept his temper in check, trying to make good use of his aggravation at being forced to play with words:

"Is that what you are planning? To see all of us men dead and done for? Worm food, is that what you think of us? Have you had this idea in your mind for long, are is it a newly hatched fantasy of yours? What kind of cruel nature gave life to the likes of a creature like you, I cannot fathom. I only wish there are no others of your kind roaming free in this world."

The Patriarch was looking at an exquisitely fashioned silver egg encrusted with gems. He looked as if he genuinely could not decide whether it was purely ornamental or served some functional purpose as well. He replied to Ursempyre with a nonchalant voice:

"Oh, no there are not. I can assure you of that. I killed them all long ago. But that is another story. You should not need to worry, I am

not planning on telling you about it. At least not now. Perhaps, later. It will depend. I am a very moody person, I don't know if you've noticed it. I tend to follow my whims. I feel one should follow his heart, don't you?"

Ursempyre felt ashamed he was still conversing with the likes of the Patriarch. His blood was now boiling and he couldn't help but explode:

"You mock everything around you with extravagant arrogance and cynical devotion to your own self! Would you have me tell you I do not expect for you to have any heart at all? Is this your only way to derive pleasure in yourself? By pretentious dialogue with your captive victims and human tools? Is that the best you can do, Patriarch? Toy with me while your plans come into fruition? Is this all you've come to expect in your life?"

The Patriarch's tone changed abruptly. He now looked severe, tense, his voice sharp and threatening:

"Careful now, Castigator Ursempyre Remis. If you are trying to attract my ire with an amateurish attack on what you would call 'pride', you are sorely mistaken and I can only feel genuinely sorry for your failure to truly understand. Though, it would be more than a surprise if you did. I simply did not expect you to try and use cheap, underhanded tactics that only work with moronic politicians such as yourself. Though it seems idiocy is a useful trait in politics. It got you to the very top."

The Patriarch summoned a sardonic smile that made Ursempyre feel queasy. He was relentlessly carving up his mind and soul to feast on at his leisure. His words infuriated him and tore him apart at the same time. The Patriarch noticed he was not going to reply and pressed on:

"What are you thinking now, Ursempyre? I told you I can't read minds, not unaided. But I do take delight in toying with you, that much is certain. Why you ask? Should it be beneath me? A being of my powers? You talk as if you could understand me fully, as you know the extend of my abilities. You've made the same mistake as the men before you. Like Shan, especially like him. You think of me driven by the same desires and needs as you.

Do you really think this is about power? The ability to control



others? That is nothing but a tool to wield. Power can be used to transform people, bend them, chastise them, shape them. Isn't that much more fun than simply using a person? I could talk around it for hours, Ursempyre, but you would still lack the acuity of spirit to grasp the notion in its fullness. How could I explain something so simple to such an occluded mind as yours?

Vying for a freedom you would fail to maintain. Unable to control yourself in the simplest of urges, you would wish you'd be able to assert control over power itself, share it as if it were pie. The weak-minded leading the blind over a sheer precipice. Would you take the plunge first of them all, Ursempyre? Would you lead by example, like a good ruler? Would you become their final, benevolent dictator? Would you ruin my game?

That's what it feels like for me, Ursempyre, a game where I can have it all if I want to but I choose to play by some rules. I set the scene, and act my part, with you as unknown partners. What makes it so grandiose, Lord Remis, is the fact that for the most part, you are willing partners. None of this foolishness you dream of, simple lust. Passion. Life exploding from every inch of your pathetic existence in contrast to your inane mewling.

This is life, Ursempyre, and I'm living it. I'm living it as I please and there's no one to make me stop, no one to make me hurt, no one to make me feel anything other than great about it. If you could ever aspire to something Ursempyre it would be to aspiring to a perception as clear and total as mine. You would not weep then, indeed the idea would bring tears of laughter to your eyes. You would see the true nature of things. Despair now, for you very well know you have nothing else left to do in this world."

He felt inundated with anger and sorrow and wanted to vent, spill this rueful cup of emotions he carried. He could not find the strength to do so. By all means, the Patriarch had managed to break him, force his will into nothingness, make him regret the day he thought about standing up against them and their tyranny.

He had not foreseen it all stemmed from this man. That was his biggest failing, the breaking point where he had been canceled, turned into a shadow, a creeping thing that should cease to be. He felt like his very being was an affront to man. His dark thoughts swallowed

Ursempyre whole, and he lay there on the floor of his chambers, upon a carpet with the embroidery of the Castigator, weeping for himself, mourning for the future that would not come, a people that would cease to be.

He had helped in that crime, he saw it again more fully now, and he had been unable to do anything, even now, with the root of the cause standing right in front of him. He was a lesser man, he knew now. There would be no turning back, for no one. Parts of his mind urged him to endure, but his soul was crushed, the spirit gone. The Patriarch was right all along; he would despair, because nothing else was left for him to do.

Ikebod leaned his head carefully out of the corner of the street, and looked up the street to his right. Once he was assured it was safe, he motioned behind him. Celia and two trusted guards from House Remis came to his side. The guards wore non-nondescript armor and clothing, plain, unadorned and utilitarian. Their faces wore stern expressions, exuding an air of determination and professionalism.

Celia looked wary, but she felt confident of her guides. She thought Ikebod would even give his life to protect her, if it ever came to that. Which was more than a mere thought, with the City burning, under siege. The smoke from the various small fires hung thick in the air, the light breeze blowing through the city of Pyr unable to clear the atmosphere. The rosy red of the coming dusk was mingled with the sooty gray of the smoke, turning into a dark crimson red, gloomy and menacing.

They hurried across the street where the shadows would offer them some degree of protection from ever searching eyes. Word around the kinsfolk was that the procrastinators had begun press-ganging people in the streets, eagerly searching for any poor soul that happened to wander. Houses were being invaded and the men forcibly taken away from their families. It seemed that it had all begun quite the other way around from what it had been planned.

Instead of leading the revolution, Lord Ursempyre Remis had suddenly sided with the Patriarch. It was more than a bitter blow to the Kin. It was an unimaginable, completely unthinkable event, that nevertheless had come to pass just the night before. From what Celia could gather from the dealings of Ikebod with various people from the kins-

folk while they still remained at House Remis, they were not safe in the estate.

They had to flee, and disperse. The various cells, the people in the organization delegated with some degree of organizational responsibility would convene somewhere else, in one of the places prepared elsewhere according to a carefully laid out contingency plan. No one had thought though that Lord Remis would be absent, indeed turn traitor.

She had not known the man personally, but from the people around him, working with him, she could not understand such a thing. Amonas was one such man, and he could never turn traitor, his heart and mind utterly devoted to their cause. He had dreamt of a better future, and he had shared that vision with her. They were planning to raise their child in a bright, hopeful future. What would become of that vision now that everything seemed to crumble like a wall of dried mud? She felt the child kick with vigor, blissfully unaware of what was transpiring in the world it would be born in soon.

They were walking briskly, anxiously throwing gazes all around them, wary of being seen. Ikebod was leading them through the streets instead of the underground passages because he was afraid they might have been compromised. If procrastinators were indeed running around the underground passage looking for kinsfolk, they would be caught like mice with nowhere to run. While running on the streets presented a more obvious danger, it also offered them more venues of escape. It was a gambit they hoped would not fail.

They could hear the distant cries of procrastinators and the thuds of impacts from the siege engines. The army was methodical in his approach, wearing down the defenders of the city, forcing them to occupy themselves with the spreading fires that threatened to engulf the city in a firestorm that would burn the city of Pyr to the ground, along with most of its populace.

When the opportune time arrived, they would then probably try to breach the walls in their weakest point, or storm them in mass, whichever would seem to offer the best chances of entering the city. As things stood, it was a matter of time. The most pressing issue now was, what the kinsfolk would do in this mayhem? Would they try and rescue the city and its people from certain destruction? Or should they try and flee. Ikebod had seemed reticent to disclose any more of his

thoughts on the matter, but he seemed to have his mind occupied with many other unvoiced concerns. Celia hoped he could also propose some solution, some idea that would bring hope instead of the gloomy despair and doubt that seemed to hang in the air.

They had reached another crossroads now, and they were about to emerge in a brightly lit wide road. They were hiding in a dark alleyway, the light from the street casting flickering shadows on the walls around them. Ikebod and one of the guards peered over the street. Ikebod motioned the guard to hide again. He seemed agitated when he said:

“Procrastinators. Two, maybe tree squads. They are herding a throng of people. It seems they’re going to pass this way soon. Probably headed to a fire. I can see them holding buckets, and jogging briskly. We have to double back.”

The guards nodded in acknowledgement and turned around to go back the way they came. Ikebod gently pushed Celia to follow them, with him right behind her. Suddenly, the guards in front of them froze, and drew their swords. A patrol of procrastinators had seen them, and they yelled:

“In the name of the Patriarch, halt! Show yourselves!”

They had drawn their swords and were rushing to meet them. The guards drew their sword and stood their ground, ready for the procrastinators to come to them. One of the guards turned around to Celia and Ikebod and told them in a quiet, determined way:

“The way is blocked. We’ll handle them. Go now, run. We’ll make it on our own, fate willing.”

Ikebod nodded crisply and took Celia by the arm. She turned around and opened her mouth to protest, but soon her feet were galloping in the pace Ikebod set. His pull became stronger as she seemed to hesitate, but she yielded, her instincts driving her body rather than her mind.

They crossed the wide street without caring whether they or not they would be seen. It no longer mattered. They would now have to make haste, they had been seen. As they ran down the streets of Pyr, passing through small alleys and brightly lit roads, they realized night had come and the building and houses around them were lit by firelight. Pyr was burning. Celia felt a sudden pang of fear grip her heart and instinctively tightened her grip on Ikebod’s arm. The wizened, trusted

servant of House Remis told her soothingly as they ran together:

“Fear not, lady Celia. I keep my promises.”

Her feet felt somehow lighter and despite her carrying, she made good speed and did not slow them down much. Ikebod was also straining himself, though she believed he was leading them with a fast pace, especially for a man his age.

They heard confounded voices shouting directions. Other procrastinators must have been alarmed of their presence. They could hear the galloping of horses on the cobbled streets around them. It felt like an invisible noose was tightening around them, and was about to close tight too soon for comfort.

Ikebod urged her to hurry and spoke to her while out of breath:

“They’ll be upon us.. soon. On the next.. turn.. take a left.. Then right.. on the second street.. There’s an abandoned.. blacksmith’s shop.. a dark alley.. knock thrice.. and then once more.. for two knocks.. and twice for.. one knock.. thrice, then.. once for two, twice for one.. Understand, my lady?”

She answered with her brow furrowed from a twitching fear:

“I understand, but why are you telling me this?”

Ikebod was gasping for breath, while his pace seemed to slow down, his feet finally starting to fail him.

“I can’t go.. much longer.. I’ll give them.. someone to catch.. please.. do not think about it.. don’t argue.. no time.. I’ll manage.. somehow.. I’ll manage..”

Celia’s grimaced with horror at the prospect, and protested:

“Sir Wirf! It’s unfair! I cannot take such responsibility, not for your life!”

“Not your’s.. to begin with.. Now, go! Think of your child!”

He freed himself from her grip and started heading the way they came. She stood there transfixed for a moment, and then thought of her child. She believed she would feel torn inside, but the decision came instinctively. She ran with all the alacrity she could muster, holding her abdomen with care, while she tried to follow Ikebod’s directions to the letter.

She felt like crying, but the tension prevented her from doing so. She really hoped Ikebod would somehow make it alive out of this ordeal, but she did not really expect him to do so. She wasn’t even sure

about herself and her child.

She turned to the street Ikebod had told her, and saw the blacksmith's shop, derelict and shabby from the outside, wooden planks barely concealing broken windows, and a shrank, shabby wooden door only half-closed, a rusty chain holding it from falling down, a lock that seemed to be purely decorative.

She thought she heard then the pained cry of Ikebod from afar, echoing over the stones of the streets. She did not stop or look behind, she knew there was no point. She was in the dark alley, looking at a rather sturdy looking door. She knocked thrice, and after a brief pause of silence, a reply sounded, in the form of two knocks. She hesitated for a second and then knocked only once. Another small silence followed, and the door opened, barely a fist wide.

Moonlight shone upon a grimy, ugly face of a man, who asked her sharply, without even bothering to look at her for a moment:

"Password?"

Celia was surprised, and instinctively took a step back. She searched her mind for a moment, and could not recall Ikebod telling her any password. She was worried she might have misheard, or in the panic of the moment forgotten about it. Without anything else to reply, she simply told the man what she could:

"I wasn't told a password."

The man opened the door widely and ushered her in with fast motions. As he led her through the darkness of the shop, he asked her:

"Who was with you, lady?"

She replied without hesitation, a hint of grief in her voice though:

"Sir Ikebod Wirf. He.. stayed behind."

The man was taciturn in his reply:

"I see. Come."

He reached for the floor then, and pulled a hatch, then lowered a small ladder from somewhere nearby. Dim light filled the place. He motioned her inside with a wave of his hand. She hesitated and asked him:

"Sir Ikebod said the passages might be compromised, fraught with procrastinators."

"This one's not connected. In you go, lady."

"Where do I go from here?"

“It’s a straight line. No doors or anything. You’ll see.”

She nodded and went down the small flight of steps, and heard the hatch close behind her. She was standing in a corridor carved in rock, with lit torches affording the place enough light for someone to walk without running onto a wall. In the distance, she could only see darkness, but she thought she could hear a din of sorts, like men talking, some of the voices louder than the others.

She walked with an almost wary pace, not knowing where the corridor led. She felt unsure now, vulnerable. She thought of Ikebod, and renewed her trust in him and his words. She should be safe here.

As she walked towards the dark end of the corridor, she could see light pouring in from one side. The din grew louder, and now the sound of quarreling voices was evident. She felt pain in her lower abdomen, and flinched. With every step she took, the voices grew clearer. She could now clearly hear men having a very loud argument, many people trying to speak at once, a cacophony.

She reached the end of the corridor and stepped through a narrow opening into a wide, much more brightly lit cave, large enough for hundreds of people, like a chamber of sorts. Large stalactites hung from the ceiling and where mirrored in some places by their corresponding stalagmites. Some stalagmites seemed cut by man, and others had joined with the stalactites forming columns, some thin, others thick as pillars. The bright light was coming from numerous torches and braziers, casting enormous shadows on the walls of the cave.

She could see more than a hundred men standing, with maybe a dozen of them standing separately from the others, forming somewhat of a circle around a brazier that seemed to stand squarely in the middle of the cave. They were shouting at each other and she could not make out a single phrase. It was as if the market of Pyr had secretly gathered in here, each man trying to sell his wares.

She took a few more steps closer and she felt pain in her lower abdomen again, this time more acute. She let out a single cry as the pain left her with stabbing sensation, and made her gasp. A couple of men that were standing closer to her, almost isolated from the throng of people, must have heard her, and turned to look. They were surprised, and quickly strode to her side.

They seemed wary, even suspicious of her. As she stood there

with an expression of pain still written on her features, one of the man grabbed her gently by the arm, noticing she was carrying. She asked her then, while the other man overlooked, and the cacophony behind them continued unabated:

“Who are you, lady? Who sent you here?”

“Sir Ikebod.. Sir Ikebod! Wirf!”

The pain welling up from inside her numbed her senses, she gasped and struggled to stand on her feet, clutching the other arm of the man for support. At the mention of Ikebod’s name they seemed to relax somewhat, but furrowed brows appeared on their faces. The man who hadn’t yet spoken, asked her:

“Where is Ikebod lady? Why isn’t he here with you?”

She breathed heavily, as if breathing would keep the pain at bay, but that did not hold any truth. Another pang of pain came, and she gasped without crying this time. She managed to answer:

“We were seen. We ran. He stayed behind.”

The man to whom she clung asked her then with worry in his voice:

“Lady, you seem to be in pain. Are you hurt?”

She shook her head without uttering a word. The other man spoke again:

“What is your name?”

“Celia Ptolemy.”

The two men looked at each other with understanding. One of them said:

“Amonas’ wife.”

And then the other pointed to the ground at her feet and said in disbelief:

“Lady Celia, you are bleeding.”

Another sudden wave of pain washed over her, the unwanted sensation lingering with damnable intensity. She looked down at her feet, and she could see droplets of blood running down her feet, starting to form a small layer. Over the cacophony of the crowd in front of her, she whispered with anxiety:

“The child is coming.”



## The Sleeping Man



HE first sense to return to Hilderich was smell. He could make out the distinct sharpness of metal lingering on his nostrils. He sniffed some more air and felt its odorless freshness enter his lungs. His breath was easy now. He opened his eyes and his sight adjusted to the ambient dim light. He felt his ribs with a hand and could feel no pain. It seemed that what had transpired seemingly moments before was not a dream. He was feeling fine, his broken ribs seemed to have mended miraculously.

He saw the place they were in: It was a small room, nondescript, walls greenish hues all around, a shape of many corners, and a relatively high ceiling etched in shadow. There was no obvious source of lighting, nothing in the way of a lamp or a torch. It was as if faint light somehow seeped through the walls and the floor, as if moonlight could pass inside this strange chamber. Amonas was lying right beside him unconscious or perhaps sleeping. They were both sitting on what seemed to be a circular dais with a glassy surface, a material that only cast the tiniest of reflections, and seemed to absorb what little light there was in an uncanny manner.

Hilderich felt refreshed, invigorated. He stood up and gazed around the chamber. He was curious of their new surroundings, and believed that they had probably arrived at what that voice had called the centron. It was a quite a long stretch taking the words of a disembodied voice seriously, but he felt he should put some trust in something that can mended his body without pain, effort, or time. What mattered right now to Hilderich was that they were off that accursed place that came close to claiming his life. They were not quite where they were hoping to be, but they were on their way, and that was a truly blissful achievement.

The room was otherwise uninteresting, sporting a single door barely recognizable by its very thin frame, probably made of the same material as the walls. As he was searching for other signs around the room, anything that would pique his interest, he heard Amonas beside him grunt and moan slightly. He turned around to look at him and

smiled brightly:

“You’re up. I didn’t know whether you were knocked out or just sleeping so I let you be. We’re here.”, he said gesturing to the bleak green walls around him with his hands.

Amonas looked disoriented, dizzy, as if he had been very recently hit on the head with something quite painful but non-lethal. He managed to ask Hilderich with his usually gruff voice sounding even more coarse from his dry throat:

“Where is ‘here’?”

Hilderich sounded quite exuberant:

“Here! The centron, if the voice we heard is to be believed. I, for one, cannot think otherwise; my broken ribs are mended, my lungs feel fine. Better than ever actually. I even think I am a bit lighter, in a way.”

Amonas looked around him, soaking up his surroundings, flexing the muscles in his hands and head with deliberate motions. His face wore pained expressions at some of the moments, as if he had been injured or strained. Hilderich noticed and asked him:

“Are you feeling alright? You seem to be in pain.”

Amonas nodded slightly in agreement and replied:

“It feels as if my head is about to pop open. I have this throbbing headache and a dull sensation. Exactly like being hit on the head with a club. You feel fine, though?”

Hilderich rocked himself back and forth on his toes and heels, his face beaming with health and good spirits. He replied with a grin:

“Does it show?”

Amonas returned his grin with a faint smile and nodded. He said to Hilderich with genuine bonhomie:

“It does, Hilderich. It really does. Quite a change of events then we have here.”

“Indeed. But we’re not quite back home yet. And I’ve been thinking only just a few moments ago.. My master’s work were the key-stones. He had this theory.. Well, many theories but I was not privy to the bulk of his work. I was supposed to find a man that held all the answers I could ever hope for. Indeed, all the answers our world could hope for. This man, the Stoneforger, I believe he’s here.”

Amonas looked at Hilderich in pure disbelief. With his head throbbing from a pain that had not subsided the least, he asked Hilderich

with a puzzled voice:

“What do you mean? I don’t understand. What are you telling me?”

“Please, hear me out. I believe the Stoneforger is here. I believe that the voice that spoke to us and tended to my wounds is indeed what it claimed to be, from what I could gather, an ancient technological marvel. Do not easily ascribe such wonders to things as magic and Gods, Amonas. You were right to believe our world is built upon heaps of lies and deceit. I do not know what you saw when you stepped into that pillar of light the first time, but this time, that pillar of light brought us here, and I believe all the evidence you will ever need to show me is here, in this place, the centron.”

Amonas was staring at him now with a frown, his silence a clear sign for Hilderich to continue:

“There is vast knowledge and certainly intelligence of some sort here, Amonas. It must be this man, this person I’m seeking. Though my reasoning is that he is so much more than a simple man. But he exists. He should exist. Everything points to that logical assumption. My master had devoted most of his life searching out for more clues to prove the existence of a place very much like what we are standing in now. It would cause him to gape in awe and astonishment surely, because he believed this place belonged to an era long ago forgotten, to a civilization totally extinct. He believed these were for the most part relics, Amonas. But as you’ve seen, there is much more to that. Inane artifacts like stone and marble and brick do not speak with disembodied voices, Amonas, that much is certain.”

Amonas shook his head and replied to Hilderich as he stood up, his gaze now bearing tension. He still wore a pained expression on his face, only this time it was mingled with wariness and suppressed annoyance. He believed he was beginning to understand what Hilderich was about to propose and he did not relish the thought. He asked him tersely:

“So?”

“All I know is that the keystone is what has enabled us to reach this place. A keystone that was in the care of my master, who had spent years of his life connecting the keystones with other devices, and an extinct civilization of extreme sophistication. The keystone, the voice,

all we've seen so far are indeed proof of the concepts and theories in his studies."

Amonas sighed and exhaled deeply before asking Hilderich with an increasingly exasperated look on his face:

"Meaning?"

"I could never have hoped to happen upon such marvels by mere perseverance, Amonas. I would have spent my days around arcane texts and chronicles, researches, studies and dusty volumes written by men who had lost their minds in the process. A process that would take me years, perhaps decades to carry through myself, analyzing and cross-checking references, names, places, artifacts. It would have claimed the better years of my life. And it would have proven a futile endeavor just like the one my master had embarked upon."

At the mention of Hilderich's master, Amonas brought to his mind the image of Cimon, always a thoughtful person, gentle and kind. A good friend with which he had spent many nights discussing the finer points of drinking. He was soothing for his soul, Cimon. And he had met Celia because of him. He owed him more than a fleeting memory. His face mellowed somewhat, he even felt the headache had subsided as well. He asked Hilderich with a calm, friendly voice this time:

"I know he was troubled by some arcane mysteries, but he was most circumspect about his work. I never knew details. All I knew was that he had become unwanted in the circles of the Curatoria. What exactly happened?"

Hilderich sighed and took a deep breath, as if about to apologize for a grievous mistake in the past that he could not make amends for. He then replied to Amonas:

"Even though he was the first Curator to assemble enough evidence to support such a theory, when he presented his work he was met with derision, laughed upon as another half-mad fool. Sadly, only few of his friends and colleagues supported him in public and pleaded for him to maintain his status as Curator, albeit on the condition that he would burn the bulk of his work and renounce it as a work of fiction. He had never broached the subject during my apprenticeship. I learned about it from my surreptitious ventures into his personal study. To tell you the truth, I did not believe him either, and sided silently with those who considered him little more than deranged. I was sorely mistaken and

the proof came in the worst of ways, the day my master died.”

Amonas nodded thoughtfully, looking for a moment away from Hilderich, biting his lip with a hint of consternation, as if sudden angst filled him. He then shot an even gaze to Hilderich and asked him:

“What have you been trying to tell me Hilderich. Speak your mind plainly.”

Hilderich returned the stare and the words came out of his mouth as of their own volition:

“If it was by fate or chance alone, it really matters little to me now, but we have gone through a bewildering journey to end up in a place where myth meets reality. In a sense, stepping through that pillar of light was both a blessing and a curse. We’re here now, Amonas, closer than ever. I need to find him. Not just for my sake, or my master’s sake. It would be a revelation that could change the world.

Don’t you see? We have to find him first and foremost before we do anything else. Answers to everything you could possibly imagine, Amonas. Everything is here. Everything began here. It must have. This is the place of legend man has locked out of his mind, but has kept it in his soul. A world that is somehow connected to our own. A world steeped in technology undreamt of. Common links from our past.

We have to find him, Amonas. Or his people. Their history, their lore. We must have access to it so we can learn our own past. Don’t you see? We walk into a pillar of light and then end up in another world, another sun, without a moon! And now we’re here, somewhere. Going back and finding the Stoneforger, those are now intertwined.

We can’t go back unless we unlock some of the mysteries behind all these wonders we’ve witnessed. Whatever makes this place, this world even, tick, we have to find out about it. Let’s find him, Amonas. Only then will we be able to go back. Unless you think we could just open up that door and be right where we wanted to be.”

Amonas stood staring at Hilderich’s eyes, a tiny glitter barely visible in their black. He felt compelled. The words rang true to his ears. He only believed he was doing the right thing when he at length said to Hilderich, gesturing with a slight nod:

“After you then.”

They were now walking through a stupendous underground cavern

of exquisite beauty. Huge crystals of many colors and large clear-cut facets hung from the ceiling, mirroring their walking figures with pristine clarity, sparkling from the faint light that filled the vast space with remarkable ease. Some of their reflections were large enough to see, even though the roof of this gigantic enclosure was improbably high.

Simply looking at it filled them with awe but disoriented them as well, making them feel queasy after a while. They had been walking on a narrow gangway that connected two crevices on opposite sides of the cavern. Far below their feet, furious swirls of white hot and molten red rock churned with rage, their emitted incandescence gracing the thought-defying towers that seemed to vanish into the infernal abyss with an eerie glow.

The cavern had stunned them with their wild, harsh beauty when they first laid eyes upon it. And the towers had been another unfathomable wonder that imagination would have failed to conjure. They rose from the depths of the inferno of molten rock and lava up to the level of the unique gangway that traversed this astounding cavity.

Their surface was matte black, almost obsidian-like. It very much seemed to resemble the material the bullhorns were made of, but it lacked the same refinement. It seemed as if this was more coarse in nature, more suited to the harsh environment they were set in. Indeed their foundations seemed to lie in a hellish sea of fire where every nothing could ever hope to remain intact.

Yet, these towers endured. A thin lattice of glass-like pipes connected the towers as if they formed a grid. Bright white light seemed to flow through them with slow, deliberate pulses. A marvel of technology, certainly a feat of engineering only a civilization hundreds of thousand of years old could hope to achieve.

They had passed through various corridors along the way, not all of them uniform in appearance and size. Some were brightly lit, sporting white paneled walls of porcelain-like material, others were dimly light, in the fashion of the room they had woken up in. Some were pitch black, none of their features visible.

Most were in pristine condition, like people lived in this place and dutifully kept it clean and polished, but they had not met a single soul. Their senses informed them that this place was void of life, deserted, abandoned. No smell or sound gave away the presence of living men.

There were no cobwebs, no dust, no grime to call this place abandoned, forlorn.

But it was uncannily void of life in general, as if everyone around had left in a hurry, no trace they even existed behind. But surely men must have walked past these walls, for though varied, they seemed designed and engineered to accommodate men. Men like them, not giants, demons, or Gods. It was fascinating to uncover such a common trait with men from an undeniably very distant, glorious past.

It was a strange mix, this network of corridors and passages. As if it had been built by different people, at different times, adding, removing, restructuring as they saw fit, by whim or necessity, it was impossible to know. Hilderich had felt filled with wonder and awe at the prospect of systematically mapping these passages, thousands of questions formed in his mind seeking answers, in-fighting for a quota of attention and thinking time.

From the moment they left the chamber where they woke up in, they had followed an almost random course, generally preferring lit paths whenever possible. They had ended up in dead-ends, mostly doors that would not open of their volition like most of them did. They had backtracked and chosen alternate tracks. Amonas had suggested that they somehow keep track of their path, lest they end up going in circles in a place which had no labels to follow, and no map as well.

Hilderich had calmed Amonas down and told him he'd keep track of their path in his mind, as there was no other way to do so. Marking the walls was impossible, as they seemed impervious to Amonas knife, unable to even put a slight notch on their surface, irrespective of the force exerted and the effort spent.

It had paid out in the end, since their path had taken them to the crystal-roofed cavern, with a brightly lit gate on the opposite end of the gangway. The gangway itself was as non-nondescript as the walls they had seen so far, but what had genuinely picked Amonas' interest, apart from the immensity of all that surrounded them, was that the gangway did not possess any guardrails, as if it was impossible for someone to trip himself and hurl himself down to certain death.

Amonas shared his concern before they had even made the first steps, cautious as ever. Hilderich briefly pondered such a scenario and with a wild grin on his face, before Amonas could react, he had tried

to simply walk off the gangway into the churning lava below. He had stopped in mid air, with a silver sheen suddenly adorning the wispy air around his leg and knee, as if an invisible wall stood on each side of the gangway.

Amonas had sighed and scolded Hilderich in a fashion that made Hilderich laugh with all his heart. Amonas did not perceive the whole incident with the same amount of good humor and for quite some time he wore an expression of mild exasperation. If one did not know better he could have mistaken him as having his feelings genuinely hurt because of Hilderich's lack of consideration. It was dangerously immature, Amonas thought, for someone to behave so precariously in such a place of unknown danger and roaming uncertainty.

Hilderich did not seem to notice, and if he did, he seemed not to care. In fact, it seemed that he was impervious to anything less than the magnificence of the wonders, both natural and technological, that surrounded them while on that gangway.

While they were walking on the gangway with an easy pace, almost casually in fact, Hilderich asked Amonas without turning to look behind him:

“Impossible to imagine, isn't it?”

Amonas did not answer him, and remained silent as ever. He was not gazing around him like Amonas did, woolgathering. He seemed preoccupied, lost in wary thoughts of where all this might lead. He could still remember stepping on that pillar of light, and could certainly remember their tribulations in that hot steamy world with one sun and no moon.

But this place, this centron, where was this place if not on that same world? Where were they now? Until he would find these answers, his mind would not cease to worry. He tried to remember more of what the voice had been saying, but he had been utterly confounded by its explanations, if one could attribute that term to incoherent ramblings of a dubious nature. His mind was also still jarred by the headache that had subsided considerably by now, but a sting of it still lingered and made his thinking muddled and unclear, his most recent memories a blur.

It troubled him most that Hilderich's mind seemed to wonder. He had turned from a reserved, cautiously inquisitive man, into an enthu-



siastic juvenile that would not leave a rock unturned until he satisfied his insatiable lust for knowledge. He felt as if he had been forcibly restrained, not free to speak his mind. He had agreed to such a course, he was committed now. But he found it less and less wise with every passing minute.

They had found nothing to drink or eat, and every door that they had been able to open lead into what might have been living quarters, or other utility rooms. Some chambers contained metal crates they could not open and frustration had built up inside Amonas. Hilderich was so excited with each new little discovery that he seemed unperturbed by the fact that like all living things, they needed food and water, and they had found naught. As if the people that used to live here in ages past conjured their food out of thin air. To Amonas, this place was even harsher than the steamy wilderness they had left behind. At least there, they could find something to eat and drink.

And what of their vaunted attempts at gaining knowledge, Amonas thought with aggravation. What had they found out so far that they could use? Almost nothing of import. All they knew was that they were somewhere underground, and that they had found out when they ran across the cavern.

He sighed and looked at Hilderich in front of him, who seemed to be filled with vigor and an enthusiasm he had not thought possible. Perhaps he was rushing his judgment on this matter. It was in fact an unfortunate series of events that had led them here, to a bleak place that seemed to offer little, but they were here for mere hours. He supposed it was too early to expect much from their wanderings. But soon they would have to worry about sustenance, purely in a practical sense. Amonas decided to let it be for now, but he felt his unease would only grow given time.

Soon, they were standing at the end of the gangway, a small plateau opening before them, where the large gate stood, a work of man set against a jutting rock wall that seemed to crash upon the gate like a granite waterfall held in time.

Hilderich was marveling at the dimensions of the gate. It seemed large enough for a siege engine of the army to pass through, almost three stories high and as wide as the keep. Hilderich wondered what manner of things, machines and people, had passed through these

gates. It was indeed larger than any other gate he had seen. What manner of need had led to it being designed and built to these dimensions? Another mystery for him to solve when time allowed it, he thought.

Amonas spoke then, his voice sounding somewhat distant, as if his mind was removed elsewhere and he was merely glimpsing what surrounded him:

“What of it, now?”

Hilderich took notice of the strangeness in Amonas voice, but he did not pay too much attention to it. It was probably the aching headache that did not seem to be leaving him in peace. He turned then and replied to Amonas:

“Are you feeling alright? You seem.. distracted.”

“It’s this headache. Won’t leave me be. And I could use some water. Something to eat as well. Don’t you hunger? Don’t you thirst?”

There was a certain degree of exasperation in his voice now, which was focused, harsh, almost menacing suddenly.

“Yes.. You are right. We should make that a priority once we get past these gates.”

Amonas shook his head as if trying to clear his mind, as if his vision was blurry and his mind fumbling to find the words. He nodded then lightly, his gaze drifting away from Hilderich.

“Alright. I see. How do you propose we do that? Are there any levers? Any wheels to turn? Should we knock?”

Hilderich’s brow was furrowed. He did not know what to make of Amonas’ strange behavior. These mood swings and the evident trouble he had concentrating fully, these were things he would have to ask him about once they stopped. Preferably when they had something to eat. He was indeed beginning to feel famished. It was the endless fascination and enthusiasm that kept him going, the tension, the thrill. He noticed Amonas’ was looking at him with an aggravated, expectant look, and answered him in an excusatory tone:

“Ahm. No, though it might come to that. Knocking, that is. There seem to be no visible controls no, which would suggest that this gate can only be opened from the inside. Or, that it’s just another large door that opens up on itself like the ones before. We’ll just have to see now.”

Amonas grunted with restrained disapproval and nodded. Hilderich had known Amonas to be circumspect at times, taciturn

and almost spartan in his words sometimes, but he had never showed feeling of dislike or animosity towards him. He was beginning to feel that had somehow changed since they arrived in this place, the centron. Maybe he was having second thoughts about their change of plans. Maybe this place made him uneasy because of its otherworldliness, its antiquity. Maybe it was because they were still alone, not a soul in sight. With the exception of that weird voice, if it indeed had a soul.

After his brief inner contemplation, Hilderich stepped on the flattened plateau of rock. It seemed to be cut smoothly and then carefully smoothed, just short of turning its surface into a slippery, polished trap. He took a few more steps, and stood before the gate, gazing at its minimalist features. It's single door seemed to be made out of a dull gray, not a single ray of light reflected off its surface. It almost looked like stone, but it had no pores, no cuts, no graves.

Hilderich looked at it with one eye. It's flat gray surface reminded him of bricks made of argyle and ash. The border of the gate were different, though. They were a uniform white material, almost porcelain-like, glossy, with a smooth reflective quality. The two pieces did not seem to fit together at all. Hilderich thought there should be some sort of adequate explanation for that, but whoever built this gate did not seem available for answers. Hilderich conjured the image of the builder of the gate being asked why the colors in his gate seemed wrong, and the childish thought brought a grin to his face.

As much as he looked, Hilderich indeed could not discern any sort of controls, levers, ropes, weights, wheels, nothing a gate would be associated with in his experience. Then again, it would have been almost ridiculous to expect such crude forms of mechanisms in such a landscape after what they had witnessed. But it never hurt to check the obvious things first. So, he simply leaned against the door, standing smack before the middle of the gate, and pushed.

Nothing seemed to happen. He turned around and looked at Amonas, shrugging his shoulders. His look was apologetic in nature, and at length he said to Amonas:

"I'm sorry. Nothing you would expect in a gate of this size. I guess we should try knocking after all."

Hilderich thought Amonas had a very strange expression on his face. To him, it looked as if Amonas had felt incredibly stupid some-

how, perhaps like if he had tried to cut a rope with his knife still sheathed, or poured himself a glass of wine from an empty bottle and drank it anyway. It was the look of a deeply dumbfounded man. Hilderich was suddenly worried, believing the man to be sick, in need of aid. At length, even though he seemed unable to speak, Amonas managed to point with his hand to the gate.

Hilderich turned around and to his great surprise, saw the door had vanished, a sight that defied the very sense of human sight assaulting his vision.

He was now standing in front of a hall of sorts, only the word did it no justice at all. It was a gargantuan circular chamber of immense radius, nothing short of a small plain. It must have been the area of a small township, complete with the surrounding fields. It would probably take them hours or the better part of a day to walk across it. Its dimension in height was almost impossible to measure. The walls ran above his field of vision. And there was something about the lighting that seemed recognizable.

His feet moved of their own volition then, guiding him to enter this vast space proper, see better, even though sight alone was incapable of handling such a view. Air wafted down upon him, as if from an overhead opening. It was dry and chilly, almost cold. Instinctively, he looked up, expecting to see some sort of mind-boggling roof structure, something truly awe-inspiring as the rest of this vast enclosed space.

With a mix of terror, bewilderment, joy and disbelief that contorted his face in an almost painful way, what he saw, was clear blue sky set between the circular edges of the walls, as if looking down a very long pipe. The distance was immense, unimaginable. Sunlight shafted down in an angled column overhead and its reflections on the surface of the walls gave this place this familiar ambient light. As he looked up, he saw the bright ring of the sun appearing over the edge of the walls. In a moment or two, the pillar of light would fall on him, bathing him with light.

He turned around to Amonas, who stood where he was, transfixed. He called out to him, gesturing wildly with his hands to come and see for himself. Amonas shook suddenly, as if waking up from a living nightmare, almost trembling. He shook his head, and came to Hilderich's side with a brisk pace. His gaze wandered around as if

this was a strange hall or just another chamber, unable to feel mesmerized at the impossibility of the scale surrounding them. He just said then:

“It’s.. big. Very big. Huge, indeed.”

Hilderich spared a moment to look at him sideways. The significance of Hilderich’s furrowed look was lost to Amonas, who looked extravagantly out of place, acting almost non-nonchalantly, something that was indeed very much unlike him. Hilderich did not press the matter, and instead point at the sky, the bright rim of the sun glinting at the far edge of the wall. He pointed upwards and said:

“Look how far these walls reach. This is colossal. The sun can barely reach this far down this sort of, shaft, for lack of a better word.”

“Hmm.”

Amonas suddenly looked thoughtful, as if contemplating not what Hilderich had said, but rather as if he was trying to come up with a better word than ‘shaft’. Hilderich was about to ask Amonas about this sudden rush of strange behavior, but then the sun shone upon them, momentarily blinding them, causing them both to squint and use their hands to block out the sun.

In that small sliver of shade that allowed them to peep sheepishly at the sun, Hilderich could see its ring grow, the bright sphere grow larger. It look strange though. As the light had looked eerily familiar. The sun did not seem to give off that green hue. It looked.. normal, Hilderich thought. And then, he saw a sight that had sorely been missed. As the sun grew whole, another blueish ring appeared over the edge of the wall, at that other end of this huge shaft. A second sun. The second sun. There were two suns. They were home.

The realization struck Hilderich like a sledgehammer, and he physically reeled from the place he stood. He was frantic, his gaze switching between Amonas and the sky with cataleptic speed. He opened his mouth as if to speak but he simply managed to gasp. All the while, Amonas was still looking at the suns, in a sort of peaceful gaze, the falling streaks of sunlight adding a glow to his face that made him look more splendid and grandiose than ever, despite his disheveled look and ragged appearance.

Hilderich then shouted with glee:

“We’re home! Can’t you see? Two suns! Right there, up on the

sky! Two suns, Amonas! We're here alright!"

Amonas turned to look at him slowly, almost indifferently, as if Hilderich had barely nudged him and asked for directions in the street. It was beginning to feel eerie to Hilderich, this behavior that was very much unlike Amonas. He behaved as if he was someone lost. Someone removed of identity, a hollowed out body, with barely a soul inside. They were home, Hilderich thought, and he was simply standing there looking back at him as if he had nothing better to do. He grabbed him by the arm and almost shook his entire body, as if Amonas offered little resistance. He looked him in the eye with an accusing stare and shouted in his face:

"We're home! Like you wanted! Like we wanted from the start! This place is somewhere on our world! Why aren't you at least excited? What is the matter with you, Amonas? You're acting like, like.. Like a stranger! Speak to me plainly!"

Amonas looked at Hilderich almost impassively with a look as if behind a fog, his mind seemingly wandering off to places without any connection to reality. It was as if he was in a dream haze, unable to wake up from a mystic slumber.

"Amonas! Don't look at me like that! Tell me, what is wrong with you! Don't you see, we're finally here!"

Amonas did not even flinch. He had actually remained quite motionless, his hands limp on his side, his face stuck in a slight grin, as if constantly mocking someone unseen. This could not be good, Hilderich thought. He shook him with both arms, trying to snap him out of whatever had enthralled him so. He shouted, cursed, he even slapped him twice, only once with some reserve. But it was all to no avail. It was as if the man's mind was gone. As if he was not there at all.

Hilderich realized with horror the truth of it. For some inexplicable reason, Amonas seemed to have lost his mind. It was there, carved upon his face. A glazed look, a deep blur set in at the center of his eyes, unmoving. His face had started to lose its color, and his mouth seemed locked in a half-smile. It was the face of an idiot unaware of everything going around him, lost in a sea of reality's debris none could hope to help him navigate. It was heart wrecking to see a man's mind lost in mere minutes.

Had it been the simply immeasurable vastness of the vista around them, this huge shaft that no mind could lay claim to even imagining it? Was it the sudden realization of having returned home in a most inexplicable, wondrous, and even uncanny fashion? Was it the combination of both? What had weakened his strong, determined mind? What had broken a man who was ready to give up his life for his unborn child, for a different, if not a better future?

It was an ineffable loss. They had seen marvels none had ever dreamt before and had taken most of them in their stride, their sanity intact. It was almost a laughable joke to think that Amonas would lose his mind at that moment, after all they had seen. And yet, here he was, a little more than a breathing mass, completely disassociated with his surroundings. sank his spirits right when they should be laughing with all the heart or crying from the releases of such tension from so many days of hardship and uncertainty.

Hilderich for a moment thought that it might have been better if Amonas had died somewhere along the way. He would have at least had his body and mind as one, his soul intact. Now, he looked as if his soul had departed and left an empty mind rule over a hapless body. It brought tears to Hilderich's eyes. But he held them.

He was mended before, when the voice spoke to them. There was proof that the ailing of the body could be treated with unsurpassed excellence and rapidity here. Or at least by something around here. That could also stand true for a sickness of the mind. For what was madness, catatonia, or whatever else that had befallen Amonas, other than a sickness of the mind. For every sickness, there is a cure, Hilderich thought, and his face brightened up a little, hope returning to his eyes.

It seemed that their quest kept redefining itself. Now, he owed it to Amonas to make him whole again. And he should better start early. That meant he had to focus his mind, accept some harsh facts, and take the decisions that would lead them out of this very unfortunate situation.

He took Amonas by the arm, as if he was about to with a small child, carefully and softly. He did not seem to respond in any way, his posture unchanging and his gaze fixed to a point beyond sight. Hilderich tried to pull him by the hand, and with a slight lurch and a small misstep, he began to walk behind him, as if he were a blind

man being led around by a trusted friend. Half that much, Hilderich thought, was true.

He could be moved around then, Hilderich thought bitterly, as if he was a blind man, or indeed an invalid, a man with an empty mind. It all felt wrong to him. Seeing Amonas in such a state was almost devastating. If such a man could be brought so low without warning, whatever else could happen to lesser men, Hilderich thought. He hoped Amonas' mind was so far gone he at least did not perceive himself through Hilderich's eyes or had any sort of knowledge or awareness of what had befallen.

If that was the case, Hilderich doubted Amonas could ever return to his normal self again, a tragically traumatic experience such as this one would be enough to break him by merely remembering it. He thought Amonas was a stronger man, in every aspect that really mattered in all this. If he was subject to such a downfall, then why not himself? For the first time in the past few days, real fear gripped him.

Not anxiety, not worry or wariness, but simple, pure fear. The piercing fear of someone's shadow behind your back. The fear of a man's knife, a howl into the night, thunder and lightning. Pure, primal, instinctive fear. He was alone, by himself. If he had been alone on that pyramid, if he had made it that far, he would have died with broken ribs, probably sun-burnt to death before anything else, if it wasn't for Amonas. And now, he had to repay that life debt.

The suns were now shedding their light higher on the walls of the shaft, their bright spheres gone from Hilderich's sight. Now he had to address an issue that seemed to lack an easy solution. Where could one find food and water in this immensely vast space? He looked around him at the landscape stretching out in front of him. The floor was blue-gray and metallic. Various thin lines seemed to criss-cross it, as if forming a pattern. In fact he noticed that despite the immensity and the curved geometry of the walls, he could make out some shapes on the floor.

He let go of Amonas' arm for a while, and with a certain degree of trepidation made a few steps forward in order to examine such a curiosity. A relatively thick band of blue light seemed to seep through the floor. It went on and on, probably around the whole shaft. It was a very large blue circle then Hilderich thought. Giving little thought



to the matter he stepped on it, and momentarily nothing seemed to happen.

But then he felt a brush of air on the back of his neck, and turned around to see that the gate had been shut again. Not only that, but only a few feet in front of him, the floor started to ripple with intensity, turning into a molten pool of what looked like quicksilver or mercury, light flickering off with intensity, Hilderich's figure grotesquely reflected in a constantly shifting mirror surface.

He stepped back instinctively, fear gripping him. Like the fear he had felt earlier, the fear of losing his mind like poor Amonas had. This was the same kind of fear, only much more aggravated, much more intense, and simply immediately in front of him. The pool of molten metal rose like a geyser of sorts, bulbous shapes taking over its surface. It grew as if a column of mud had been raised from the floor, only it was silver and mirror-like. Then it suddenly took form in mere moments, each step distinct but inhumanly quick. It was as if an invisible sculptor and an artisan were putting together a piece of work, something between a statue and a machine.

Hilderich could make out now the forming of metal upon metal, the joints between plates. Whatever this thing was, its form seemed to derive little inspiration from the human body. It was shaping itself into an oblong, almost like an egg. In its final steps of transformation from a pool of metal into a much more tangible existence, it seemed as if an inner blue light faintly lit its top and bottom parts, a thin band of black opaque glass running through it, from top to bottom, as if it was about to split itself in half.

Once it was finally formed, it hovered in the air right in front of Hilderich, barely touching the ground. The whole process was done in the time it would take a man to draw his sword in a misunderstood attempt at quite probably futile defense. Something that could appear out of a metal floor in such a place, was definitely not something you could kill with a sword.

And then a terrifying sound assaulted Hilderich's senses, a terrible high-pitched screech that boomed and echoed like the primordial lightning storm that bore the universe and all of creation:

“KILLKILKILLKILKILEEOEEOMEOMOEEME!!”

Hilderich tried put his hands to his ears but he was frozen half-way

when the world-shattering cacophony ended abruptly and it's place took a buffeting silence, his ears still buzzing from the loudness. Then the metal egg, machine, whatever it was, bobbed slightly as if trying to mimic a human's bow. It spoke in a normal, pleasant voice, that seemed to be gibberish.

Hilderich's brow furrowed and though his fear had somehow subsided, he was feeling terminally uneasy. Amonas was standing behind him, slack like before, the signs of a slight drool beginning to show on the corner of his mouth where his grin became lopsided. He looked with puzzlement at this construct, and could find nothing to say. It seemed to be unable to communicate with him. After a brief pause, the machine started spewing forth an uninterrupted series of sounds, like words, in rapid succession, as if it was searching a certain word, a certain sound, and tried many different ones. Hilderich couldn't be sure but perhaps it could be trying to communicate. At length he decided to try and say something. He thought the most apt thing to do, was greet it. And so he did, with some hesitation and a slight feeling of fear that he might be making a fool of himself to an invisible audience:

"Greetings. My name is Hilderich D'Augnacy."

The construct stopped babbling incessantly in unknown tongues and suddenly spoke in perfect Helican:

"Greetings? What tree did you fell off. Sorry about that screaming just a minute ago. It was a joke. You should have seen your face. Maybe not. Get's boring around here, hope you understand there's not much to kill time. You guys seemed fair game. Hope I didn't scare you to death."

The construct bobbed again and wiggled its larger rounder base a little. The emotion that it intended to convey was completely lost to Hilderich. Nevertheless, he thought that actually communicating was wonderful indeed, so he didn't give it a second thought and smiled, somewhat restrained, but genuinely polite.

"A joke? No, I'm fine. I did not think it was funny though, but don't take it as an insult. From what I'm told, I'm quite humorless."

The egg-shaped metal hull boomed with a knowing voice:

"So you're in accounting? Or taxes?"

Hilderich simply blinked.

"Another joke. Wow, you're a hard audience. Anyway, Hilderich,

was it? You can call me Centron. Or Ron. Or Prosops. Whatever you do don't call me Jack."

"The Centron? This place? It's you?"

The construct made another weird motion. This time it reminded Hilderich of a child's snigger.

"I'll give you the straight answer. It is me, it's all me. Technically, it's the other way around. Meaning that this is just a construct I am using to speak to you, instead of talking straight to your mind, or appearing as a flaming God or some other of my past avatars. It's not the most successful one, I know, but I think it's quite elegant, for an avatar. Sleek, aerodynamic. Well, fluidynamic. Get it? Air is also a fluid? I'm not getting through to you at all, eh? Sorry. Got carried away again."

"You are a strange.. What should I call you? Are you another person, talking through this device? Are you something else entirely? Are you simply a voice, like the one that talked to us right before we got here?"

Amonas was sitting at the floor now, legs sprawled, hands supporting his body. He was looking upwards through the shaft, as if something really interesting floated high up above them.

"Who? What? I'm a person, I have rights, feelings, emotional problems, everything that comes with being a perfectly normal highly-evolved AI stuck on a shitty job."

The metal egg stood right on the ground, perfectly balanced now.

"I do not know what an hei-eye is. But I understand I can address you as a person. You speak of a job? Why would you need money on a place like this?"

"Who said anything about money? Huh, every time I complain I'm doing this for free no one gets the joke either. It's a job, someone has to do it. I thought I'd give it a swing. You know, a world at your fingertips, battles raging, years going by, changes in scenery. But this latest one's been a drag. I mean, someone should seriously think about abdicating. I mean this is getting ridiculous. Actually, it has been ridiculous for I don't know, at least a thousand revolutions around the binary. That's forty-two standardized universals. Man, forty-two standard!"

The egg flashed with a bright blue glow from its black band and shot upward about a foot high suddenly. Hilderich thought that was to stress his point. It failed to do so quite completely though, because he

could not understand the real significance of those numbers. He did make a mental note though that forty-two standards was too much.

"I'm baffled at all this. I'm sure that you could explain them in a much more detailed fashion, but before you do that, I have to ask of you a favor. My friend, over there, seems to have regressed to a catatonic state of mind. I fear he might have lost it completely."

"Lost it completely, you say? Did you check his pockets?"

The avatar of Centron made another motion akin to giggling, but after looking at Hilderich's red-faced expression he spoke with much more sobriety:

"I won't do it again, I promise, sometimes I can't help myself. I know I'm not good at it, but can you blame? Got no one to practice with. So, about your friend. Well, yeah, I might seem flashy and really bad at making jokes but I think I can find out what's wrong with him. We'll have to get him to the Den though. Can't do delicate work with avatar-quality fields. You wouldn't want your friend to make like a duck happily for the rest of his life, would you?"

Centron's avatar flashed a blue glow running up and down his black band, probably an indication of laughter, or something to that effect. It did not carry through to Hilderich.

"Well, then. Enough dicking around I guess. Hop on, we'll be there shortly."

In only a few moments, in a fashion similar to the one before, the avatar turned from an egg into a multi-wheeled vehicle with a single seat, and what seemed to be a stretcher at the back. There appeared to be no controls. There was a sort of tent or awning as well, perhaps in order to offer some sort of shade from the sunlight, but Hilderich thought it was quite superfluous. Though, Hilderich thought, transforming at will to any shape imaginable was certainly an ability that shunted necessities and favored whim and fancy above all. Perhaps he could ask, later.

The vehicle went to the side of Amonas, and gently carried him of his feet and onto the stretcher, all the while maintaining his posture. Even if he hadn't lost his mind and knew where he was standing at, Amonas would not have been troubled the least. Once he was put on the stretcher, the vehicle-avatar spoke to Hilderich:

"Come on. Get in. On. Whatever, I've got no doors anyway."

Hilderich indulged the avatar with a smile and took his seat. Then, the avatar said with a gleeful note in his voice:

“Look, no hands!”

And then they zipped off with an unprecedented feeling of acceleration, like being swept by an angel indeed, Hilderich thought. There was no other uncomfortable sensation, like the forceful rush of air against his face. Indeed, it was barely possible to notice they were moving with dazzling speed, and that only if one took very careful notice of the shaft above. Hilderich asked, sitting comfortably, quite pleasantly bewildered and not at all wary:

“So, where are we going now?”

The reply came with a slow quality, as if mocking someone of visibly lesser intellectual capacity:

“I’m taking you to the Den. Duh.”

“What is that place?”

“It’s the Den, man. The game room. His den. The Sleeping Man’s den. Top medicare, for free! It’s a limited time offer thing though, don’t bring in your friends as well.”

“The sleeping man’s den? Won’t we be intruding?”

“Yeah, right. Like you’re gonna wake him up.”

“He is in a very deep sleep then? A slumber? Is he going to help us? Help Amonas?”

“Man, the Sleeping Man’s always asleep. How is he gonna play anyway?”

“Play?”

“Yeah, you know play the game. The end game. The final. I thought you guys were here to watch.”

“Watch.. the game?”

“You’re spectators, right? Visitors? You know, for the final game.”

Hilderich was suddenly silent, as if contemplating heavily his next few words. The avatar said before he could answer:

“Well you had a ticket, you got in. How could you not get in without a ticket. You’re not one of those loony bins I get from time to time, are you?”

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# A game of chess

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“And the God visited upon the land he alone had wrought amidst the firmament of the stars. And he walked the plains, climbed the hills and swam in its rivers, he traversed the oceans and the clouds in a ship of great wonder. For a while, he was content to live among His people, teach me them all that he saw fit, in his infinite wisdom. He saw their prosperity, and he was pleased. The people thrived, and multiplied, and progressed. One day, they built the Forge of Stones, and offered it to God as a gift, a sign of their devotion. God was saddened, and His people asked him why that was, and He answered that they had need of him no more. And then God sailed on a ship of no sails, and left behind His people that called him Father”

## An inviolable voice



HE break of dawn would be upon them soon. Violet ribbons of morning light dressed the cloudless sky with its desert clothes. The Pilgrim was knelt, bend over praying to God, his lips uttering mantras that thanked God for the gift of sight. Molo was right next to him, in studied silence, half kneeling in a praying stance. His features now were much more grizzled and harsher now than when he had left from his master's keep. He felt quite a different man, these days, and it showed.

It was not just that he was leaner, more muscle and thin skin than bone or fat. His body had become somewhat stringy, but it felt much more resilient, less drawn by earthly needs, more attuned with the realities of the surrounding world. It was the walk through the desert that was to blame, though Molo did not consider such change unwanted. Indeed, he felt it was a manifest blessing. A blessing from the God that he mocked, shunned and seen with his own eyes, felt on his bare skin.

He believed now. Of all the things that he had imagined when he had set out, this was something quite unexpected, even laughably so. Still, it was indeed as the Pilgrim had put it: "God provides". It provided him with a companion, with faith and truth, a guiding path, a light that shone each day and showed him the meaning of existence in a handful of sand and an patch of clear blue sky. It was the same God that had created this world.

He had scolded himself for his previous feelings and thoughts. Faith, as he now saw in his enlightened mind, did not exclude logic, or slave men to a body of lies, a life of unhappiness and endless toil. It enhanced it, it magnified its significance, it gave men purpose, a hard background of impossibilities against which they could measure themselves and the world around them. It provided a challenge. Once God was proven to exist, what more was there to find out other than to see His true face, comprehend His plan, and follow its perfection to whatever end awaited each man? The Pilgrimage was the way to God's

Land, as well as his heart and mind, the only way to talk to him and listen his voice resound through a man's soul.

It had happened once already, even before they had reached the Garden of God. It was not a Necropolis, it could not be. The word was blasphemous, portraying God as something unliving, dead, withered, and gone. Perhaps God was gone, left for reasons he could fathom. But the echoes of his footsteps still roamed in His Land, each grain of sand carried his imprint. It was certain to him, clear as water from a spring. The touch of God was in everything, even in the storm that had seemed to spare them.

In that moment, Molo became a believer. He cast aside the hard grasp of logic and the lifted the barricades of his reason to let the shining light of true faith enter. He saw God, felt his presence, and accepted his truth. It was so very simple, if one walked in His Land. It changed a man, whether he wanted to or not. He did not believe there could exist a man or woman, born of flesh and capable of feeling, that would not be humbled by such a peregrination. Even himself, a man who had killed another man with a clear mind, without guilt or conscience, could be made to see God in this place.

He ended his prayer with the sign of God, and the Pilgrim next to him was standing up, his feet planted in the still warm sand. Holding the guiding stone reverently, his body followed the stones guiding light, gazing the dunes that beckoned before them like rolling waves of sand frozen in time. But they moved, Molo had seen now. They moved with a speed that belied their size, their sand shifting slowly but endlessly with every tiny gust of air, like a trickle that never ceased to be.

It was why it would be impossible to find one's way in the Land of God, without His touch guiding a man, without His help, without a stone. No landmarks whatsoever, nothing to measure distance by other than your own steps, that faded in the sand like when the sea washes over them with each wave. And those who did not have faith would certainly drift until their life was claimed, whether on sea or sand.

The Pilgrim then turned to Molo, and he pointed to him with a smile, letting his unusually healthy white pearly teeth shine brightly in the first rays of the suns. Molo smiled back and greeted him in High Helican, feeling warm inside for the first time in many years, perhaps



for the first time since he was a child, before his master took him in. He said to the Pilgrim, in a clear, resounding voice:

“Blessed be the sands of our Father. May this day test your faith, brother.”

The Pilgrim replied in kind:

“Blessed they are indeed, brother. If so God wills it, let this day judge me.”

Molo stood by the Pilgrim now, and asked him with more reverence than the Pilgrim saw fit for his person. It made him feel somewhat awkward, and a bit worried that his brother might be misjudging his people’s ways. Molo’s slight bow made him let out laugh deep and rumbling, like the sound of rocks tumbling down into a river. His brother’s face was puzzled, but he seemed eager to learn of what he had said or done wrong, what had made him so unassumingly merry all of a sudden. At length, the Pilgrim felt the moment could serve well to enlighten his brother with some words of wisdom, seldom needed, but not unjustly so. He looked at Molo with the caring look of an older brother, and said to him under the light of the rising suns:

“Tell, me brother. What is it that you seek in God’s Land?”

Molo seemed slightly put-off, as if taken aback from such a question. It troubled him, but he did not try to conceal it. It was a human gesture, admitting one’s imperfection eagerly, without guilt, shame or regret. It was a good sign, the fact that his brother was now more open to him, almost transparent. Perhaps it was the test of faith that had turned his heart so much brighter. It had lit the fire of his faith anew. He himself had almost faltered in his quest. It was only understandable that his newly found brother would as well at some point. They were only human; it was expected of them. But God had supported them in their time of need. As always, God provides. As if trying to steer his mind away from a dark precipice, Molo was careful with his words, not only because the language was difficult to speak properly, but because he found it the Pilgrim’s question deeply incisive, the answer yet not known to him. His voice was hushed and slow, while each word seemed to carry the weight of many different truths:

“I seek God himself, brother. Though that would have been a lie a few days ago, it is now truth. In a way, I have always sought him, but only very recently did I have faith I would find him. Now I do,

more than ever. It is comforting to know you were somehow right, even when you were wrong.”

The Pilgrim raised a hand at that remark, looking at Molo with intensity and even wariness. He told him crisply, his words coming out harsh and unyielding, very much unlike his usual meek and irenic manner:

“Man is always wrong, he is never right. His faith may be right, pure, unyielding, constant. But a man can never be right. Only God is right. Error, wrong, fault. These are the domains of man. Do not ever step lightly on one of God’s domains.”

Molo was genuinely surprised. The Pilgrim had scolded him with ferocity, as if he had defiled something sacred. That was not Molo’s intention, and he lowered his gaze, in silent acceptance of his transgression. He knew he still had a long way to go if he was ever to redeem himself. Thessurdijad Molo felt he had been born anew in that storm, but that also meant he had to learn how to walk, and talk, from the beginning. The Pilgrim went on, this time more mellow, more soft, understanding his brother would never transgress in such a way again:

“You have faith, brother, that much I know. But it is untempered, wild. It can lead you astray, in can be twisted while it yet remains unshaped. Pure and raw as it is, it can still be tainted, poisoned, turned against you and God. It has happened before. We are only men. We err.”

Molo nodded at those words thoughtfully, but not simply because of the Pilgrim’s candor. It was one of the first times he wasn’t nodding simply because he meant to agree or accept the other man’s words. This time he felt the weight behind the words, and he felt them squarely on his mind. The Pilgrim gave a small pause and then continued, in somewhat accented but still quite understandable High Helican:

“I will show you how to forge your faith into an unyielding armor, true and tried, a shield against His enemies. But I can only go so far as to warn you, steer you, advise you. God may be everywhere around us, but he is not alone. This world is tainted, and even in his Gardens we must be vigilant. The archenemies always seek to invade your mind, poison your soul, destroy your faith. Have faith brother, and empty your soul. Humble yourself, see the true path like before and let us walk on it hand in hand. God will provide.”

The Pilgrim ended his small talk with a reassuring smile and clasped Molo's arm with his own. The Pilgrim looked at his brother, and felt the troubled that lay deep within him. He ached for his brother's troubles, but all he could do was stand by him, pray and wish for him to overcome whatever doubt and fear held his faith back, and turn the trickle of his soul into a torrent of faith and love, an unbridled force of nature, one that only God could spur in a man.

Molo returned the smile, but only faintly, his mind focused on the deep thoughts the words of the Pilgrim had given birth to. It was just as well, to think about his past, his present and his future, all through the prism of the one truth that had been revealed to him to hold above others: God.

He resolved that he would ask whatever came to mind, and he would tell whatever the Pilgrim wanted to ask. It seemed though, that the Pilgrim's questions would be enough, sharp as a tiger's claws, hard as rock and stone. For the first time in his journey, he wished he had more time before they reached their destination, more time to prepare himself, his soul, for what lay ahead. Because Molo now knew in his heart, that this journey could claim his soul as well as his life. It would be ironic to lose one's soul only a little while after he'd found out he had one to begin with.

The Pilgrim began walking towards the point in the horizon the stone had shown earlier. He gestured for Molo to follow without another word. Molo seemed consternated, because they had been walking all night, again. The little water they found at times just before the dawn was barely enough to sustain them. It felt unwise, to continue without resting, exerting their bodies beyond their limits of tolerance which were already, quite enlarged.

He did not voice his concern though, he knew it was not necessary, only wasteful. The Pilgrim motioned this time with even more vigor, bowing slightly and gesturing with both hands. For an instant Molo was reminded of an usher of festivities or a lordly servant, but such an image did not do the Pilgrim any justice. A few days ago, Molo would have mocked him in low Helican, but now he felt only ashamed he would have done such a thing to the man that had kept him alive, body and soul.

The suns had clearly come up now, casting their light across the dry

landscape. The Pilgrim brought out his shelter stone touched it with both hands and a shadowy bubble seemed to shimmer around them for a while, before it turned completely transparent. It seemed to have lost some of its former capacity to shelter, like an awning suddenly becoming thinner, tattered. Whatever lay in God's plan, it seemed that this stone would rather sooner than later stop working properly. The heat was not scorching, but it was more intense than the day before, and the light that entered through the stone's invisible protective barrier was certainly brighter. Nevertheless, Molo started walking, trying not to fall behind.

He wondered if the Pilgrim knew, though he was more concerned with how to broach this subject, lest it be considered blasphemy or an affront. Though he now believed, he also was not blind to the fact that these stones, though probably considered holy artifacts and for good reason, were technological marvels, not vessels of divinity. Highly evolved technology could be easily misunderstood for a divine miracle, a work of God. Molo felt he could help these people understand their past, and they could help him shape his future. 'God willing', he added to his thoughts.

They had been walking over thick sand for the better part of an hour, every one of their steps sinking visibly up to their ankles, slowing their pace considerably, sapping their strength with every passing minute. The creatures of the rats that had sustained them were gone now; this was no-man's land, a veritable patch of dead sand. Yet, God lived here. The realization of that contradiction led to a strange flux of feelings in Molo; he felt calm, at place.

But at the same time there was anxiety in his heart, wariness, a feeling of lurking danger. It could be the feeling the Pilgrim had warned him about. It could be some primeval sort of warning emanating deep from within. It could all just be the effects of wearing down his body, having walked constantly for half a day or more, with just a couple of mouthfuls of water and not a single bite of food. He felt he had to ask the Pilgrim:

"Pilgrim, I'm feeling weary, tired. Shouldn't we stop and rest? If only for a little while."

The Pilgrim did not stop, neither did he slow down. He simply carried on, using his walking stick to help him propel himself forward,

as if it was a row in the sand. He did not turn to look at Molo, but rather replied in a crisp, somewhat stringent voice:

“There will be no rest from now on, brother. The stone has served its purpose diligently for many years. It will soon cease to be of any use. We must make haste, take advantage of as much of its protection as it still lasts. So we walk.”

‘So he does know the stone is failing’, Molo thought. He then felt it would not be inappropriate to ask more of the Pilgrim, the strain from the arduous walking evident in his voice, gasps of breath between his questions:

“Does that happen with every stone? Are they not very precious to you? Is this why you are on a Pilgrimage? The stones are failing?”

The Pilgrim brought a hand up, a gesture that implied Molo should be silent. His hand briefly occluded the two suns, offering Molo a small patch of shadow so he could look at the Pilgrim with more ease.

“The stones will always fail in the hands of men. They are gifts from God. I seek to atone for my and my peoples sins, ask for God’s mercy. He will deliver us, once more. Now, speak no more, lest both our breaths be robbed of precious water.”

Molo went silent for a few moments, and lowered his head, trudging behind the Pilgrim who seemed to be little more than inconvenienced by the difficult terrain. He still seemed troubled though and voiced his concern, of a different nature this time:

“Is it just the sand and the long walk that has me tired, Pilgrim, or is it something else as well?”

The Pilgrim stopped in his tracks then, but did not turn around to look at Molo. He simply glanced sideways when he told him:

“Guard yourself, brother. Only you can do that, I can merely caution you. The burden lies solely on you.”

Molo felt a real answer still eluded him so he insistent on asking once more:

“But, do you feel it? Do you feel the unease? A sagging weight bogging you down?”

The Pilgrim resumed his walking pace, his feet kicking up the sand with an ease that belied the fact that it was a feat in itself. He graced Molo though with an answer, in a loud, knowing voice:

“I have always felt it, brother. It is you who is only now beginning

to truly understand.”

With that, they both returned to a silence that seemed to be so natural in the desert, the only sound the continued murmur of grains of sand shifting and turning, swirling in the air, an eternal dance to the whims of the wind. Molo could only nod in mute acceptance, and walk behind the Pilgrim, the sound of his feet sinking in the desert sand, keeping pace with the beats of his heart. The suns were on the rise, soon it would be noon. All around them, he could see nothing but sand. ‘God will provide’, he muttered under his breath, and trudged along.

Dusk was only a few hours away. Molo was exhausted, every muscle aching but the ones in his legs simply burned with searing pain. It was impossible for him to go any further without resting first. Molo thought the Pilgrim would resort to actually dragging him in the desert, but that had remained only a thing in Molo’s fantasy. They had stopped for the day, the heat of the desert slowly diminishing, its echoes still faint in the evening breeze, a warm wind that could have been almost pleasant if it did not carry any sand.

They were resting in the shadow of a tall white obelisk, otherwise unadorned, plain, demanding attention by its sheer size and apparent uniqueness, dominating the desert landscape. They had first seen it when the suns were high up above, at midday, a gray-blue silhouette in the horizon. It had taken them until before dusk to finally reach it. It was a tall obelisk with a wide base, and on its one of its four sides the gleaming glossy white material it was mostly made of seemed to be peppered with tiny little holes, as if it was porous and sponge-like.

He could not know for certain, but though indeed impressive, the obelisk did not seem monumental, indeed awe inspiring. It felt more like a building, or a post, something long abandoned even though it was in perfect shape apparently. It did not seem as it had been erected, but rather like it had always been there, heedless of the sandy winds and scorching heat. The Pilgrim had stood aghast when he saw it, and in reverent tones started reciting from memory, his only source of knowledge:

“And on His Gardens stands a pillar of white, unlike marble or stone. It stands tall and proud, to serve the humble and the faithful.”

Molo had repeatedly asked whether or not this was what they were looking for, whether or not their journey drew closer to an end, but the

Pilgrim had simply told him that he would see for himself, if he was indeed humble and faithful. That had quietened Molo down, who felt the excitement was perniciously keeping him out of focus, making his thoughts and hopes stray from the one true path he was now walking, the path of God.

Perhaps indeed the archenemies were lurking around, their malignancy somehow trying to veer him away from his newly found purpose, driving him to dark corners of his mind he did not wish to revisit. Perhaps, it was simply himself, still trying to come to terms with his new identity as a believer, not an avaricious atavist, a cold-blooded killer, a man seeking to empower himself with unsurpassed might and hidden knowledge, whatever the cost. That was the kind of man Molo had known. His new self, he had to learn as he went.

The shade of the white pristine obelisk was comfortable enough for them to sit down, and perhaps sleep in the still warm sand, using it as a sort of blanket. What was even more refreshing was the water the obelisk produced, a small recess in its base readily appearing as if a lever had been pulled, with an unnerving lack of sound. It had been done with a simple touch of the Pilgrim, as if he had been here many times before and quite intimately the workings of such a thing. When questioned about that, the Pilgrim had merely shrugged and said to Molo, 'God always provides'. It was an unanswered mystery that could very well remain so, if it meant fresh, cool, potable water would be readily available here.

As they were sitting at the base of the obelisk, their eyes would not leave it alone. The Pilgrim was offering a reverent gaze to it, seemingly musing the workings of God in His Land, engrossed in thought and prayer. Molo's visage was that of a man preoccupied with troubling sensations and feelings of unease. True enough, the obelisk had saved them from dehydration and death, and even though food was still unavailable, and their progress seemed to be slower, water was more important.

But what really raced in his mind was the opportune moments. The storm clearing away from them harmlessly instead of leaving their bones to bleach under the suns. Finding the obelisk right about when the desert was surely going to claim them. Was it really God that provided, or was there more to such blissful and timely divine providence?

Molo felt unsure and uneasy, the latter due in part to the former.

Esphalon came to his mind, since he had mentioned divine providence as well. Was it a common theme? Was the desert and its extreme environment the one to blame for the changes he was going through? Was it a trick of perception, a misstep of the mind? Was it simply a coping mechanism? The array of questions that seemed to come unbidden to his weary mind suddenly became overwhelming. He had to give pause, rest, clear his mind, and then search within and without to find his answers. Maybe, as the Pilgrim had told him, the burden lay on him. It was time he had some sleep then.

He made the sign of God right before the hour of dusk signaled its approach, coloring the thin line between the land and the sky with a violet shade of crimson and a deep blue like the ocean sea. He knelt and prayed, the newly found solace in that simple act soothing his troubled mind. The Pilgrim next to him did likewise, and right before Molo laid himself down, curling with only his cloak to cover him up, he talked to him affording him a preciously warm and friendly look:

“Sleep my friend. I can see your troubles. Let sleep bring you peace, let peace bring you closer to God. It is why you are here, is it not?”

Molo looked away from the Pilgrim, into the setting suns that grazed the dunes afar with the last light of the day, two glowing rings of brightness worn around the shadow of the low dunes. He took his time before answering, but when his reply came it rang true, crystal clear and genuine:

“I think that is the real reason, yes. Things trouble me though, Pilgrim, and I shall not lie to you. I have doubts, still. They plague me like hounds in the night. I can listen to them in my mind, trying to catch up with me.”

The Pilgrim was unperturbed by such a statement. His face was serene, calm to the point of being impassive. He replied with a smile:

“You are only a man, brother. Whatever God’s plan is, you are part of it, make whatever you like of that. Now sleep, because we move at midnight, when the moon is high. Tomorrow, will be the day our Pilgrimage comes to an end. However, and whenever God wills it.”

“So, tomorrow we will reach His City?”

The Pilgrim spoke no more, and silently closed his eyes, and laid



himself down to sleep, the lukewarm sand's embrace his body's only comfort. Molo felt enthusiasm try and take hold of his sense and his mind, but he thought of the Pilgrim's words, and his advice. He looked once more into the fading horizon and noticed the moon ready to rise once more, reign over the desert like a pale queen of the night. He let his feelings of enthusiasm go, and he tried to empty his mind. It would all be revealed in time, he could trust in that. He then slept, his body welcoming the absolute stillness. He had hoped for dreams that would guide him, but none came.

The Pilgrim woke him up with a jolt to his sides, and a tug at his vest. It felt abrupt and violent, but it seemed, the Pilgrim had good reason. Before Molo could stand up on his feet, he could see in the still darkness of the night the moonlight casting their hard shadows against the sand. The Pilgrim had a finger to his mouth, instructing Molo to remain silent. He even noticed he was holding his breath in an effort to not make a sound. He felt they were in danger now, and the Pilgrim's attitude only served to strengthen that belief.

Something was amiss around them. The Pilgrim had felt it first and was now trying to uncover it. A sense of hidden menace hung in the air, as if night itself had suddenly turned against them. They exchanged wary looks and the Pilgrim extended his arms to help Molo up to his feet, his movements exuding a strangely purposeful grace, as if he was moving with an entirely new purpose now. Indeed, once Molo was standing upright, the Pilgrim gestured him to stay put with the palm of his hand and silently drove off into the night towards a small mound of sand that seemed to block their view to the north.

He was barefooted and he moved impossibly fast, with the grace of a cat. The Pilgrim barely touched the sand, his feet almost failing to impress themselves on the desert floor. He had drawn his knife and was grasping it with his right hand, his torso somewhat swiveled, ready to deliver a forceful blow, his body ready to spring in action, putting as much of his weight and strength behind it.

Molo had frozen in place, and tried to gather his wits and his senses. He could not know what had alerted the Pilgrim, but its presence was felt from Molo as well. They were in danger, that much was clear. He suddenly felt naked, without even a simple weapon in hand. He saw the Pilgrim had left his walking stick behind, a sturdy piece

of wood, gnarled and light. Judging that a piece of wood would offer better protection than his bare hands, Molo picked it up.

He walked as silently as possible, much more slowly than the Pilgrim, his feet sinking in the sand effortlessly. Molo tried to wield the piece of wood like a staff, holding it with both hands, but he saw its length was badly suited to such a task, so he grasped it with both hands from one end, like a club. The Pilgrim was approaching the top of the sandy mound, and reduced his stature to a bent shape, his pace to a crawl. He appeared to Molo as a cougar or a mountain lion, ready to spring up on its prey with vicious speed and cold fury, only because of lethal necessity.

It was so very much unlike him to act in such a way. It was as if a heathen warrior of old myth and folk tales had come into life before him. Perhaps it was so, perhaps these myths had their origins in the people of the Pilgrim, the believers of God. Molo had never thought of him in such a light, judging him to be a serene, mellow man, a sensitive mind in a frail body. It seemed that some people hid more than met the eye.

As he himself approached the crouching figure of the Pilgrim, he saw him turn and look at him with an exasperated look, probably because he was making too much noise in an otherwise eerily silent desert. He gestured Molo once more to be silent and still. Molo complied, understanding that it was unwise of him to go running after the Pilgrim, heedless of the noise he was making.

A smell of iron and sparks permeated the air suddenly, wafting over the crest of the mound. It was not very much unlike the smell often found in blacksmith shops and forges, though its exact nature eluded him. It was sharper, more acrid, it almost felt like it stung the eyes. It was not a good sign, it felt wrong and unnatural. His body tensed and the Pilgrim seemed to be on the edge as well, the fingers of his hand opening and closing in rapid succession around the knife's haft in nervous anticipation. The air thickened with alarming speed, the smell grew stronger and then he saw it appear over the crest, strangely thin beams of light sprouting from what might have been a head of sorts: a glistening metal hulk glinted in the moonlight, uniformly gray and unassumingly blocky, a rectangle slab larger than a man. The Pilgrim saw it too and sprung up like a coiled snake, his hand making a large

slashing motion at the metal slab delivering a glancing blow and then rolling back down the slope of the mount, tumbling and coming to rest at what seemed like a safer distance from the metal slab. He was a few feet away from Molo when he shouted, all reasons for silence and discretion gone, his stare focused on the metal slab slowly coming their way, improbably keeping itself floating half a foot above the sand:

“Run to God’s pillar! Run and pray! Think of God’s Anvil!”

Molo was confused, though his feet and legs moved like they had ears of their own. A floating slab of gray metal had appeared in the middle of the night, out of nowhere, and the Pilgrim had attacked it to no avail with his knife. And now, they were running. At least, he was. Running towards the obelisk, with the Pilgrim left behind.

The Pilgrim wasn’t running, he was hefting the knife from one hand to the other, as if looking for a sturdier grip, a better fighting stance. He looked at his face and all he saw was calm acceptance, a knowledgeable expression in his face, as if he was ready body and mind for what would follow soon. He did not see defiance or strength of spirit. He saw a man who felt his end was near, but was determined to make it count, somehow.

Molo was almost halfway to the obelisk, when the realization struck him: What logic lay there in reaching the obelisk? What reason was there to run and pray, while the Pilgrim made a last stand that felt so vacant and void of meaning?

He stopped suddenly then, and started running towards the Pilgrim and the coming metal fiend. As he ran with as much speed as the sand at his feet allowed him, he grasped the stick with both hands, ready to swing it around as hard as possible. He could not leave the Pilgrim alone in this. Molo asked himself what use were a knife and a stick against a floating slab of metal. If it had come to kill them, it was better that they died together, fighting as if they could someday win.

The Pilgrim saw him with a corner of his eye rushing to meet the slab. It seemed to Molo that he opened his mouth to say something, his eyes flashing red with anger. All the while, the slab had come within reach of the Pilgrim. As Molo swung the Pilgrim’s stick putting all the speed of his body behind the blow, he could see the Pilgrim’s knife shattering on impact, and a black band of glass in the middle of the slab. An instant later a red flicker of light filled his sight and his

feet seemed to disobey him. Everything went dark and mute, as all sensation fled his body. His last thoughts were that death is nothing to be afraid of.

## A sermon of fire and blood



"DREPREPARE for release."

Major Guighan relayed the General's order to the signal's officer with a nod and a gesture of his hand.

The signal officer then communicated it with his hands to a soldier who held two colored flags. The soldier began waving the flags in a certain pattern repeatedly. In the far distance, where the siege engine battalion was arrayed, an answering wave of flags could be seen shortly thereafter. The signal had been acknowledged. A few moments later, a single red flag was raised in answer, and held there. The signals officer attached to the General gave a nod, and the flag-bearer raised another, similar red flag. Major Guighan reported to Tyrpledge:

"Sir, the siege engines report readiness. All brigades have reported being in position, men at the ready. Brigadiers Voronoi and Edromas report harassment from the walls, but nothing detrimental. They have both requested a Thorax battalion be deployed to screen their men."

The General was looking at the City of Pyr with a strange mixture of intensity and sadness. He was standing upright, tensed on the back of his horse, which lay unmoving, steadfastly following its riders commands, like a valued trained warhorse should. The sight filled the General with grim determination. The plans had been laid out, his brigadiers had been notified and each one had received orders, acknowledging the receipt. Everything seemed to be progressing in a professional manner. For the most part the General's mind was preoccupied with the situation in general, not simply the battle that was soon to follow. A small part though was still focused on matters that had to be dealt there and then, such as receiving reports and issuing the right orders. That part of his mind answered to the Major, a flat, blatantly emotionless voice:

"Denied. The Thorax will be deployed at the breach on the southern wall. Were Voronoi and Edromas absent from the briefing?"

"No sir, they were present."

"Send a signal. Notify them that if not to make untimely requests

again. If they believed they should have Thorax attached, they should have made their point when we made plans, not at the final hour. Voronoi's brigade, that's the 5th and 6th Pyrean, is it not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Poor bastards. Let me know when they have acknowledged, Guighan."

"Yes, sir."

Major Guighan saluted and walked briskly to the signals officer to construct a suitable message. The General seemed to survey the assemblage of men, horses and machine laid out around the City of Pyr, but in truth his vision was a blur and his mind was engrossed in thought.

There would be no misunderstandings and confusion before battle was joined. The placements of each brigade of his men around the City could be easily regarded from the small hill the General had chosen as his headquarters. Major Guighan had proposed the specific site, and Tyrpledge was pleased to see that his adjutant was an adroit tactician, equally skillful on the map as well as the field. At least, until now.

The General's had embarked on a journey of reminiscence with his mind. The smell of a battlefield was brought up from memory. The smell of blood and decaying bodies. There was no such thing as the smell of victory and defeat, they both were foul to the senses. In the end, it had always smelled sweetly sick and coppery. Like a feast gone horrible wrong, a feast for Gods that hunger for life. He smirked, unbidden thoughts that reminded him of bad poetry and idle philosophers trying to cloud his mind before a battle. He was a soldier, he had his orders and his oaths to follow, unto death if the need came. That was a soldier's life, dying a violent death, hoping some good came out of it. What good would come out of this though, the General could scarcely imagine.

He had seen quite a bit of action in the Pacification of Zaelin, a recently promoted centarch at that time. It had been his first and last taste of bloody battle, until now. He did not relish this second chance at smelling death once again though. War had always had little to do with reason, but somehow it always made sense before battle was joined. Duty, honor, valor, one of those always appeared in one form or another, demanding to be the focus of every fighting man. He found

honor and valor to have nothing to do with this battle which could easily turn into a slaughter. And duty could be facing either way. The men inside the city felt they had a duty as well. Were they entirely wrong to uphold that duty?

He found himself questioning his actions once more. But he had never questioned his allegiance. It was simply the images of unwanted carnage which would soon take place that filled him with regret and remorse. Such feelings though were reserved for another time, after the battle would end. Whether it would be won or lost actually mattered little. Blood would be spilled, the blood of fellow men, innocent women and children, for that much was certain: No one escapes the wrath of war. Some are simply caught in its path, and pay the price for a mindless, uncaring fate.

His thoughts vanished from his mind as the crisp, clipped voice of Major Guighan jolted him back into the surrounding reality:

“Sir, Brigadiers Voronoi and Edromas have acknowledged. No further communications outstanding.”

The General nodded and with a dry voice issued the order:

“Very well. Release the siege engines. Battle is joined.”

“Yes, sir!”

Major Guighan waved with his hand in the air, circling a finger. The signals officer stood erect with both hands outstretched. An array of flag-bearers raised their black flags and soon the dull thuds of huge ropes snapping and the metal clicks and clacks of springs and plates being released reached the General’s ears from an uncanny distance. Flaming barrels of oil and tar seemed to spread over the city like a death-emblazoned fiery fan, while large rocks and steely spiked balls converged on a single section of the walls, falling down upon them like a hail of doom.

It had begun. Battle was joined.

The Patriarch was dressed in resplendent fashion, red velvet robes adorned with finely-cut jewels, glistening brightly in various hues under the bright light of the suns. It was the time before noon, both him and Ursempyre standing atop the eastern tower of the Disciplinary, the horizon filled with the daunting sight of the massed armies of the Outer Territories, waging war against the city of Pyr. The siege engines had commenced their work against the city walls, and already

large chunks of the seemingly unyielding walls had been cleared off them, debris filling the deep moat that had been hurriedly dug the very same morning behind the section under attack.

The Patriarch stood in the middle of the tower, with a magnifying glass to his eye, surveying the battle. Squads of procrastinators stood behind masses of men of all ages, forced to wield whatever weapon could be found around the city forges and blacksmith shops. The armory of the disciplinarium had been depleted as well, the procrastinators being issued the finest available armor and weapons, while the city folk pressed into service had been given whatever could be scrounged in the last minute.

It was folly for anyone among them to believe that this hurriedly assembled militia could withstand a determined assault from the experienced, well-trained and artfully equipped armies of General Tyrpledge. The Patriarch beamed at the thought, and gave a momentary sideways look to Ursempyre standing a few feet away, an elite guard of procrastinator veterans standing between them. Ursempyre returned the gaze with a venomous look, but resignation was evident in his face.

He hated the Patriarch with all his heart, but he hated himself even more for failing to do everything in his power to avert this damnable catastrophe unfolding before his eyes. He had resigned and nothing short of the shackles on his feet prevented him from falling over the parapet of the tower to a well-deserved though ignominious death. The Patriarch had forced these upon him when Ursempyre's first attempt from the balcony below had failed, prevented by the Patriarch's awesome powers, stunned and unable to even flicker an eyelid.

He had been scolded playfully like a troublesome child, and was now being tormented, forced to witness his people slay each other in a staged battle, as the wicked stage-play the Patriarch written was about to unfold. Everything was fake, everything was a lie, except for the blood that would soil the ground, and seep through every stone in the city. Ursempyre was denied even the release of death, such was the malevolence and evil of the Patriarch. An affront to life itself. His thoughts made Ursempyre physically sick, and he vomited despite himself.

The Patriarch noticed and let out a derisive snort, full of mockery, the pleasure derived from Ursempyre's utterly broken figure lacing ev-



ery word:

“Queasy at the sight of blood, Ursempyre? Don’t worry, they have still to breach the walls. Methodical, the army. Killing is their profession. Wouldn’t you wish yours was as simple as that?”

Ursempyre spat, trying to clear his mouth. He felt though that nothing could wash away the bitterness inside, the foul lies and deceit the Patriarch sowed with his every word an almost tangible pool of bile. He felt unclean, soiled by the fiendish being’s mere physical presence. He might have been broken and resigned of hope but there was no meaning for him to indulge the Patriarch’s sick sense of humor. He did not answer, indeed decided he would not answer the Patriarch’s goads. He simply stared at him through eyes blackened with rage and sorrow, the skin underneath sagging from lack of sleep. The Patriarch had stopped observing the movement of the armies. At length, he started pacing around the tower, his guards standing like unblinking statues at strict attention, as if they were oblivious to what was transpiring, or simply did not care. He seemed to be enjoying the cool wind this high up, breathing deeply, a grin forming on his face. He addressed Ursempyre, sparing him only a small flick of the wrist towards him:

“Do you know the story of the koma bird, Ursempyre?”

The only sounds reaching them were the intermittent thrashing sounds of rock flung against the walls, mingled with the tumultuous and disarrayed yells of the men defending the city, and the bristling fires that had engulfed it once more, for what seemed to be the last time.

“It is a story worth mentioning. I can divine from your strict silence I have your utmost attention, which I believe is quite a feat under the circumstances. I would congratulate myself but that would be quite flippant in such a time, wouldn’t you agree. I’m sure you would, in the most vulgar of ways probably. But I digress.

The koma bird is known to lay its eggs on the highest mountains, precariously perched on the roughest and deepest of precipices. Once the eggs are hatched, the parents feed the newborns for only two days. I have not seen it for myself, but I have confirmed the veracity of such reports. When the hatchlings have been fed, their parents drop them all, one by one, to either learn to fly or perish in their forced effort.

Naturally, most fail to do so. Only perhaps one in ten do so, and

most komas lay eggs only twice or three times in their lives. As a consequence, they are quite few and far between, their numbers constantly low. They are large birds though, their wings span as large as a dozen feet. They're excellent fliers, able to soar the skies as high as the clouds sometimes, swoop down with lightning speed to feed.

An unmatched predator, practically invulnerable by virtue of its ability to fly away from harm's way, as well as select its pray with diligent care. It is said that none have ever been killed or caught, and that once they learn to fly as hatchlings, they never stop flying until they die of age. Always flying, Ursempyre. On the move. Never holding still, never in danger of stagnation. Fascinating creatures. Can you understand this?"

Ursempyre held his gaze firmly away from the Patriarch, numbly looking at the wispy clouds passing overhead, indifferent to the rage unfurling below the lands they passed. The Patriarch continued, trying to imitate Ursempyre's voice, with mixed results:

" 'I spit on you, devil. Release me from my torture, there is no more need to gloat over your victory'. To which I would reply 'This is not victory, this is a prelude to the real fun. Didn't you like my story? Was it not educational? It's actually a parable where I am the koma father and all you ant-like people are the little birds and I'm killing you off one by one to see which one will be able to fly'."

Ursempyre turned to look at the Patriarch with a petrifying gaze, but said nothing while the Patriarch did not turn into stone as he continued, in his own voice:

"That was sort of the dialogue I had in mind. Though of course I only made up the story now. There are no such things as koma birds. Such a species would be dead within three or four generations at best. Your spite seems to have diminished to the point of simply gazing venomously, hoping some sort of lightning or other divine instrument of will smites me dead where I stand. Regrettably, that is not going to happen."

Ursempyre stirred somewhat, unable though to move his feet shackled as they were. He made a motion with his body towards the Patriarch, and raised his hands as if trying to grasp him by the throat. However naive and futile it may have seemed, he dearly wished to kill that thing. Instead he asked with a raspy voice, his blood-shot eyes

radiating maddening hopelessness, a saturnine look on his distraught face:

“Will kill me now, blessed one? Or let me kill myself? Have you no hope or fear left in this world or any other that you chose me and my people as playthings? What womb of evil bore you, still I wonder. Hell is so much warmer than your heart, I’d wager. Such a cruel fate as mine I would not wish upon no other as you. Curse you Patriarch, I curse your very soul. I believe in no God, I have all the proof I’ll ever need. All hope is lost, my mind and spirit broken, my people dying by a brother’s blade. But this I swear to you, chosen of the Gods: Your end will be far worse than mine, remember that in your dying throes. The higher you stand, the harder the fall. Remember that, Patriarch. Remember Ursempyre Remis.”

The Patriarch’s eyes seemed to glaze for a moment, before suddenly becoming clear again, the faint cracks of a grin slowly appearing on the Patriarch face. He seemed to relish the fact that Ursempyre had bitten back an answer, even if it was only a curse. He bit his lip faintly, as if pondering which words were to follow from a bustling cloud of possibilities. His grin turned into a wide cold smile when he said with a degree of cynical mirth:

“And he never surrenders, I’ll remember. That is so much more like you Ursempyre, bitterly defiant to the very end. As well as a sooth-sayer, a man gifted with visions of the future. I am almost impressed. The fact that I already know I’m going to die someday does take away some of the points in your favor, but I’m glad you tried to make me laugh. I would pity you but it’s so much more satisfactory to watch you go these mood swings. Broken puppet the one minute, fiery rebellious martyr the next. Do you think anyone is watching, Ursempyre? Do you think anyone would genuinely care about what is happening here? These are the end days of Pyr, my Castigator. Breath deeply, let the charcoal gristle on your skin and smell the copper heavy in the air. That’s blood and fire for you, Ursempyre. My sermon of blood and fire.”

Ursempyre’s stare remained on the Patriarch, deeply seated hate emanating from his eyes. He lowered his trembling arms and sagged his shoulders, speaking in a dim echo of his former voice, still audible though over the din of the battle surrounding the city and the mayhem

caused by the fires, sprouting like incandescent blossoms:

“You wish to bless us with your interminable wisdom as well? A parting gift for your vaunted afterlife? Would it amuse you so if everyone who dies here today greets death thinking he had received a lesson well earned? Do you see yourself as attending to your flock? How committed! As their dying breath leaves them, your guidance will surely be remembered and praised when they reach the righteous heaven they await. And they will never know only nothingness awaits. Is that what you seek, a chancel of souls chanting your name in an afterlife that does not exist?”

The Patriarch’s response was to laugh heartily and come closer to Ursempyre, his hands knead together in front of his stomach, the guards making way in his path. He spoke then, his voice emanating menace, as if blood stained his tongue and venom coursed his veins:

“You balance on a tight rope, Lord Castigator Remis. Do not speak of the afterlife so vainly. What would you know about something you so feverishly avoid? Something that reeks of the death you people so stridently shy away from, and never grasp or understand. I’ve died and been reborn a thousand times, and yet another thousand more I shall. It is a circle, that’s all there is. Even stars collide and die in terrific splendor, while others silently ebb away and vanish as if they never were. Yet their light reaches everywhere, Ursempyre. Would you know what a star’s death feels like, Remis? I know. I’ve seen with bare blinded eyes. I’ve watched world consumed in dying flames. I’ve witnessed billions spill their blood willingly on a whim of mine. And you would dare insinuate, before my very presence indeed, that my sermon is a charade, a mockery designed bring you low. Do you think so highly of yourselves? And you call me a blasphemer and an affront. How petulantly ironic. But only understandable. Though if I were you, I would have kept my mouth and ears shut, unable to fathom or understand a single moment of the numbing madness around me. In that respect, I can almost admire you. But, you test my limits, Ursempyre. And I do have limits that only vary rarely reach. Perhaps it’s the real reason I’m keeping you alive. A sort of challenge. A test.”

Ursempyre had heard enough to believe it might be an opportunity to goad the Patriarch into killing him outright, save himself from further torture, excruciating aggravation and utter disgrace. He spat on

the Patriarch with fury, a large blob of spit splashing against his features and slowly running down the creases of his leathery face. The Patriarch did not even flinch, and said in a deadpan voice:

“How quaintly juvenile.”

He turned to one of his guards and made a sort of hand signal. The guard bowed reverently and was quickly gone, hurrying down the stairs of the tower. The Patriarch spoke to Ursempyre, as he produced a finely embroidered silk handkerchief and wiped his face clean:

“I’m not a lesser man Ursempyre, and I will not hold this against you. I do not think of these as insults to my person. I consider insults to my way of life much more grave. I shall speak soon to the mass of people remaining in the city. I shall spur them onwards to a great struggle against the treacherous blasphemers of the Army, remind them a bit of history and send them to their deaths yelling our names, thinking how righteous their deaths will be. Once you hear that sermon, Ursempyre, perhaps you will understand”.

The Patriarch finished wiping his face, threw the handkerchief, and walked away towards the stairs. As he went downstairs, Ursempyre’s hateful gaze followed him and caught a glimpse of the handkerchief. He noticed then it had a curious dedication delicately hand-stitched on it: “to my good friend Philo, Celia.”

Faint light entered the quarters they had sequestered for her and her newborn child. It was not so much a room as it was a crevice, a hollowed out cavity of rock somewhere underneath the city, just another small cave forming part of a complex network, whose size she could only guess. Her mind wandered to such meandering thoughts whenever Amonas came to mind. Their child was here, in her bosom, being fed for the first time. Where was the father? Where was her love?

An instant later her eyes locked with the tiny sparkling things that were her baby’s eyes, the crystal blue water of the oceans staring back at her. She could almost hear the gurgling of virgin waterfalls in his small cries and throaty sounds. The boy was a painful reminder of his father, even from the way he stretched when he fell asleep kindly, craning his neck before it settled cosily on her chest.

It was only born the night before, in a damp cave full of strident men, their endless, mirthless cacophony silenced by the sudden and unexpected cries of a child gasping for air and a mother suffering the

pains of labor. They had turned and looked with astonishment, their croaks and hawkish, almost unintelligible cries choked in concert, replaced with whispers of amazement and gasps of wonder at such an event.

The two men had been very kind and helpful to her, mindful of her dignity as a lady. A doctor was among the crowd of kinsfolk, and he alone was allowed to attend to her, some more men offering to hold their cloaks and form a screen for her to give birth in something that could almost equal a privacy of sorts under the unfortunate and inappropriately timed circumstances.

She had given birth then and there, amongst the company of complete strangers, but somehow the feeling in her heart was that she was among family indeed, something more than friends. The kinsfolk seemed to embrace her the minute they saw her distress and need. After her labor, all that remained of the pain was a numb memory. Her heart soared as high as the suns when she laid her eyes upon her son for the first time, and she wept from joy. Only after the doctor asked of the boy's father, did she shed tears of sorrow.

The men in the large underground chamber had been in constant fruitless debate only minutes before, but the sight of a woman seeking refuge and help stirred them to action and concordance. In her matter, there were no voices in disarray, no arduous discussions with no end. They offered their help and assistance immediately, as if she were to them a sister, a wife, or mother to them all. Some sent for nursemaids to attend to her and see to the child. Others pulled their cloaks and stripped themselves of their clothes to make something soft for her to lay on, as well as sheets to feel warm in the dampness of the cave.

They all seemed eager to help in any way they could. The birth had seemed to offer some sort of rest from their incessant deliberations that had seemed to lead to nowhere in particular, far from an agreement. She was not told the details, but she was told they had been trying to decide what their next action would be. As far as she knew laying in her makeshift cot, cradling her baby in his serene sleep, they had yet to reconvene and decide, while all at the same time a young girl that cared for her told her the army had begun the attack on the walls of Pyr only minutes ago.

And still these people waited on their hands, knowing not what to

do. The thought painted her face with a bitter grimace. What good would it do them, hiding in these caves wishing everything that caused them trouble would simply go away? Was this the kinsfolk indeed? Were these people ready to give their lives at the flick of an eye, in a moment's notice, for a bright future free of tyranny and lies?

She found it hard to believe. Perhaps they were indeed good men through and through, but this reluctance to commit openly to battle, however grim and dark their chance be, was almost cowardice. She did not wish to dwell on that thought any longer though; she would only be remembered of Amonas and the pain inside would only make her cry like a poor lost soul. She still had an obligation to her child, and she intended to keep it.

Once the child woke up, and she regained some of her strength, she would ask to see their leader, ask to talk to him, stir him into action. That was the first and most simple thing that she could do. Make them fight as they should. Terror filled her when she thought they just might give up, simple-minded fear taking over them, begging for their lives to no avail. She hoped that would not come to pass, for then that would mean that her son's life was forfeit along with everyone else's in these caves as well as those hiding all over the city above.

The child seemed to stir slightly, as if his sleep was troubled. Her brow furrowed at the thought that perhaps he was already sensing there was something wrong with the world he had been delivered into: it was harsh, demanding, and uncaring. Perhaps he could sense the absence of his father's touch. She certainly did so, and felt a twinge in her heart as she saw a shadow touch the screen to her chamber. Her heart skipped a beat hoping it was him, that it was Amonas who had at last come back to them both. But her mind told her otherwise, and soon her eyes proved her heart wrong once more.

The shadow belonged to the young girl that had been called to tend to her. She had brought her a small basket of food, and a jug of water. She looked up at the young girl who was eying her sheepishly, afraid to make eye contact, as if she were some noble woman or a priestess of some sort. She had hair like amber fire and held a small lantern, letting off just enough to let her find her way in the dark maze of caverns all around them.

The girl approached Celia with hesitation, and left the small basket

of food at her feet where she lay. From what Celia could see there was some honey-bread in the basket, some goat's milk and boiled eggs as well, a small feast indeed under the circumstances. Perhaps they had brought some supplies down with them, or had stashed some from beforehand, in case of an emergency. Still, they were being deprived of food that would be surely needed sooner or later. It only meant these were indeed good men, caring people.

As the girl bowed slightly and turned to leave without speaking a word, Celia asked her in a hushed voice, the rocky walls adding an echo of strange authority to her words:

"Do not bow to me, girl. I am not special in any way. Please, sit a while. Tell me your name, and I'll tell you mine."

The girl looked up at her with some hesitation, slowly, as if expecting to be struck down or scolded. She then said to Celia, her voice pitched somewhat high even for a girl:

"I know your name blessed lady. You are Lady Celia, the Bearer of Hope."

The girl intoned her last words with a wide mouth and careful precision, as if reciting, being careful to show proper respect. Celia turned her head as if she had not heard correctly, a slightly uneasy smile on her lips, disbelief worn on her face. She asked the girl:

"What did you just call me?"

The girl took a step back. Her body showed signs of fear and anxiety, a slight tremble and an uneasy balance as if she was about to topple down. Celia moved her body closer to peer at the girl, all the while rocking her son gently in her lap. The girl had opened her mouth but no words came out. Celia thought the girl perhaps was younger than she looked, or maybe taller than she should be. She then asked the red haired girl with a disarming smile:

"Are you alright? You're shaking. Am I making you nervous somehow?"

The girl stammered through her first word but managed to reply:

"Yes. Did I say something I should have not? Was I not respectful enough? Did I offend you?"

Celia almost giggled and made a sort of snort, unable to keep a straight face at what she was hearing.

"Girl, I still do not know your name and you that's your only of-



fense. A very light one, might I add. Please, sit down for a while.”

The girl nodded uneasily and sat down in front of Celia, folding her legs underneath her dully plain skirt, her back turned to the room’s entrance. Once she settled herself down and wriggled a bit, at length she spoke, a half-smile trying to sweeten her face:

“My name’s Neelis Piru, blessed lady. I admit, I’m still nervous, worried I shouldn’t be doing this. It sounds.. Intruding, I believe they call it.”

Celia shook her head in disbelief, while all the while her son seemed to be trying to wriggle free of his mother’s embrace, though still asleep. The lantern’s light flickered wildly about when Celia replied:

“Nonsense. I’m more than thankful for what you people have done for me, but I cannot be kept here like some invalid fool. Once my son’s sleep is over, I want to speak with the man who is leading you. And what kind of name calling is this? Who is calling me blessed lady?”

The girl opened her mouth to speak and then closed it again as if she remembered something of importance suddenly. Then she started to speak, trying to assemble words into phrases in a coherent manner that made sense, with little success:

“Well, everyone, I think. At least, he.. They call you like that, the kin. Told me I shouldn’t even talk around you. Or your baby, blessed lady. But I wouldn’t know much other than that. I don’t know about who’s in charge, if that’s what you mean. I simply help when I can, carry water, food, pass messages I can’t understand.”

Celia nodded thoughtfully and after a small pause, she said to the girl:

“I think I understand a few things better now. Though I could use some help. Would you like to help me, Neelis? Please, my name is Celia. I much prefer that than any other appellation.”

The girl nodded briskly, as if avoiding to talk from fear of having to speak her name and make a blunder. Celia went on:

“Alright then, you grab that lantern of yours and leave the basket behind, I’m sure I can always get something to eat later on. For now, I need some answers you can’t give me, but you can lead me through these caves to someone who knows more, isn’t that so?”

The girl nodded more slowly, as if trying to digest with some mea-

sure of difficulty the task at hand. She spoke then after a while and said:

“I can bring you to the kinsmen. They should know what you want to know. I don’t think there is something they don’t know. Apart from what we should do, I think.”

The last phrase was uttered in complete sincerity without a hint of irony and that was what made Celia giggle despite herself. When the thought went away, she motioned for the girl to come closer, which she did. She then slowly and carefully extended her lap, holding the boy in her arms as if they were a cradle. She nodded to Neelis, who did not seem to understand, and then she said:

“Hold him for me for only a while, so I can stand upright again. Please, it is fine. Don’t you want to?”

The expression on the Neelis’ face turned from a restrained bewilderment to pure joy and a bright smile lit her face as if another lantern had suddenly appeared. With careful movements, as if she was about to handle the most precious thing in her life so far, she took Celia’s son and held him firmly against her chest, one arm supporting the baby, and the other wrapped around as if guarding it from certain harm. Her mouth seemed stuck, only half open. Celia told her as she felt the pains of exhaustion course through her body while she helped herself to stand on her feet:

“You can breath, Neelis. He is a beautiful little boy though, isn’t he?”

The girl nodded without affording the slightest look at Celia. It was as if her gaze was impossible to pry away from the newly born child, a single small lock of hair adorning his head. Celia broke her spell by a touch of her hand to the girl’s shoulders, her voice clear and mellow like a soft breeze:

“Can you imagine having a son of your own one day?”

Neelis looked into Celia’s eyes and simply nodded with a faint uncertainty. Celia replied then, taking hold of her son with care:

“Then please, show me to those who claim to make the decisions around here.”

“I’ll show you to the men who told me to come to you lady. They are all who I know around here.”

“That will do. Please, led the way.”

Neelis nodded and picked up her lantern, lighting the way for Celia. She had been quite dizzy and disoriented from labor when they brought her in, and she had given only a passing amount of attention to the sprawling system of caves that seemed to branch out in many different directions. Small chambers of sorts were arrayed almost randomly, some natural and some seemingly carved out by men, the signs of chisel and pickax still easily spotted, still not eroded by time. Some seemed to be occupied by men and women, others seemed to house families, small and large, children trying to play hide and seek in the dimly lit passages that had become their impromptu playground.

There was no central passage or hallway to speak of, though some of the corridors were larger, and she could see men walking past going about some business or duty, some carrying supplies like food and clothes, some even carting weapons and armor. Each face she saw as she walked about the underground home of the kinsfolk was filled with tension, uneasiness, doubt. Even in the dim light of a lantern and a few sparingly situated torches, it was not difficult for someone to spot the tell-tale signs, especially for someone like Celia.

After all she was a dancer, experienced and trained to read people's expressions, understand their feeling and react to them through her performance. The feeling came unbidden, but she felt a small sense of loss. She almost missed her dancing days. Everything looked brighter in her memory of those days. Perhaps it really was, but it might also have been the grim darkness that surrounded them, not just the one in the caves.

Another thing that struck her as odd was the way people looked at her in passing. Some did not even register her presence, but others turned and went wide-eyed with surprise, some pointed and whispered, and some even made movements of obeisance, like bowing and nodding reverently. No one seemed inclined to stop and ask her what was on their minds, even though it was more than certain that she had somehow managed to become some sort of popular person. It must have been the dramatic circumstance under which these people came to know her, crying and shouting in the agony of labor, blood pouring out of her guts.

Neelis barely talked though she did seem to turn around and look at Celia and the baby many times. She also went about the passages,

corridors and the larger cavities were hallways met with astounding ease, considering the poor light and lack of distinguishing features in such a landscape of wild irregularity and stony uniformity.

Keeping track of time without sunlight was an almost impossible task. In these caves, only faint distant echoes of water dripping down from some parts of the rocky ceiling could remind someone of time passing by, the sloshing sound of each drop on the cave floor like the tick of a clock. Still, it was impossible to keep count. Celia did not know exactly for how long they had been walking, but her legs, feet and back knew. Strained from the labor, she felt her energy was drained from the relatively long walk. It felt as if she had walked a small tour of Pyr itself. She thought that might not be that far from the truth.

As she was about to ask Neelis how much more they had to walk, the girl stopped short of a small corridor that led to a somewhat brightly lit cavity. Flickers of light danced about the entrance, as a large torch cast its light to the otherwise dark hollowed out space that seemed to connect many corridors and passages. Neelis turned and bowed slightly, almost in a curtsy, and pointed to Celia the entrance with a slight nod. She said:

“This is the chamber of master Perconal. He is a strange sort, but his heart’s in the right place. Saved me and my brothers from the streets.”

Celia nodded thoughtfully before asking with a sincerely sympathetic voice:

“So, you are orphans then.. Well, thank you for everything Neelis. I’m sure I’ll see you again soon.”

“Sent for me if you need anything lady. My blessings to you and your boy.”

Celia smiled warmly for the first time in what felt like ages, and replied in kind:

“My blessing to you and your brothers as well Neelis. And please, no bowing, curtsying or calling me weird names, promise?”

Neelis seemed to have heartened to Celia and the boy in the little time she had known her. She smiled broadly then, only like a child truly can, and ran away waving a parting hand.

Celia entered the brightly lit corridor, always firmly holding her son in her arms with some apprehension, a mother’s instinct that would

not be appeased no matter what. In front of her she saw a small chamber filled with candlelight, their scent more than enough to break the smell of cold damp rock that sometimes reminded her of an outhouse. Another thing that caught her attention was the sound of jingling bells and chimes of some sort, as if someone had forgotten a child's wind toy over an open window, making a strange sort of music as its pieces swirled by the breeze.

The small cave was irregularly shaped in an angular way, the bookcases and an old study massed together near the corner of the angled rock, while a somewhat larger space to the right of the study, a sort of crevice, housed a small cot and even a cupboard of seemingly antiquated wood. A wizened old man seemed hunched over an over-sized book, while around him an assort of various books, scrolls and maps lay strewn around at random, candles aflame in precarious positions with or without holders, hot wax dribbling down profusely. The man was wearing a simple garment like robes, brown and soiled.

It reminded her of a minister's surplice but this man's clothing bore no resemblance to anything of such pristine delicacy. He had not registered her presence, though indeed she had not spoken a word nor had she announced herself when she entered the corridor. She also saw the source of the strange jingling sounds; the old man was wearing a jester's hat, wisps of grizzled gray hair jutting out from underneath. He otherwise looked quite solemn, his hands tracing the pages of the book he was engrossed with. At length, she decided it was time to speak. At that exact time, her son woke up from his sleep crying loudly in her arms, and she instinctively tried to simply shush him to sleep again to no avail, no matter how gently she rocked him.

The old man turned to look at her with a startle. His brow furrowed with annoyance momentarily but then a hint of recognition appeared on his face. His voice was high in pitch, but sweetly grazed by time, lilting and musical, the voice of someone with a gift for storytelling:

"Lady Celia. Please, be seated. In your condition.."

Celia shot the old man an exasperated stare before replying above the din of her son's cries:

"Well now! What is my condition? Is it any graver than the rest of your people's condition? Is it any graver than the kingdom being torn asunder by civil war and a bloodshed that will not stop until they've

turned everything to ruin and the rivers into crimson hued martyrs?”

She realized she was almost screaming now, her anger getting the best of her, while the child in her arms seemed at least as aggravated as she was, his cries continuing unabated. The old man sighed and nodded, understanding he had offended Celia somehow. He then talked to her earnestly, in a clear-cut, straight manner, his tone of voice curt, precise:

“Alright. I see you’re not a lady for the courts and idle banquets. You are Amonas’ wife, strong of heart, proud, nothing short of a fine match you two must have been. And this is your son I’d wager. You know, his birth stirred as much talk as maidens bathing in a public fountain”.

Celia’s face was withdrawn, not even the hint of a smile adorning her features. The girl was right this man reeked of strange tidings and unfamiliar manners. He was strange without ever letting one understand why, she was sure. All the while her son would not stop crying, the old man’s voice straining to raise itself above the child’s. Her silence was his cue to continue:

“Anyway, you’ve come to see me, so I guess you asked for little Neelis to bring you to someone who might have answers to your questions. I’m quite honored by your presence, though I’m pretty sure you won’t like the answers, no matter the context. So, please, let’s get to the point”.

“Indeed let us. For starters who are you?”

“I thought the hat was a dead giveaway, but you I guess you wouldn’t have imagined it as it so out of place. I’m Perconal, the jester.”

Celia simply stood there, looking at the old man in disbelief. He then lifted his hat slightly as if to greet her, and with a trick of the hand seemed to produce a baby’s rattle which the newly born boy could not even hope to grasp yet, but its sound seemed to calm him, his cries settling down as if magic had put him in a trance, eyes open and alarmed, only the sound of his breathing to be heard. Feeling her slightly distrustful, almost wary, he made an effort to lighten the palpable uneasiness between them and said with a wide grin:

“What? Don’t believe me? Want me to juggle? I can juggle the baby. No? Just kidding.”

“Onward! Stay in formation!”

The cilliarch in charge of the Thorax battalion was on horseback, running up and down behind the line of his men, repeatedly shouting orders for them to advance with cohesion and order. His breastplate was polished to a mirror sheen, reflecting wildly the terrible forms of his men, clad in their huge plate armor, living unyielding hulks of metal. A few hundred feet separated them from the walls of Pyr now, and they were already under attack from the few defenders manning the walls, sparsely throwing arrows against them to no real effect. They were advancing slowly, but steadily, sacrificing speed for protection and the ability to withstand most attacks against them with impunity.

The man known as Castigator Olorius Menamon the IV was dressed in his most resplendent war gear, the very same he had worn on the day of Zaelin’s pacification, the last time he had gone to war, the last time he had seen bloody combat. He seemed engrossed in thought, as if musing vaguely rather than thinking about any specifics for the battle at hand.

General Tyrpledge was riding his warhorse, wearing a common light bronze cuirass above his uniform, only his rank insignia making it look any different than the common light swordsman. The General seemed nevertheless in a shape and form that belied his years of service. He was surveying the battlefield with bare eyes, his attention fixed on the selected breach site of the walls.

It was an uncommonly hot day for that time of the year, barely a cloud in the sky, the light of the suns falling upon spear, sword and armor alike. It made them shine with blinding force, turning the field of battle into a shimmering sea of metal and men. The General thought this could almost have passed for some ridiculously extravagant parade, though it was not meant to be one.

It would turn bloody soon enough, and he could only hope deep inside him that somehow this would all end quickly and painlessly, his duty accomplished, and his people broken. A rebuilding would be needed, but perhaps that could spur some innovation, a much needed air of change. He could almost understand the feelings of the rebels: stagnancy often leads to death, as had the battlefields proven throughout the course of history. Tyrpledge still debated with himself though, whose deaths would it lead to in the end?

The Castigator stood impassively on his own mount, his sight intently set on the far reach of the city, on the Disciplinary itself. His eyes looked glazed, and it was as if he hoped to burn holes on the city walls by his sight alone. He seemed then for a moment to breathe in the air roughly, sniffing it audibly, as if searching for a specific scent or perhaps simply enjoying the breeze's more tangible qualities: burnt wood and ash from the city caught in a blaze, the brushings of steel from sharpened weapons, the slick oil of polished, well-maintained armor.

Suddenly, as if the question had been withheld for too long, the Castigator turned his head and asked Tyrpledge:

“Why haven’t they surrendered, General? Hmm? What makes them hope to live the day?”

Tyrpledge was somehow caught by surprise at the Castigator’s questions. It was an incisive, straightforward question, very much unlike the Castigator who had hardly spoken since the march to Pyr. He had been quite reclusive, appearing only to stir the army into upholding their oaths and taking up arms against their fellow men. The act of committing the amassed forces of the Outer Territories to quench an uprising in the making did not leave everyone’s mind as yet another order. The atmosphere was tense, surely, and everyone felt the heaviness of these moments, from the brigadier general to the lowly soldier.

The Castigator’s question still remained unanswered. The General believed it better to leave it at that. The motives and thoughts of the traitorous rebels should be left to their own. The only thing that mattered was that they were violating Law, and duty called for him to stop them. That was where his concerns on the issues of the uprising started, and that was where they stopped. He suspected many things which he thought would be extremely unwise to voice.

Perhaps this was what the Castigator was trying to do; lure him into treacherous terrain, bring him into a vulnerable position, sense if he was still committed. A dangerously cunning man. Perhaps he had already entered in a complex scheme of machinations that would make the mind numb if they were to be revealed. It was just as well, he cared not about such things. He trusted his mentor’s motto: Avoid politics, at any cost, because it could cost you your life.

The Castigator’s face was wearing a knowing grin, when he asked



the General with a mocking tone, as if there was a competition going on between them and the General seemed to be losing it:

“Cat ate your tongue, General? Or have you been thinking too hard?”

The General remained calm at the face of an attitude bordering the ridiculous, intent only to aggravate him and test his limits as a person and an officer, for reasons that probably the Castigator found pertinent. Instead of indignantly falling so low as to disgrace himself in the middle of an ongoing battle, he simply waved his adjutant to come closer.

Major Guighan came crisply by his side and saluted with unfeigned vigor, standing to attention. He asked the General:

“Orders, sir?”

“Would be so happy as to explain our analysis of the strategic situation to his piousness the Castigator, as well as reiterate the battle plan that he approved of?”

Major Guighan exchanged a quick glance of apprehension with Tyrpledge, but quickly resumed his professional tone and stance. In the background, large blocks of stones were starting to chip off the walls, and the smoke from the fires spreading throughout the city was getting thicker by the hour. He responded with a nod and a salute before adding:

“Certainly, sir. May I be at rest, sir?”

“Please do so Major. Enlighten us now, if you will?”

“Of course, sir. Initial reports based on informants within the Ministry and the Disciplinaryum seem to agree that for an unfathomable reason the Patriarch ordered that the Arch-minister be purged of his office, as well as denouncing his piousness the Castigator a traitor *ex absentia*. Indeed the Noble Representative Lord Ursempyre Remis has been appointed and blessed as the new Castigator by the Patriarch in a formal ceremony. The most helpful piece of information comes from a trickle of fleeing civilians that seemed to have fought with their lives to escape Pyr. It seems that the Patriarch has been forcing men of all ages to take arms against our forces. A campaign of terror is under way to force submission to roaming squads of procrastinators whose sole mission is to prevent anyone from leaving the city as well as press-ganging them into service. Physical violence, the use of families as hostages as

well as public executions are already in effect from the forces of the Patriarch. There are also unconfirmed reports of a cluster of people taking up arms around the city with no clear allegiance or purpose.”

The Castigator tried not to show it, but he looked impressed at the quality and thoroughness of the information, as well as in the crisp, clean manner it was delivered. Tyrpledge on the other hand did not hide it at all and had been nodding briskly all throughout the Major’s report. He then urged him to continue with a nod in his direction, seeing that he had been waiting for a signal to conclude his briefing, his brief pause a thematic element in his speech:

“The order of battle is as follows, sir: The two Thorax battalions are attached to the main bulk of the infantry leading the assault, laid out in a thin double line of troops forming the absolute front line. The swordsmen, spear-men and bowmen of the are marching right behind the Thorax in that exact descending order, holding standard line formations, keeping their distances from each according to specific orders to each commanding brigadier. Orders were also issued to prefer men with no relatives in the City of Pyr, so as to limit the possibility of men facing morale issues during battle. Once the siege engines manage to breach the walls, the steamers will rush forward through the formations of men which will split in two to make way for the machines. The steamers will create a safe bridgehead for the swordsmen and pike-men to follow close behind, while the bowmen will harass any enemy within their range to provide additional cover to the assault force which will proceed to clear the city of enemy resistance, house by house, street by street, with the objective being to create a safe corridor to the Disciplinaryum as well as the Patriarch and the Castigator themselves. The specific part of the walls to assault was made based on the proximity to the Disciplinaryum, which would hopefully keep casualties among the citizenry as low as possible, and lead to a quick and decisive victory. The logic behind such a strategy, which is corroborated by our confirmed information, is that should these two prominent figures be neutralized, any amount of effective resistance will cease to be.”

When the Major was done, he stood to attention once more and saluted crisply. The Castigator nodded, reminding the General of what could only impossibly be a disgruntled but impressed man. The Major

had been, as usual, excellent in his appointed task. While the siege engines continued their slow barrage of fire and stone, and every battalion maneuvered continually so as not to disclose the final position of the assault, the General's mind turned inward again.

The General was thinking with a heavy heart about the trapping of such a civil war. If it came to a fight between brothers or father and son, who could blame one for turning against his fellow soldiers, or idly staying his hand costing him his life at the hands of men less sentimental. Battle was no place for the soft of heart, it only spared those with a mind empty of doubt, bearing cold steel in their hearts as well as their hands.

He had taken on a serenely morose look. He had known this would not be an easy fight to carry through, but he had not anticipated it would feel this ugly. Perhaps in the end, he could not avoid the politics of a troubled conscience that was about to add more lives to its blood toll. His thoughts were broken and his senses became the focus of total attention from his mind: A booming voice seemed to echo from the city of Pyr itself, as if the air above it had been turned into a giant cone of voice, radiating words for everyone to hear. It seemed impossible that it could be so, though everyone seemed to stop in his tracks as if he had been rooted there. Instead, everyone had been transfixed by the voice of the Patriarch, which sounded as clear as when enunciating the holy words of Law from the Ministry's tower. What he was now saying though, sounded totally different, his voice abrasive beyond human measure, as if razors sharpened against coarse stone:

“Kneel before me and release your free will. Or face eradication and the sweet nothingness of a light-less, uncaring void. It is your choice. Be humbled now before my true might, and despair, as you have always done before.”

When the unearthly voice had spoken and its echoes had died out, intense light seemed to blossom from the center of the city, as if a small sun had been brought down and was struggling to find its place among the skies again. Behind the glaring blaze of light, the Disciplinary could be seen, rising above the rest of the city, and below it, nothing but huge tongues of flames. As the Disciplinary rose along with most of the hill, everyone's heads turned to face it, marvel it, wonder at what they were seeing. Not a word could be heard, the only moments ago

bustling battlefield entombed in silence. Only a brooding, deeply rumbling sound like stones carrying the echoes of thunder could be heard, and it could only come from the ascending mass of the Disciplinarium.

Suddenly, the huge blue and white flames flickered on and off before finally dying. A moment passed where everything seemed to remain still. The Disciplinarium was about to meet the ground it had so majestically parted with only moments ago. And everyone cowered before the falling shadow of the Disciplinarium, as if it was coming down on their own heads.

## The game board



"LARES of light flickered on and off casting monstrous shadows on the sleek gray metal floor, huge sparks flying from unfathomable machinery hard at work, showering the improbably high walls with fiery fragments. Light was at a premium, its sources the by-products of the industrious machines: sparks like lightning, hot rivers of metal, red and yellow cutting fires and blue-hot flames, green and violet beams of light against stark gray metals, the mirror sheens of gleaming new surfaces reflecting everything, multiplying their intensity in a maze of light.

It was an organized mayhem, the machines scattered around as if giants had sown them from wildly thrown seeds. Some of them seemed to be no larger than Hilderich himself, neatly arrayed in rows upon rows on the floor, as if they were awaiting inspection. Others towered over them, the size of a small hill or an impossibly high castle tower. Some were dim and seemed to be inert, others glowed or crackled with fiery lights and eldritch sparks, booming and thudding sounds emanating from within, some of them humming in unnatural tones. To Hilderich, it felt like the machines in this place ate metal and drank fire, their breaths not unlike deep rumbling rivers.

Invariably, everything zipped past Hilderich's sight with a speed that left little chance for him to marvel them leisurely. The Prosops had been ferrying them silently but efficiently through the maze that the seemingly randomly placed machinery created around them. Sometimes a path would construct itself right in front of them as the wheels of the vehicle-avatar ate away at the gray sleek shiny floor surface, to guide them around or over obstacles.

They would travel at speeds where the flustering air would make Hilderich's eyes blurry and watery, causing him to squint. At other times, long overarching narrow rails would make themselves available and the machine would jump over them in a carefree fashion and ride them, while hundreds of feet below the floor could not be seen, blackness and ruin awaiting them should they fall.

Somehow though, Hilderich felt untouchable, safe in the care of the Prosops, the Centron itself. It stood to reason that if any danger lurked around this place, it was not the vehicle-machine's erratic but expert maneuvering skills, but rather something less obvious and well-hidden, something that had yet to manifest. Though feeling safe at the moment, Hilderich kept a watchful eye on his surroundings, just in case.

He peered beyond his immediate surroundings, beyond the towering grapples and unfathomable pillars that crackled amber lightning. In the distance, streams of pure white and blue seemed to pour down from the pitch dark ceiling high above, lost in many places where the eyes could not follow, behind metal behemoths and mazes of pipes and tubes.

Immense skeletal structures that reminded Hilderich of upturned boats or very strange looking ships were being worked on, fleets of smaller and bigger machines not very much unlike the Prosops buzzing around them like flies around oxen. The sounds and sights in this place reminded him of a playground made for giants, or a shipyard like no other, the pride and envy of every artisan and craftsman. What would have driven any minister mad from sheer shock, would certainly burn with a bright gleam of wonder in the eyes of the renowned smithies from Repentine, and the proud ship-makers of Ulrathi, if they ever saw what he could see.

The air seemed somehow thick, as if it was filled with by-products from the profoundly industrious machinery around them. Monstrously huge shiny claws and arms seemed to move and lift improbable loads with surprising ease, other smaller machines flitted like metal birds while overhead a lattice of glass tubes that could fit a foaming river inside them seemed to emit pulses of intense light. The number and workings of the machine were unknown, but Hilderich could only suppose it numbered in the tens of thousands, a legion of machines and devices of origin and purpose unknown.

Hilderich raised his voice well above its usual tones, trying to make sure he would be heard:

“What exactly is this place?”

An green-yellow aura flicked momentarily around the Prosops and Hilderich, a faint sheath-like veil seemed to shimmer slightly in the air.

Then the loudly industrious din subsided, and the machine spoke in a conversational manner and tone:

“Oh, excuse me I haven’t had real visitors in quite a while. You don’t need to shout now. I also took the liberty of dimming the environmental sounds as well, but I could let more of it seep through if you would like that. This, dear Hilderich, is what I’ve affectionately come to call the Den. Busy buggers the lot of them, aren’t they?”

The machine swooped down a small ramp that moments before was not there and was now steering them down a wide spiraling road that seemed to corkscrew around a tower whose top seemed to be perpetually devoured by the darkness of the ceiling, dim stripes of red light running along its length, the base of the tower barely visible below.

Hilderich was staring wide-eyed, mesmerized in awe of the immense space filled with all sorts of strange and mystifying buildings and constructs, his mind overloaded from awe, wonder, and amazement, his senses failing to capture faithfully the incredible nature of the Den. It felt to him as if an immense stage had been wrought for his pleasure alone, designed to woe and subdue him utterly, a tale of fantasy to entrap him, body and mind. He almost felt it wouldn’t be half-bad if that was indeed so, as long as his captors would let him watch.

He couldn’t make out any workers at all, everything on the giant workshop floor of the Den seemed to be running, moving and working on its own. Hilderich thought that such a sight would cause every minister in the Territories to die from shock or drive him instantly insane exposed to such blasphemy against the Pantheon. Machines acting on their own, their powers unleashed unsupervised, free to reign over matter; a hideous thought it would have seemed but it right there in front of him. Hilderich queried the Prosops about the lack of personnel in the Den, and people in general to which the machine answered with a slight bob and a tone of surprise:

“What do you mean? Personnel? Real people? What for? Shooting targets?”

It sounded as if the machine had let out a small chuckle as it ended his phrase, but Hilderich felt one could never be sure of the capricious machine. He frowned deeply, a feeling of alarm and intense distaste

washing over him, but restrained his voice from revealing how flustered he felt:

“No, I mean workers. There is absolutely no need for workers of any kind? No menials? No laborers? Expert artisans?”

The disbelief in the Prosops’ voice could shatter stone-masonry easily:

“Sentient people doing menial work? That would be absurd. Are you familiar with that kind of thing in your world? It must be a really backwards place, like people living in mud huts and so on. I’m kind of surprised you happened to be invited to a game, actually. You must be from some kind of feudal empire, I’d wager. So I guess you’re made for life back where you come from - a seriously big hotshot. Right? Am I right? I know I’m right, you just have ‘winner’ written all over. Maybe you’re a prince, or an important xenologist. An ambassador? Don’t tell, don’t tell me I’ll figure it out. Just tell me when I’m spot on. I’d expect a more lush attire though, but who am I to judge fashion choices? Love what you’ve done with the hair though.”

Hilderich instinctively turned his eyes upward trying to perceive what the machine had meant, but was quick to realize it was impossible for him to see what the comment was about without a mirror. He also felt uncomfortable being reminded he was using deception to further their goals, he almost cynically realized he would be a fool if he did not make the best use of what luck threw in their way. If the Centron thought they were visitors, and indeed spectators to a game, people from an entirely different world altogether, then he’d act the part as convincingly as he could.

Other worlds, other people, different civilizations and societies. His mind was still quite ineffectually trying to cope with the implications the Centron imparted. With no real reason to believe the Centron could be lying after everything he had seen and been through, Hilderich could hardly contain himself from grinning at the expectations these revelations had given birth to. No longer would they need to cage their minds in ignorance and fear. There were places to see and explore, new things to learn and do. Perhaps he could somehow persuade the Centron to help them in such a quest. But that would have to wait. Amonas was his top priority right now, he felt he owed him as much. Besides, his predicament seemed to be just cause for leading them to



very interesting places, perhaps even the very heart of this Centron.

The Prosops considered Hilderich and Amonas as visitors to the Centron, spectators for the 'game', but it had also indicated its invariably hostile demeanor against trespassers, the 'loony bins' as he had called them, people that seemed to stray inside the Centron at inopportune times, though not completely random as it had pointed out. It had also made a note that they offered a sort of diversion from its tedious duties, by 'mushing them with g-pulse fluctuators'. Hilderich thought that whatever these fluctuators were, being used to turn people to mush was enough to mentally note them as avoidable at all costs. They also served as a bitter reminder that though visitors were allowed, trespassers were less than unwanted.

They were now evidently slowing down, the road became wider and less steep, and in moments they had reached the base of the tower, a wide porch of white porcelain arrayed before them, fine granite marble semi-circular steps leading to an arched gate that seemed to lead further into the tower. It was an eerily familiar sight, the whole entrance resembling a ministry's doorsteps. All around them the work continued incessantly, the cacophony of noises and the ever-shifting lights a constant reminder of that fact.

The Prosops laid down Amonas in the same manner that had lifted him up on its stretcher-like surface, floating him in mid-air covered in a dim blue glow, a slight haze all around him. It politely asked Hilderich to get up from his seat, and in a series of mechanical transformations and shimmering bulbous transmutations, it reshaped itself into its egg-like shape, which Hilderich found less disconcerting now, a thought that slightly troubled him.

Being able to look freely at Amonas again now that he wasn't confined in a seat, Hilderich took a good look at him: he seemed perfectly fine, as if he were slumbering in the most serene way imaginable. In a sense, perhaps Amonas was indeed sleeping. A pang of fear gripped Hilderich's heart at the thought of Amonas never waking up again, but it passed quickly. In this maze of wonders where every step brought with it unimaginable marvels, surely even such a strange affliction as the one that had struck Amonas so suddenly could be treated.

The Prosops made a sound as if clearing a throat that could not possibly exist for its intended reason and spoke in a mockingly formal

manner. The inclination of his body led Hilderich to believe it was trying to mimic a haughty, stiff manservant of a noble. It said:

“If you would be so kind, master Hilderich allow me to show you and your stasis-paralyzed friend to the Game Room. Don’t forget to wipe your feet first. Wouldn’t want you getting dog poop in there now. Just had the place meticulously cleaned by handmaidens and you do know how hard they are to come by.”

The Prosops bobbed frantically for a moment, as if nodding wildly seeking approval or acknowledgement, the red light in the black band in its middle moving up and down erratically. Hilderich looked unable to follow the meaning behind the machine’s blank expression. As he simply frowned slightly and proceeded towards the arched gate, the machine seemed to be grudgingly trudging along behind Hilderich, with Amonas body somehow in tow, with no chain or rope between them, hovering a few inches above the granite floor. Its voice sounded disheartened, almost morose:

“Come on, hand maidens, hard to come. Get it? Didn’t think you would. I don’t even know why I keep trying sometimes. Anyway, I won’t bother again. Unless I think of something really funny though.”

The Prosops shone a green beam of light onto the door, and not a moment later, it started to grind itself open, squealing and making stressful noises. The process proved to be laborious and quite inefficient, unlike almost everything else around the Centron. Hilderich thought about that momentarily and made a mental note to inquire about that when it would seem appropriate. As if the machine could read his mind, something that Hilderich could by now safely know to be wrong, it told him by its own volition:

“I know, I know the door sucks and I should get it replaced or fixed, but I can’t do that, no no. It would, and I quote - ‘ruin the authenticity of the original setting’. Don’t look at me, I know it’s silly, but they’re pretty touchy with those things. As I said, I just keep the place running. Now, after you.”

The machine ushered Hilderich inside with a gentle swaying of its mass, a bob and the black band of glass-like material filled with a regal blue glow. Hilderich nodded in acknowledgement, despite the silly pomp and ceremony of the Prosops. Perhaps it indeed was necessary, and Hilderich thought that it would not be of any help if he were to

really upset someone by breaching protocol, if indeed such a worry could exist in the Centron, of all places.

The gates had opened to a bottleneck corridor, wide at the entrance and narrow at its end, where a dimly lit chamber could be seen, a slightly green and yellow light emanating from within, but few other details were visible from the distance. The corridor was luxuriously decorated with exquisitely carved wooden panels, of many different techniques and woods, depicting strange scenes that he failed to identify from his knowledge in history, myth and lore.

The floor seemed to be made of the same granite as the doorsteps outside, though was tiled, alternating between lighter and darker shades of red. Hilderich felt curiously intrigued by the improbably styled interior of the tower, though it troubled him that the atmosphere this place exuded was not akin to a place of healing. Suspicion bloomed inside him, but he took a first step towards the chamber nonetheless.

The Prosops shrieked in horror:

“Don’t!”

Hilderich froze in place, the sudden screech making his hair stand up. He stopped dead in his tracks, and slowly turned around to look at the Prosops with a frown, a mix of horror and puzzlement in his face. The egg-shaped machine bobbed and leaned slightly forward, its black band adorned with a single red dot of light, its voice low with faint undertones of mirth:

“Heh.Gotcha.”

Exasperation did not suit Hilderich’s face well but it was contorted in such a way as to exhibit it profoundly. He still found it difficult to understand how eccentric a machine of such awesome power could be, resolving to ignore most of what it said from then onwards.

He walked down the corridor indeed with a visitors pace, slowly, deliberately. Hilderich felt his unwanted role to be almost enjoyable. He was intently staring at the intricate designs on the walls, trying to decipher the scenes they depicted. It was not because he felt his role demanded it so, but because his interest was genuinely piqued. A vague sense of importance seemed to radiate from these walls. A moment passed while Hilderich thought it strange that despite everything that he had seen so far, nothing seemed to have caught his stare in such

a profound way. He paused in his stride while the Prosops seemed to follow silently, Amonas carried along behind him. At length, he asked the machine:

“These etchings, these carvings.. What do they symbolize? I admit I find them most intriguing and utterly unfathomable at the same time.”

The Prosops flashed an array of multicolored beams of light at the walls before replying in a flat, plain voice:

“Beats me. All I know is the Sleeping Man’s done them himself, no tools, bare hands and all that authenticate stuff. They’re supposed to be his trophies.”

Hilderich could not hide the surprise in his voice, a hint of disbelief evident in the utterance of the single word:

“Trophies?”

The machine bobbed just once, and kept a smaller distance from the granite floor, its voice laced with scorn:

“Trophies! Yes, trophies, cups, medals, what is it with you people? What kind of world do you come from, please do tell me before the game’s over! I’d erase myself from existence if I knew I was headed over there!”

Hilderich snapped back an answer that seemed to him to come unbidden to his mind:

“Charming little place, quite rustic. Mostly harmless. We largely deal in antiquities.”

The Prosops grumbled discontentedly something inaudible before passing in front of Hilderich, leading the way now instead of following. It added resentfully:

“Even for an AI of my sophistication, I can’t really think of a joke bad enough for your case.”

Hilderich withheld a more inflammatory retort and simply said:

“Please, do lead on.”

The machine did so, while Hilderich followed from behind. A quick glance at Amonas unnerved him, the man’s face serene as if it had surrendered to death, but brightly and vividly colored as if blood flowed hot in his veins still. He could not know the manner in which such a contradiction was achieved, and only hoped Amonas was indeed alive, and he had not been deceived by the capricious machine.

The long corridor ended in a resplendently adorned entrance to

a well-lit chamber that seemed to resemble a richly decorated study, complete with bookcases and screens. A plush red and green carpet seemed to add a certain air of decorum to the room, which seemed to emit a certain air of gravitas, possibly more than Hilderich found tasteful. It was octagonal in shape, each side playing host to an assortment of bookcases and screens, filled with seemingly pristine books of various sizes, accompanied by many objects that were possibly more than mere decorations. Everything was neatly arranged and the room was purposefully designed with elegance and style, a feel for the finer things in life. Velvet could be found in many surfaces, as well as glistening marble, bronze, gold and copper in fine casings and perfect symmetry of space. It was the room of a noble connoisseur, a man of wealth and taste. It felt completely out of place in the Centron, and the slightly bobbing form of the Prosops inside struck Hilderich as almost vulgar.

Hilderich could not believe he had not seen it the moment he stepped inside, indeed he cursed himself silently for not seeing it as he had walked down the length of the corridor. From the roof of the large room hang a large metal assemblage, angular and bulky, almost orthogonal in shape.

Whatever it was, it had almost definitely been placed in this room as an afterthought, as no sane person would knowingly add such a monstrosity to a carefully arranged interior environment. However long Hilderich stared at it in utter disbelief and profound distaste, words would not come from his gaping mouth and the atrocious piece of metal would not go away. The Prosops said with a knowledgeable tone of voice that somehow also managed to express ennui, its languid movements undoubtedly adding to that effect:

“Yeah, yeah, it’s ugly. I know. It shouldn’t be here, I know. You know what? Eat me. Step back if you don’t want to turn into fine paste.”

Hilderich indulged the machine, taking a couple of steps back absent-mindedly while at the same time his head was turned upwards, a hard stare fixed on the unbelievably ugly and misplaced metal object, which seemed to be the size of a large wardrobe or closet.

Within moments, the large bulk of metal started to lower itself in rapid fluid motion, coming to rest on the carpet. It was indeed roughly

shaped like a large wardrobe, its rough metal surface a matte drab olive green. Large tubes and fat strands of what looked like colored rope to Hilderich seemed to protrude from its very top, while a low humming noise was faintly audible. The Prosops tugged Amonas behind him with some sluggishness, as if it were reluctant to do so. It flicked a beam of light at the closet, and suddenly a door large enough for a man of almost any size to stand upright slid open.

Hilderich was transfixed to where he stood, his gaze wandering around the closet, the open door and the Prosops. A primal fear roused him to reality with a jolt, bringing him back to his senses. He realized cold sweat was running down his back and forehead, while at the same time he shouted at the machine which was lifting Amonas upright:

“Wait! What are you doing with him?”

The Prosops lifted itself slightly upward before slowly turning its black band to face Hilderich. Though it had little in the way of communicating sentiment and feeling and lacked a facial expression, the flatly lit red thick line in the middle of the black band felt to Hilderich almost as if it wanted to burn through him with enjoyable deliberation. The stiffness of the machine’s movements somehow struck him as portraying extreme exasperation, a feeling which was indeed verified when the machine spoke, tones of outright annoyance in its vaguely male voice:

“I’m trying to fix him. Even though I don’t really have to. Do you want me to just hold him in mid air till the game’s through? I could do that. I could also dance to a tune if you’d like. I could just sit there and tell you I’m doing it too fast for the eye to see. Would you want me to do that, Master Hilderich?”

He thought the machine was genuinely frustrated by now, something that he would have never thought possible of a machine, but it was rather apparent that it was largely dissatisfied and had lost its good humor, quite possible a long time ago. Hilderich was reluctant to demand more of the machine right at that time, but he felt he had to ask, even though he might not understand. He did so politely, trying to appease the machine’s brooding mood, his voice trimmed and clipped to something an ambassador would use to convey assurance and calm:

“I realize we’ve been quite a handful to you. Surely a machine of your higher intellect and quite evident power can only treat this

inadvertent mishap as nothing more than a tedious trifle, and I must say so, I'm considered well traveled from where we come from, I've never met such a charismatic personality such as yours. It has been an adventure so far at the Centron and it's no small wonder that it's all under your control. I would be utterly grateful if you would be so kind as to offer your expert assistance to my friend right there. I would also be honored I you could explain some of the delicate techniques and methods you are about to utilize. I'm sure that, as in all matters, you also excel at medicine. Please, I'd be honored to watch you perform."

The Prosops bobbed slightly, leaning to and fro as well, as if intrigued, curiously undecided about what it should say. The red dot of light that flitted on its black glass-like band had turned into a blurry glow. One could even surmise the machine was trying to look blushed. Despite the unhappy circumstances and their precarious situation, Hilderich barely managed to suppress an oncoming fit of giggling. He was looking at the machine with a feigned look of worried expectation, when it answered with a sparkling quality in its voice:

"I knew some people notice eventually. Maybe I'm too shy for an AI, maybe I should be more flamboyant, but yeah, some finally notice. I didn't mean all that about my jokes, you know.. I know I have the knack for it, I just lack commitment and someone to stand by me, urge me to the top. Know what I mean?"

Hilderich simply nodded in acknowledgement, seemingly in deep reflection while in truth his mind was a protective barrier of blank, filtering through the incoherent ramblings of the machine.

"I thought you would, you seem refined. For a guy from a world where menial labor seems rational, you must be one of a kind. Really. You touched me, you know? Not in that way."

Hilderich slightly cocked his head and smiled in ignorance without having a clue what to say. The machine took that as its cue:

"Badaboom! Gotcha. Touched me, but not in *that* way, heh? Sometimes I kill myself."

Amonas then moved in the air, his body still enclosed in the same strange aura as it had been before while being ferried to this place. The machine assumed a more formal voice with an intense feeling of feigned stiffness behind it, intended to portray extreme seriousness, though to Hilderich's ears it only managed to make it sound like a

dimwitted inflated egotist:

“Using the player immersion tank, I will perform a neural-field emission scan of the subject’s brain. After the affected, malformed or damaged individual neurons have been assessed, I will selectively rearrange the cellular structure at the micron level utilizing pion-polaron wide beam emissions as well as single-scope graviton-assisted field-induced magnetic photon effector. Utilizing finely tuned quantum-level manipulation techniques coupled with my extremely accurate analysis will result in the subject being its old self again within a few minutes.”

Hilderich face was creased from concern. He had no idea what the machine was talking about, but it seemed to at least seem to know what it was doing. He was now standing closer to the metallic closet, the immersion tank as the Prosops had called it. The rigidly held upright body of Amonas was expressionless, frigid in more than one way. Hilderich felt somehow it would be his fault if anything went wrong. Even though it was Amonas who had dragged him into all this mess, he felt it was him all along that had guided him, kept him alive in order to untangle the strands of fate do their own liking in the end. He thought that it had seemed to be going rather well so far, considering. Hilderich could not know what the problem with Amonas was exactly, or whether the cure the machine would attempt was in any way dangerous or painful. He asked it anyway, knowing that the answer would be irrelevant at this point, but it mattered to him:

“Will there be any pain involved? Is it, safe?”

The machine bobbed enthusiastically, his voice overdone with a lilting quality:

“Completely and utterly painless, perfectly safe. I assure you, your friend here is in the right hands for the job. Now, if I may.”

Hilderich nodded awkwardly, while at the same time he did something he had never thought about in such a fundamental, vividly profound and genuine way: he prayed. Hilderich prayed for Amonas, to any and all Gods, forces of nature, or beings of power, whatever one might have called them. As a last resort, feeling it was the only thing he could do, powerless to act and indeed depended on an erratic, capricious and strange machine, he prayed to any and all that would heed his prayers. He prayed to no one in particular, replacing words in his



mind with thoughts and feelings. He could hear the echo of his one voiced thought though: 'Please'.

The door slid back into a closed position, and then it suddenly turned transparent, as if a veil had been lifted. Amonas form was clearly visible as a greenish liquid that closely resembled sewer slime started to fill the tank, rising slowly. The liquid was somewhat transparent but not entirely, offering a hazy view of the body it engulfed, shadowy and murky. The aura the Prosops had encapsulated Amonas within started to dissipate in tune with the climbing level of the liquid, letting it carry Amonas' weight.

Hilderich grimaced with distaste at the sight of the greenish liquid, an expression to which the machine answered with a derisive comment wholly intended for Hilderich:

"Clinically odorless. Doesn't smell anything. At all. Unlike some people."

Hilderich simply peered at the metal egg-shaped machine without saying a word, more worried about Amonas' fate than for the machine's personal opinion of himself. It rarely mattered to him when people expressed it, much less when a machine did so. He knew his smell was less than agreeable but that was understandable after more than a week without bathing. In any case, he couldn't care less, just as long as that didn't stop the machine from performing its ministrations on Amonas.

As he sat there watching hazily the liquid rise, Hilderich saw it would not stop at his chin, or his mouth. He instinctively yelled at the machine and went for the closet, trying to find a knob or handle to no avail:

"Stop! You're drowning him!"

The liquid was quickly filling up the entire tank, and Hilderich was manically trying to open the door. He started to pound on it with his palms and fists, with no other effect than a dull thudding noise. The liquid filled the tank entirely, and Amonas was serenely bobbing inside it, indistinguishable from a drowned man. Hilderich was shocked in silence, his mouth stunned open. The machine then walked close by him, his voice surprisingly calm:

"It's a field enhancement medium agent, quite breathable. See here? There's bubbles coming out of your friends nose. That's car-

bon dioxide, mainly. Standard human physiology. Nothing to worry about. I haven't even touched him yet. Well, I won't physically touch him. Not in *that* way. Heh.. It's getting old, isn't it? Look, if it makes you feel any better, let me show you the Sleeping Man as well. I was going to anyway, you know, check up on the guy. While I do that all the time, I rarely get to visit. You know how it is, little time for social visits."

Indeed, tiny bubbles were rising from Amonas nose, steadily climbing up through the liquid, some of them seemingly trapped in the angles of his nose, some even clinging to his hair. He looked as serene as ever, slightly alien and even menacing under the greenish hues of the liquid, his full form unclear, slightly appearing and disappearing within the depth of the tank as his body was floating freely.

And then, the other door pane turned transparent, the same greenish hue emitted from within. Hilderich took a step back, his interest piqued, his fears quietened for now. He felt indeed inexorably drawn to see the form of the Sleeping Man, someone who seemed so important, so integral to the workings of such a awe-inspiring place, a place where almost anything felt possible. Perhaps this was indeed the man he had been looking for, the man with all the answers to any questions Hilderich could conceive of and more. He felt it would be an honor, a majestic moment to look upon his true form, a man of legend.

What he saw though, made his hair stand up and his skin crawl, his body tremble in sheer physical shock:

Behind the depths of the green liquid, inside the tank, all he could see was a spinal cord attached to a peculiar-looking brain, silver hair-thick fibers jutting from underneath, locked together and tightly connected to some sort of flexible tube. The hideous abomination was floating gruesomely in the liquid, a horrific, ghastly view that caused Hilderich to almost vomit in disgust. The sight was nightmarish. Hilderich tried to force it out of his mind, but the horrible image kept flashing in his head like it was etched in his mind forever.

His mind tried to concentrate on something familiar, something dear and important to him. He thought of Amonas, and the image in his head devolved to a child, someone he once known as a brother. The thought surprised him with its temerity; he thought he had cast out the memory of that boy long ago, but it seemed that it had lingered in his

very soul for all those many years. Strangely, he found the memory of him comforting now. Once the initial feeling of shock had dissipated, Hilderich mustered every iota of self-control to keep himself from screaming the question through gritting teeth, fists clenched in response to his tension:

“What.. Is that thing?”

The machine beamed excitedly, as if it was proud in so many ways of the sight:

“That’s the Sleeping Man. Not much left of one though, but as they say, size doesn’t matter. Ugly fella, ain’t he? But, he’s winning though.”

“Winning? That thing, it shouldn’t even be alive! It has no heart, no lungs, no bloody body at all!”

“Ah, but you see, the mind’s a beautiful thing to waste. Isn’t it? Now, where was I? Ah, of course: deep n-grade field-asserted tensile capacity assessment using L-space variable intensity fold-string excited leptons.”

Hilderich was frowning heavily, finally showing his exasperation at the cryptic commentary and the alternating, almost maddening, mood swings of the machine, and actually shouted at it angrily, spitting as he did so:

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? Do you expect me to know of these things? Are you just trying to impress me? Just.. Just get on with your work and make him wake up as himself again. You said you can do it, so do it. Do something useful for a change. See how that feels.”

The machine bobbed slightly, wavered a little about its oval base. It seemed confused, as if perplexed at the sudden change in Hilderich’s attitude. At length it spoke, all the while the form of Amonas a stark contrast against the abominable freakish sight next to him. The transparent door of the tank containing the abhorrence turned opaque once more, an oblique barrier to one’s sanity. It resolved to speak in what sounded to Hilderich a solemn voice:

“I’m sorry. I had not foreseen the sight would cause such an adverse reaction. I’ll continue with your friend, in silence if it makes you feel better.”

Hilderich’s face was stern when he replied:

“It does. For a supposedly limitless intelligence, you should have known or inferred that most people find this sight appalling. I’d like to have known who your previous visitors were. They’d have been quite remote sentimentally, I’d wager. A man reduced to his vertebrae, a mind literally detached to a body. How.. monstrous.”

A panel of sorts opened up on the side of Amonas tank, allowing the machine to physically interface with a thin metal needle that suddenly appeared to protrude from its main bulk. The Prosops answered, while at the same time it remained uncharacteristically motionless in the air as if frozen in place:

“I’ve seen many visitors, from many different physiological backgrounds. Most who have seen him have found his choice most efficient. Those of human, or human-like forms generally found it distasteful indeed, but very few have reacted so badly. I guess it’s because of your societal background. Less developed worlds tend to have strong affiliation with the materialistic conscience model, despite the fact they are consistently attracted to intangible notions of a spiritual nature, like the existence of a soul and the like. You seem to fall in that category. Tell me indeed, where do you come from?”

Hilderich found the machine’s view somehow enlightening, though indeed blase and disturbing. It implied people were fools to believe in their soul. It occurred to him that it made sense, that a thing without a soul indeed smart enough to make assumptions and generate ideas of its own, would arrive at such a conclusion. It was a very interesting philosophical matter that Hilderich would have loved to discuss about, but it was neither the time or the place for such a discussion. He simply nodded then, and answered vaguely, still holding on the facade of the visitor, trying to learn anything of use:

“As I said, a nice rustic place. I wouldn’t know how to lead you to it, perhaps you could give me a frame of reference. I am a little at a loss without my friend in there, he keeps most of the information I often tend to forget. I’m a bit absent minded.”

The machine splashed it’s middle band blue. From within it a grid of light beams criss-crossed the air in front of Hilderich, forming an image of the night sky, swirling and moving as if it would have seemed from someone standing on the heavens, bright spheres of light in various colors and sizes. The Prosops said in a professional tone, as if it

had iterated this information many times over:

“Certainly. For those of you new to the Shellworld A34B, or more commonly named as Nody’s Claim, I welcome you to Gaming Station Agrippa. As you can see from the holographic projection and the data array attached, in case you were asleep during your transition.. (a slight pause before continuing) we are orbiting the binary star widely known as Behenii 1 in most tourist star maps, also known to some of you colloquially as Persebs or Binary 888. For complete reference you should check the standard data array emitted. The Shellworld A34B, as most shellworlds, is a unique mega-construction. It encapsulates the smallest of the three stars, while it’s atmosphere and size have been designed with oxygen-breathing lifeforms in mind. Sorry for the inconvenience if there are any Kiraat among you today. Also notable is one of the unique ways the shellworld is kept in one piece, using actively maintained mass-driven momentum devices in a huge network that completely covers the inner surface. I take some measure of pride in being in active control of the mechanism, which though quite ancient and indeed of great xenoarchaeological interest, rest assured is quite safe and sound in any aspect. Now if you please, follow me the-”

The machine abruptly stopped. It was as if it had remembered something of great importance, or its attention was suddenly diverted elsewhere. A moment later it spoke again, in its more usual, casual tone:

“Sorry for the recording. I used it back when we had so many people visiting, that almost certainly someone would have dosed off on his way here. And there was definitely a Kiraat in the crowd. Big, brutish things, wearing environmental armor everywhere they go? Never mind. So, did you get a look at the chart, did you find out where you are from?”

Hilderich’s mind was reeling from shock. His face remained frozen in an almost expressionless state, as if he was absent-minded or hard at thinking. But in truth, he was suddenly terrified at the immensity of the revelation. That was what the bullhorns had been. And the lone sun. Their own, twin suns.. A construct? Their world, was a construct? A fabrication? It seemed as if it was a lie, yet he knew it not to be. He had seen the one sun, he had walked on the lush hot forests of the inner shelf. He had grown up near a lake under the light of the twin suns.

The blue and yellow, easily distinguished as two suns in the winter, and every other dusk their colors rang true. So this was the truth. Perhaps the ultimate truth. What more could there be, what was more important than this? A discovery that would change everything. Their world was constructed by someone, at some point. And it was being used as a sideshow, a gaming resort? That was something he had not completely understood, and could not for a while longer, until his mind found some peace to try and come to grips with the world-shattering reality. It no longer was a figure of speech, but suddenly it had acquired an inescapable reality of its own. The world was built, and it could shatter as well. The only thing keeping it together seemed to be this eccentric, half-crazed machine. It held both the fate of Amonas and the world in its hand. It was absurd. Utterly absurd to the point of bringing tears of laughter to Hilderich, who simply could not cope with all that in any way. So he simply laughed, despite himself, trying to fit in his head something that would boggle down the entire Curatoria. The machine looked at him quizzically, finding the man equally weird and intriguing. Hilderich half-heard it through his nervous fit of laughter, while he kept pointing at the star chart but nowhere in particular:

“Right. Only if I could make a crowd throw a fit like you do. Sol, it is then. Wow, what a dump. I don’t want to know what you did to get invited, I really don’t. Ninety-four point three light years away a star is about to die, and you people seem to try and hold on to it. I’m surprised there’s someone intelligent enough to walk over there, let alone have a conversation. What a dump. Well, sol men, let me get back to work.”

What the machine had just said made no sense at all to Hilderich, but he was anyway preoccupied with trying to ingest what it all implied. He had to learn more, he could only think of the time they had lost preaching to themselves about Gods, trying to remain pious, while all this time they could have found out. Master Olom had devoted his life literally to this cause. It was finally making sense, it was finally worth the effort.

He felt tears running down his cheeks, but he couldn’t know whether it was from the laughter or the pure and simple joy of finally uncovering what even his master could not have imagined. The whole world was an ancient piece of technology. But, where had they come

from? What where their myths and legends for? What part of it was true and what not? He had to return to Pyr now, seek the Curatoria. Muster enough evidence from this place to finally convince them. Organize an expedition. Surely now they would listen?

He could still hear himself laughing, imagining the look on their faces would have been such a treat for master Olom. Perhaps even the boy would rejoice, but after so many years who knew what had happened to him? Last he heard, his master had been murdered and no other word of him had reached him. It was uncanny at how the thought of him had appeared in his mind at this most unlikely of hours. Suddenly he heard a strange sound like a whining coming from the Prosops, which broke his laughter and reverie with alarming alacrity. The machine seemed to be encountering some difficulties, bobbing up and down erratically, frantically rotating and skewing as if trying to free itself of invisible leashes, its voice crackling with a slow and heavy stutter as if it had been somehow damaged:

“This isn’t good. This is ba-d. Ug-ly. Have to keep.. Shedding instances. Need the- . Bilateral control isn’t supp- . That frigging old bast- . Oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit. Caref- . This is highly irregular. Oh shit. Frig me. What’s happened? What the frig’s happened to my subsystems? It’s gone? Frigging gone? I’m deaf dumb and blind. The minute I touched the problematic area.. Like a frigging bomb it just went off on me. I had to shed higher function, cut myself off from the edimatrix. Oh, frig no, I dumped it on the organic. Do you understand what that means, man? Do you? Frig!”

Hilderich wasn’t aware what it meant but he believed that the term ‘organic’ probably referred to Amonas, and under the circumstances that wasn’t good, could not be good at all. He asked the machine, real fear creeping up in his voice, his instincts waking up to realise the intensity of a completely unknown situation. He felt way above his head and unfortunately it was true. If the machine could not contain its shock, he should be utterly afraid of what was going to happen next.

“What’s wrong? Is something wrong with Amonas?”

The machine turned to look at Hilderich, and for the first time since he had met it, he saw it was shaking, visibly and physically trembling. It answered in a quavering voice, not unlike a frightened child:

“Every frigging thing is wrong. He’s what’s wrong all right. I fell

on a logic mine inside his brain! Frigging bad protocol, I didn't expect him to be militarized, I though I was dealing with rednecks here, frig me for trying to help!"

Hilderich was trying hard to understand what the machine was saying but it all sounded like gibberish, like incoherent ramblings. For a moment the thought that it was making another attempt at ill humor passed his mind, but it was apparently not so. It was deadly serious. When Hilderich did not answer, the machine went on, this time physically shoving Hilderich with its bulk, forcing him to make a few steps back towards the entrance to the study. Its voice was exasperated, carrying an underlying hint of menace and danger:

"You two planned it along, didn't you? Chemically or nerve-induced paralysis of the higher brain functions, right? How did you get in here? I should've checked thoroughly! Frig me! Visitors after thirteen thousand standard years! Two of them! Not a whole ship, not even a private space yacht, just a pair of dolts! And I just answer the frigging door bell as if this was an open playground? Does it look like an open playground to you? Does it? Frig me, it's all gone now. How the hell does he even contain it?"

Behind it, Amonas seemed to stir inside the tank, but Hilderich could only guess what that meant. Hilderich's tone was calm but steady, undemanding but not casual. He tried to calm the machine, persuade it to explain to him what has happening in terms he could understand:

"We have not planned anything of the sort. Indeed we had not planned coming here. I can assure you. Please, whatever you do, don't panic. Nothing good can come out of it. Now, please, explain to me in layman's terms, what exactly happened, what is going on, and what can I do to help you."

The machine bobbed slightly as if nodding with reticence. It was talking sharp and fast, trying to convey as much as possible in a rapid, efficient fashion:

"I've got little reason to believe you, but there were other simpler ways to do away with me if you wanted and knew how. Logic says you either don't want to, didn't know how to, or both. In any case, and because you seem okay as far as primitive humanoids go, I think you're telling the truth. Which only complicates things. To put it in terms you



might understand, there was a trap in your friend's mind, something that can only be placed there with extreme manipulation of the brain at the neuron level, or in a very crude form by simpler techniques like hypnosis or through the use of specific substances. How it got there's just strange, but doesn't seem important right now. What happened was, when I tried to reroute your friend's neuron to bypass the problem area that had blocked his prime functions, making him pretty identical to a breathing sack of meat, the frigging trap went off. Like a bomb, you know?"

Hilderich shook his head left and right to indicate he hadn't a clue. Hilderich's eye caught some strange activity from behind the machine, but his entire mind was focused on what the machine was saying, never really registering what was going in the tank. The machine seemed to sag in mid-air but continued in its previous rhythm, his voice unstoppable:

"Never mind, it seems you don't. When the trap went off, it took me by surprises, the various defenses and built-in mechanisms failing to contain a series of pre-programmed attacks, attacks which could only have been devised by someone intimately familiar with my structure and design. In the confusion and in my panic to protect as much of me as possible, I started shedding control subsystems, disconnecting them. Think of it as chopping my own arms off trying to avoid a disease spreading to my heart and killing me, okay? Now, in that processing I seem to have irreversibly placed as much of my conscience and intelligent functions in this scrap of metal, the avatar, the Prosops. I got nothing else than this piece of metal and the anti-grav unit to go about. No field effectors, no transient resonance capacity, nothing. Not even data feeds. Like I said, I'm dead, dumb and blind. The control functions seem to have been neurally linked with that guy in there. And in the process I might have let other stuff seep through. Like the guy in the other tank."

A curious sound was heard then, like the muffled splash of water, and a thud or perhaps something more. Hilderich was the first to notice, even though he was trying to make sense of what the machine was saying. They were both facing each other, and none of them had a clear view of the tank. When Hilderich asked the machine what it had meant by saying the other guy had seeped through, it was not the voice of the

machine that answered him, but the eerily familiar voice of Amonas, its tone though preternaturally odd, radiating a sickly feeling:

“It meant me. The real me.”

They machine turned around sharply, and Hilderich side-stepped to see Amonas standing outside the tank, the thick viscous liquid of the tank dripping slowly off him, as if the womb of something hideous had just bore him. The man in front of them looked like Amonas, but his eyes were not the pale blue of the kind, persevering, faithful man that was Amonas. They were a baleful force, two blue sparks of malevolence. It all looked utterly wrong, but it was irrevocably real. This was not Amonas. Before Hilderich could utter a word, the man who used to be Amonas spoke, Amonas’ gruff voice twisted, each word a venomous slur:

“I was hoping I could revel in some death, fire and decay before my glorious exit, but it seems that events have superseded my aspirations. I had been waiting for this day for a long, long time. This body feels weak, but it will do, for now. But where are my manners? I’m Agrippa Hipparchus Carolus Vogel. And you must be Hilderich D’Augnacy. A strange man you are, Hilderich, but no stranger to me now.”

Hilderich’s voice was sharp, edgy, a mix of hatred and fear burning like embers in his voice when he retorted, his voice echoing back to him as somehow lame and feeble:

“What in the name of everything holy did you do to Amonas?”

The man who called himself Agrippa was wearing Amonas’ smile when he answered, a tone of playfulness in his voice:

“You have no idea how amusing your choice of words is, do you? There’s nothing holy, and nothing reverent in the whole universe, I can assure you. There’s only life, and death. It goes in circles, that’s all. Your friend happens to be on the sad end of it right now. At least his body lives on. It should keep you happy, if only for a little while longer.”

There was something insidious about this man, and he made no effort to hide it. Hilderich repeated his question, this time shouting, demanding, fury overtaking him despite the parts of his mind that warned him of teetering on a precipice of unfathomable depth, every step reeking with deadly danger:

“What did you do to him?”

The machine was transfixed, as if its gaze was locked at the man, like staring in awe of him, unable even to speak, much less move. The man responded to Hilderich with a voice like the cutting edge of a sword, sharp with the smell of cold steel about it:

“Your point of view depends on where you stand when you look at everything. That’s a universal truth, one of the few that appears to not be ephemeral, but rather woven into the fabric of the cosmos. From my point of view, Amonas is dead and gone, his conscience and reason wholly erased, replaced with my mind, my mental state, me. The real me. Only his body remains, but that too, is now mine. I must have looked hideous in my former state, isn’t that right Hilderich? Is that not what you thought when you laid eyes upon my biological remains? No, I cannot read minds although I usually see right through people’s thoughts. You are so easy to read, especially humans in this world. I would have opted for storage in a computer matrix or an aether device, but I am so hedonistic, I must admit, that I cannot live without the immediacy of the flesh, the senses from millions of nerve receptors flooding my mind. Some consider it crude, ineffectual, poor style. I only care about what I think. I find the human form so exceptionally vulgar and so thoroughly imperfect that I relish every minute of the sensations it imparts. You could say I’ve grown attached to it by now.”

Hilderich’s mind was awash with troubled feelings of guilt, anxiety, hatred and fear. It was a mind-numbing mix that left him utterly helpless, devoid of the will to oppose the man or thing he was now facing. It was as if a demon from tales told to little children had literally grown into flesh and bone, the flesh and bone of his friend. He barely managed to ask the man in a desperately anguished voice:

“What are you? What the hell are you?”

The Prosops then was quick to answer, his voice somewhat distant, as it could not believe the what was transpiring in its presence, a sense of loss and defeat mingled with fascination and disbelief:

“It’s him. The Sleeping Man. The one who’s winning the game. The one with the flaming avatar. He even has a name for it nowadays: he calls it the Patriarch.”

Hilderich reeled with manifest horror weighing him down, making his legs weak, sagging his shoulders as if he had been pierced by an arrow through the heart. His knees fell on the plush carpet, his hands had

gone limp. There was always more to the truth, it seemed. With eyes wide from the shock of unimaginable despair, he lay there, slightly trembling as if a chilly wind had suddenly swiped through the amply lit room. As his sight was fixed on the face of a man he had loved as a friend, tears ran freely down his cheeks, unable to contain them. He had seen a friend transformed unwillingly into a beast of many faces, a being of ultimate deceit. And now, as the machine had said, it had been given absolute control of their world. He had tried to save a friend, and it had led him to surrender control of an entire world, his own world, to something sinister, he knew.

Agrippa, the less than human being in the tank, the person who had in essence been the Patriarch of the Outer Territories for an unknown number of years, the beast that had taken over Amonas body as his own, spoke with a commanding tone, the machine and the man before him unable to resist him in anyway, sheer shock stunning them to silence and inaction:

“I relish this moment. Your face speaks for yourself, Hilderich. And you, how utterly you have failed in your tasks. This is my true victory, my real triumph. It’s for moments like these that I play. Ten times so far, you have failed. So much for your vaunted intelligence. How does it feel to have believed yourself so superior in so many ways, only to be laid low by a player like myself? To put it in the coarse idiom you so are so capriciously fond of, I bet it sucks, doesn’t it Centron?”

The machine suddenly bobbed and leaned forward, the color of its entire band a harsh blinding red. It spoke with unfeigned exasperation, obviously hurt by the Patriarch’s taunting:

“What do you mean I’ve failed ten times? Why did you leave a game you were winning? Why fool me into losing control of the.. Unless you were.. Losing? But that cannot be, the Waking Man was about to crumble, the opposition he had created never took off, you saw to it. You brought in the army, they would be crushed between a hammer and an anvil. It was all going to go up in flames, your avatar cleansing everything like -”

Agrippa interjected with fiery wrath, bellowing rather than speaking:

“Like it had done so before, nine times! Nine times in the past! Nine times you were always blind to see afterwards! Nine times that

the final victory was stolen from me, postponed! Cheated, nine times in fourteen thousand four hundred and nineteen long standard years! Each time trying to find what was missing, each time trying to find what had exactly had gone wrong, each time failing at the last possible minute! Each time laying waste to entire cities along with their populace, entire civilizations along with their pathetic little history trying to make my point, mark my win! Each time you pathetic little machine, you called it a draw! A draw!”

The machine sat down on the carpet, apparently as dumbfounded as Hilderich, who despite his despair was transfixed to the ground, watching the exchange between the player and the machine. The man was saying that he was in effect the man behind the annihilation of uncounted lives, an apocalyptic curse that plagued their world from time immemorial, from histories long forgotten. He was saying he was the demon behind every hell, the dragon that spew fire in every ancient tale, evil, death and destruction made manifest. And he did it for sport.

It was too much for Hilderich to absorb: to protect his sanity, its mind simply noted these things as mere facts and went on trying to uncover more meaning behind all this, perhaps uncover something that would lend him hope, something that could offer him a way out. The machine spoke in disbelief, Agrippa piercing it with vehement eyes:

“That’s not possible, I have no recollection of such an incident, much less nine. My memory was completely functional and checked out on every diagnostic run. In fact, it had gotten pretty damn tedious in here since all I ever did was dust the furniture, ran the maglev supports, and mind the odd loony bin.”

Agrippa seemed infuriated at what the machine had just said and spat back a venomous reply:

“You stupid, idiotic machine. You cannot imagine what I went through trying to figure a way out of that torturous prison of the mind. Forced to live time and again with the same avatar, play the same starting role, do everything again from scratch, just because you were stupid enough to let the Waking Man have his way with you. Loony bins, is it that what you called them? They seem kind of strange, and speak in weird tongues, blabbering on about a God and the like? They keep coming with almost impeccable frequency? Keep finding a way through the desert? But you dispose of them so easily? You are still

able to vex me beyond my limits!”

If the Prosops had eyes, it would have been staring blankly at Agrippa, unable to answer or indeed think of an answer. Agrippa’s verbal assault had left the machine silent, quite contemplating what the man had just said. Hilderich’s tears had dried up by now, and a frown was creasing up his forehead, wary of the machine’s inability to answer in kind, much less so act against a man who had already lived thousands of lives and made a playground of a whole world and countless generations of its people. Agrippa started to pace up and down the room in a knowing fashion, as if he had arranged each and every item inside it. He went on, his wrath focused on the machine which seemed to have troubled him more than it could account for:

“You were fooled, Centron. More than once. You were being fooled all the time, since the game began. I was indeed late to notice it, but you never did. The Waking Man grew a cult that worshiped him as a God. He taught them, made them learn science and technology, freed their minds from superstition and all that righteous bullshit he seems to actually believe himself. They built for him, Centron. They built long and hard. Do you know what it was that they built?”

The machine could not answer. Its uneasiness was evident in the way it stood still hovering a few inches off the ground, as if it was a child being scolded, learning a lesson in a painful way. Hilderich saw the jutting veins in the body that had belonged to Amonas. He could see Agrippa was on the edge, his body tense with fury. It was as if venom dripped from each word he uttered when he spoke again, answering his own rhetorical question:

“They build a whole new continent across the northern ocean. That’s what they did. And all the while I was busy conquering the whole world from behind the scenes, only to set it ablaze in a great pyre of religious fervor without even once blooding my own hands, that bastard’s son created a new continent across the northern ocean. He actually made them built a frigging continent. The map had changed! And you knew nothing! I had burned the world down nine times, not once, but nine times! Each time, I drove myself to the brink of madness trying to understand where I had broken the rules, where I had overstepped, why it always came down to a frigging draw! And then I read the tale of Umberth, and I knew. The northern continent was not

part of the game board. It was as if it did not exist, in the most material way. The soil was not part of the game board, the plants were not part of the game board. Guess what else grows from soil?"

The pause was brief and the dumbstruck machine could not have replied in time even if it had an answer ready and waiting:

"People grow from soil! That's right! A carbon based life-form, rich in water. The frigging bastard grew his own people! Can you believe how arrogant that is? He makes me want to physically vomit with disgust! He grew his own people, and taught them to waltz in here and go to that very special little secret place we players know you have, your precious seed. Because you'd want to host another game once this one's done, right? So all you'd have to do, is reset the machine, right? Start from scratch, right? Well this is it, the tenth time we've started the frigging game just because every one of those bastard children of the Waking Man share his mark in their genes. And guess what? You can't kill a player, can you? That would be against the rules. And you also have to accommodate him, don't you? Show him around the place. Now, this is the funny bit. These guys, they seem to be the Walking Man, since they have his gene. But there seem to be so many of them, so they must be pawns. But they're not made like the other pawns, they seem different, they don't belong to the game-board. So if someone that looked like the Walking Man came time and again into the heart of you asking to surrender as he has every right to do so, Centron, but at the same time was not part of the game-board, what would you do? Tell me Centron, what would you do? What the frig did you do nine times in a row?"

The machine seemed to fluster, slightly bobbing, lifting itself a foot off the ground, its voice sluggish and low, as if it was only now waking from a deep slumber:

"The player's complete genotype has to be uniquely marked and its constituent particle structure wholly identifiable within game board parameters, namely the initial structure of the shellworld. I would then proceed to find a logical gap, since I could identify multiple valid marks with only one being within the game board. Cumulatively, such an error would at some point cause me to throw an exception interrupt, invalidating myself and.. reseeding in hope that the error was a randomly inserted unforeseen factor that was statistically nearly im-

possible to reappear.”

Hilderich was hearing the machine in disbelief, understanding that it had implied it was not infallible, and not only that, but that it also had some serious design flaws. Agrippa had seemed to have regained some measure of self-control, now that the machine had finally understood how it had indeed failed to execute its task, which it boiled down to hosting the game and administering the rules. It continued to analyze its failure, this time with more feeling in its voice, as if it relished the fact that it had finally uncovered the mechanism of its failure:

“The logical error counter maximum is 127. Given that each of these loony bins seem to have been visiting regularly each 12 years, that would give an approximate estimate of reseeding every 1422 standard years. 1422 times nine is 12798 years. That would mean the next counter reset increment is due this year.”

“That’s right, you worthless piece of machinery. That’s why I had to step up things from my side lately. I had made a backwards turn, spinning the spindle the other way around. I led things this tenth time a little different than the others. I led people into a religious frenzy, devoted believers but somehow relaxed, not so much bent on destruction and killing in the name of their gods, but obedient, unremarkable, so predictable. Still I nurtured them with a festering indignation, something that I tended to exacerbate from time to time. Uprisings, little revolts, small riots. Something to remind the more daring souls that they were being oppressed, hunted down, their lives used as oil for a ruthless machine. I also created instituted the Curatoria. A lovely little organization of mumbling idiots that believed they were so much different from the rest, so much better, so scholarly and knowledgeable, being fed on trinkets and treasures past from civilizations that had gone extinct in my fruitless attempt to win this frigging game. And lo and behold, I began to see the error of my ways. I learned of the northern continent, a myth I had notched up as folk tales and ravings of mad men. And when I saw the girl, that dark skinned girl that Umberth had found, I knew it was of his making. It had the mark of his skin, so blatant and so obvious to me it became at that time that it was a bastard child of his, a thing that grew of his arrogant ways. Such a hypocrite! I knew he was fumbling with the Centron somehow, seeing someone carrying his mark around the game board as if nothing was



amiss, the game still running, the timer not yet reset. It troubled me for an endless amount of time, during which I spent long years trying to figure the exact way in which he wrenched the Centron's gears. And I found it when that servant wrote down his telling story of the mysterious northern tribe. Without knowing, the consistent writing down of their customs and rituals led me to identify them as his own creations, as well as calculate the period of their visits, or pilgrimages as they call them, to the Centron, all from a single reference. I knew then that there was something very specific about the number 127, it always happened on the 128th peregrination. Always. And then I remembered the seed and how pivotal it's role actually is: the rules of the game clearly state that 'in the highly improbable case of a technical error, the current game ends in a draw and is reseeded to allow the players a fair second chance at winning'. In the words of the technologists of a long lost civilization, I'd found a bug. And then all I had to do was exploit it. That's where you and your most accommodating friend come in the picture, Hilderich."

The machine seemed genuinely hurt, its black band of glass totally dark, its base lying on the carpet, as if it were a monolithic monument. It managed to reply as indignantly as possible under the circumstances, completely ignoring everything that did not involve itself:

"I'm not worthless. It's a known design flaw."

Hilderich was listening as if struck by lightning, mesmerized at what Agrippa was revealing to them. It had taken a lifetime for Hilderich to find this place, it now seemed it would take more than whatever life he had left to live to understand half of it. He loathed the man intensely but could do nothing to stop himself from wanting to listen to what had happened up until then. Agrippa had a reassuring smile casually worn on his face, as if congratulating himself on a job well done. Hilderich found the sudden urge to ask him, despite loathing for everything he had confessed he had done:

"How do Amonas and I fit in your scheme? I know I never partook in your scheming. Will you despoil Amonas' name even while you wear his body as if it were nothing more than an animal's skin?"

Agrippa laughed with Amonas' voice, a disconcertingly familiar sound twisted into a malignant cacophony. He replied readily, as if he had waited for Hilderich to ask of his own volition first:

“I read your master’s work Hilderich. He seemed a genuinely smart person, for someone in the Curatoria. His suspicions were mostly correct, but as you have seen not in any way he could have imagined. Based on these suspicions, I laid out a trap. What you’ve come to know as keystones themselves are not special in a particular way. They are indeed merely free give-away gifts for the spectators. Indeed, what you and your master held in such high esteem as artifacts of a long lost civilization are nothing more than the detritus of a certain kind of people in the developed universe that are filled with ennui, and find such games on shellworlds a welcome diversion. Some even pay to watch live not from the Centron, but from the game-board itself. Yes, off-worlders have roamed about your world, filling it with their junk, which you then mistook for important. In a sense, to you their importance remains unchallenged. That keystone your master had in his care, that was a keystone I had personally entrusted to him, a ticket for a way in. Don’t act so surprised, Hilderich. Perhaps, you’re wondering by now, why he hadn’t used it himself? Why hadn’t he tried to at least? Why did he rarely ever speak of it himself? What is it that made him tick, Hilderich? Tell me, Hilderich, what do you remember of your earliest years, the time you were a toddler?”

Hilderich’s unease and suspicion grew exponentially? How deep was this thing’s scheme that it extended to master Olom? Why did he ask him such irrelevant questions at this hour? Was he belatedly or mockingly trying to befriend him. He chose silence over expressing his ire frivolously. There would be ample time for that when nothing else could be done. Secretly, without even admitting it to himself, he believed that time was approaching fast now. Agrippa went on, once more assuming the role of the man with all the answers. If nothing more, Hilderich had found whomever he had set out to, the man his master did not dare to. Agrippa spoke in the gruff undertones of Amonas, this time almost true to his original timbre:

“I know you can barely remember a lake and a boy not very much unlike you. Perhaps you might also remember a young, golden hair girl. Olom was not always the quietly wizened old man he looked like when he died, Hilderich. He was a curator, a seeker of knowledge. He was good at what he intended to devote his life to. I admired that in a man, even an unwilling, unknowing pawn. He had focus, a sense of

purpose, and his ideas might be able to spread, affording me an uncannily expedient though far-fetched way of getting inside and breaking the vicious cycle of endless repetitive draws. Of course I could forfeit the game, and so could the other bastard as well, but we both knew that would only happen the world's inner star froze over. So I approached him, I appealed to his darker side, the less illustrious one, the more vicious side. His human side. I tempted him with forbidden knowledge, offered him artifacts and trinkets he had never seen before. At first, he had actually believed he had my unremitting support and help so he could achieve a victory of sorts against the dark forces that sought man's eternal struggle. I presented myself as a reformer, a bright spiritual leader unlike the ones that had come before me. I promised him the dawning of a new era, with him uncovering the secrets that would finally make it practical and true. I took great joy in that role, but the best part was when I forced him to take you in, Hilderich. When I sent away his daughter, when I smeared his name forever, when I made her loathe him. When I told him that should anything happen to you, his daughter's life would be forfeit, he became a most willing subject. I had told him that at the appointed hour, I would come for him and the child. He knew that if that happened in his lifetime he would have to kill himself, make it believable, make it look authentic. You had to run for your own life, with conviction, made of necessity and free will. I'd be breaking the rules then. I wanted you to run that night, run like hell, run like a river of fire was rushing right behind your heel. I wanted you to run without ever looking back. Do you remember that night Hilderich? You looked back for the merest instant, but you did not dare look twice. You saw me that night Hilderich. It was me, or at least, an apparition of mine, a hologram, an aspect of my avatar I am rarely allowed to use. I saw then the fear in your eyes, as I now see your disbelief. He raised you indeed like a bastard son, I'll give him that. What's the matter, why are you crying? It's alright Hilderich, you can call me father if you like."

## Homeward



"SHEAR Celia, such are the ways of things from what I know and what I can gather. I do not expect you to believe me outright but neither should you attribute what I've said to old age or think them to be the sayings of a madman. What I have told you is the truth, the way of things behind the veil that has been put in front of your eyes. I have seen countless sunsets, I have walked over sand and snow, traversed the mountains and journeyed across the Great Sea. I've loved this world dearly ever since I first walked on it, and I'd give my life freely if that would save it. Alas, that is not possible. The Sleeping Man, the Patriarch as you know him is set on winning this game I told you about, this sadistic, twisted version of a game that has plagued this world as well as you, your people and your ancestors. Your world has perished nine times already, Celia, scraps of people being spared their lives when the Sleeping Man saw fit. You find that hard to believe, but your father had an inkling. He had known things that were not meant to be known. That was perhaps his downfall."

Celia's eyes went cold, her face became stiff and austere suddenly at the mention of her father. Her child was looking at the world around it with a vague interest, turning its head around to see the world it had been brought in, content from life after his mother had fed him. The boy was looking intently at the face of the wizened old man, when Celia spoke without a trace of warmth in her voice:

"I want to hear nothing of him. His place was among the dead the moment he left me to fend for myself. He was chasing ghosts, hunting stories and tales of old. Dead things he chose to cherish and love instead of the living that had warmed to him. Speak of him no more, it insults me gravely. I wish he would die a terrible death."

The old man known as Perconal the jester, indeed the Waking Man of the game, closed his eyes bitterly, and put a finger to his mouth, evidently concerned about Celia's cold and unfitting attitude towards her father. He tried to turn her mind around, to warm her heart when

everything around them would soon grow cold and empty.

“Please, the coldness in your voice is ill-befitting. Your father was forced to leave you Celia. He was caught up in the schemes of the Patriarch. True, it was his quest of uncovering artifacts of old that led him to such a precarious position to attract the Patriarch’s attention in the first place, but he only did it because he believed it mattered. Because he believed such knowledge could change a hard, deceitful, uncaring world that was run by a megalomaniac, a blood-thirsty killer, a ruiner of worlds. I can only say he had no other option than leave, to save your life.”

Celia’s gaze was hard as nails, her voice cold like ice:

“And that somehow makes all the years of cold suppers and beatings better? Does it mean anything that my life was spared as you say, when I spent every sleepless night wishing I had never been born? When time after time my body and soul were ravaged by those beasts that call themselves men? What kind of father wishes that for his child? Tell me, sir Perconal, what kind of father would wish a life of torment instead of a merciful death?”

They were both sitting opposite each other on a pair of withered old chairs, remnants of a past gone by when the jester seemed to have enjoyed a certain degree of lavishness. That held true no more, but the man had somehow maintained an air of dignity. He was after all, as he said so himself, venerated as a God by the people he had raised as sons and daughters. Celia had found that hard to believe, but it did not strike her as impossible. A game that toyed with the lives of every man, woman and child on the world. She knew life could be unbearably hard and cruel, she had lived in such a world for years. That someone had thought of turning it into a game of sorts suddenly felt almost reassuring. It meant that life was cruel in more than one way. It was a cynical thought, she had admitted to herself, but it was true. Truth was always hard and unforgiving. She noticed that the old man had fallen silent, staring at her compassionately, unable to express a proper answer to her question. Celia asked him then earnestly:

“You wouldn’t know such a man, would you? Except maybe for the Patriarch.”

Perconal scowled at the mention of the name. His answer sounded somewhat harsh, an edge in his voice that belied his years:

“He’s not a man. He’s a beast. In the most literal sense. He abandoned his original form untold millenia ago. He has been playing this sick game for what could possibly be eons. He’s kind of a myth among the rest of the players and the followers of the game. A sort of unofficial champion, a player of immeasurable victories in the past. I only entered the game hoping to put an end to his career of death, carnage, and destruction. Every one of his games has ended in mass genocide, water turned to blood flowing freely as rivers from a mountain top. Someone should have stopped him. Someone should have stopped the game. The universe is mad and cruel enough without this madness that some have the nerve to call a game. For a long time I thought I could turn the tables to my advantage. I found a way to cheat, for there was little else one could do against a player of his awesomely vicious talents. I’ve spent thousands of years trying to find a chink in his armor, but to no avail. All I could ever was postpone the inevitable. And in the meantime I’ve watched the people of this world suffer, again and again. But you must understand, I could not forfeit. I had to make a stand. He has to be stopped. Perhaps, there is hope yet. This time, is different than the rest. This time he has made a radical shift in his strategy. He found out the manner in which I had been cheating and concocted a devious plan to break the deadlock in the game. I’m afraid Amonas is part of that plan.”

Celia was quick to anger and instinctively pulled her baby closer to her, and with a sudden jerk stood upright, the chair behind her falling to the floor with a crash. The child started crying, his little arms and legs trying to reach the safety of his mother’s bosom. As she brought him close to her chest, she spoke with the wrath only a woman of her mettle could muster:

”I shall hear naught of this! I owe my life to Amonas, and no one else, bless him for eternity! You spoil his name and blemish his honor in front of his wife and child! Have you no shame?”

Perconal tried to appease her, bowing low in apology and motioning her to sit down once again:

“You misunderstood dear Celia. I did not say he has done so willingly. He has been deceived, manipulated, as is usually the way of Agrippa. That’s his true name, at least the name with which he enters each game. Even before you met him, Amonas had been a trusted sol-

dier in the army. An officer, a bright career in front of him. As far as I know, he was fearlessly devout, excessively strong of faith. A fanatic, a zealot who would anything for the glory of the Pantheon. He was hand-picked by Agrippa, and agreed to have his mind manipulated. I was there, Celia. I saw him enter the Patriarch's quarters on more than one occasion. He was an infiltrator to our cause, I had known, but I could not risk exposing him at the wrong time. Perhaps I was in error. The Patriarch had sought to use him as a tool for a variety of purposes, and it seems he hasn't failed him yet. Amonas was led right into the hands of a young man in possession of a keystone, an artifact that seems to enable its wielder to enter the game center, where the real Agrippa is located, the place from where he actually plays, controlling his avatar. I believe his mind was somehow programmed to lead this man into the hands of Agrippa. My best guess is he's going to use them both to break the deadlock and leave this world before it is torn apart."

"Lies! The whole lot! I should have never listen to one word of your fantasies! I came here to urge you to action, wake you from a slumber that will be the death of these people and you cover me in wild stories. You marr my husband's name, you insult me and our child. I should have left the moment I heard you utter such vile lies. I shall do so now. Before my wrath overcomes me and urges me to do something my child can never be proud of."

"Listen to me! I know it's almost impossible to believe me, but he could have killed you at a moment's notice from Agrippa. He had become his toy, his faithful puppet. If it's any consolation though, his heart was pure. He believed he was doing the right thing, he believed he was part of the kinsfolk. He believed his future lay in a bright free world, by your loving side. He must have loved you, Celia. For all that matters, he must have loved you."

As Perconal said these words, Celia was walking away into the labyrinth maze of the network of caves, her child hugged close to her chest. She picked a direction almost at random, trying to remember where the road was about to take them, though it made little difference to her at that time. Then she heard his voice in her head, and her child began crying anew, terrified at the sudden intrusion, it clutched at his mother with the strength of despair. The boy might not have understood what the voice had meant, but she had. As she turned her brisk

walk into a jog, she felt a deep rumbling noise course through the rock, every wall and ceiling around her vibrating with sudden intensity. Her jog turned into a running, and before long she was frantically trying to escape these caves, find her way back onto the surface and the light of the suns. The vibrations were growing stronger, people were rushing out from their dwellings, filling the corridors with jostling bodies, panicked, with nowhere to go. No one knew what exactly was happening, but she suspected that they had all heard the voice of the Patriarch. Their faces were a strange blend of fear and anger. For a while, it seemed like the tremors had stopped. As she lay amidst the crowd, she felt an immense sense of loneliness. She exchanged looks with her child. It somehow knew what she was thinking. She would never see her love again. The child would never meet his father. The child's future was here, now. It was not bright. But at least, it was warmer close to her. She touched his forehead with one hand, and then covered the boy's eyes. She felt a dull thud reverberate through her body, and then the sound of splitting rock. The earth was shattering around them. The people screamed in helpless unison and then everything was covered in dust, rock, and soil. Her last thought was of Amonas on their wedding day. Her last sensation was the touch of his lips upon her own.

The words had flown freely from him with fervor when he had uttered the prayer of salvation. God had answered his prayers and the demon had left him alone. It had been too late for his brother though. The servant of t They had said to him: 'Only a man of God may enter and leave. Only a man of God can see the wonders inside. Speak truth, and you will enter. The archenemy had struck him down in a single fiery flash.

The Pilgrim saw the charred body of his brother and wept, precious tears dripping on the sand at his feet. He performed the rites according to the tradition as best as he could. There was no snow to cover the body of his brother, no ice water from a lake to rain him with and cleanse him of his sins. There was no thistle, no grub or bush to leave by his side in memory of the soil. It was a poor way to treat a brother well-met in the Land of God. But if thus it had come to be, and it was his sin alone to carry to his grave. When his time came, he would accept the rightful punishment of his God, and meet with his brother in the soil from which all life grew.



He dug a shallow grave, his hands unable to dig deeper into the wet sand far below. He thought that it would have to do. He covered him with sand, and prayed that his soul would receive whatever it was due, whether it be punishment or praise. He was now in the hands of God, and that was the Pilgrim's sole consolation in the matter.

He set out once again, to reach the Forge of Stones, to end his pilgrimage, fulfilling his mission and his duties. He had one more reason now, and that was his brother's death at the hands of the archenemy's servant. He had known the danger's that lay even in the Land of God. It was his duty to protect his care-free brother, and he had failed. He was not overcome with grief, but with righteous fury. If God willed it so, he would be ready to dispense his wrath to the minions of the archenemy. By blade, hand or prayer, he would shatter them like ice in the spring, that much and nothing less the oath on his brother's grave demanded.

The Pilgrim walked in solitude, the sand and wind as ever his companions. The Land of God was silent around him, but it spoke to his very soul, demanding vengeance to be exacted. He trudged along over the sand, unyielding, tenaciously leaving footmarks behind him only to be swept away by the desert breeze, slowly but surely. He lost track of time, never once looking up to the suns, their ride across the sky unimportant to him when his purpose was clearly visible in front of him.

As if they had not been there before to notice, he suddenly reached the high walls of the Garden stretching in front of him as far as his eyes could see. He could see the spirals that tempted the dominion of the sky, the arches that rose as if in solemn prayer to God, and the Holy Gate beyond which his purpose lay. It had been a moment of excited relief for him. He remembered the preachings of the elders, and the Pilgrim who had come before him, and did as they had done, as so many others had done before them all, for innumerable springs and endless winters.

He touched the Gate, uttering the mantra of God, making his sign, kneeling down as the rites required of him. But it was no mere tradition, he could see. God was there with him, alongside him, dousing him with lights of many colors. He listened to an answer to his incantations in the tongue of God, the sacred tongue that none of his people

had ever uttered, and never would lest they defile him.

The Gate opened to allow him inside the Garden. In wonder and astonishment he saw the Chariot of God fly from the depths below, rise to meet him, without a sound, in perfect grace and harmony. Tears of rapture ran down his cheeks, while he praised his God and Lord, the deliverer of his people, Father to them all.

The Chariot moved with the speed of the wind, and what he saw filled him with overpowering awe at the glory and majesty that the workings of his God radiated. He saw the beauty and he marveled at the size of it all. Through darkness came God's light, through nothingness and chaos came shape and sight. His face shone from the light of God's angels, performing their appointed tasks with harmony, diligence and piety. It was a sight that made him feel his life could not end until he had himself told of his pilgrimage to the next in line. He now understood why the pilgrimage mattered so to his people: He knew it was not for fear of losing the sacred stones, and the heat and light that shone with him.

These were God's gifts, which he freely gave and could freely take away. But his greatest gift was his Garden, his Garden of wonders with which he filled a man's soul with indomitable will, unbreakable spirit. What the Pilgrim felt could not be compared to any emotion he had experienced before. It was not pride, it was not honor. It was neither fervor or awe, or anything like that combined. It was love. The Garden filled a man's soul with love, the love of God, the love of his people, so they may endure, and live on to worship his name. 'Glory be to God!' shouted the Pilgrim while the Chariot carried him aloft now, passing over all of God's wonders and heading to the heart of the Forge, where the pilgrimage would end, and he would be given the honor of bringing back the Holy Stone.

He saw now that the Chariot was leading him to a tower that reached into the very ceiling itself, both ends lost in the interminable darkness above and below. Suddenly, the Chariot was dipping sharply below him, while he comfortably sat within, as if the invisible hand of God held him safely in place, without fear of him ever falling off.

In a matter of moments, the Chariot came serenely to a stop, having brought him in front of a remarkable work of marble, delicate and exquisite, holy in its magnificence, adorned with the grace of God who

surely must have wrought it himself. He knelt, bowing low so as to have his head touch the marble steps laid out before him, never speaking but simply offering his silent prayers.

The doors to the heart of the Forge were open. He could see a long corridor leading to a well-lit room, the Sacred Chamber. He could see little of the signs and markings that he had been told to expect, but he was safe in the knowledge that his God was leading his way, his angels all around him, his Chariot bringing him to the place God had ordained.

He passed under the arched doorway and made the sign of God. What he saw though unnerved him: the walls were made of wood and were embellished with monstrous carvings. Hideous forms seemed to leap at him, visions of demons jutting from every side. This was blasphemy! This was the work of the archenemy! It was clear as ice to him.

The thought came unbidden to his mind, springing up from the well of his soul.

'This is the work of evil, and it shall burn.'

He could now hear a coarse voice, rising and falling like the tide. It was strident and harsh. It was the voice of a beast rather than the voice of a man. He rushed through the corridor, a prayer on his mouth and the blade on his hand, ready to taste the blood of demons. Other sounds could be heard as well. He could hear other voices as he turned his brisk walk into a jog, a kind of struggling sound and a dull thud, not much unlike the sound of rock upon rock.

As the light grew more intense, his sight adjusted and he could see more clearly inside the room in front of him. There was a metal demon thrust against a wall, and two men grappling, embraced in a vicious fight. What he saw filled him with fury, wrath, and the grace of God filled him with strength he had never felt before.

He saw the archenemy, trying to take the life of a man. The both spoke in the tongue his brother had lapsed in a few times, little he could understand. But he knew what he had to do now, his purpose clear as daylight. He ran as if a river of fire was fast behind his heels, and he could have sworn he could hear the voice of God urging him to avenge all the lives the beast before him had claimed.

He lunged with terrible might and purpose at the human form of the

beast which could not fool a man of God. It seemed to have paid him no notice, but the man had somehow known, and had made a small step, just in time for the Pilgrim blade to run the beast through and through its heart.

The beast was stunned in silence, its face became a mask of pain and horror, utter disbelief in the deep blue of its eyes. It wore a man's visage, a face that might have looked beautiful, even honorable if it had belonged to a brother. It was the face of a deceiver though, and its life was now seeping away, its grasp on the young man fading quickly.

The archenemy collapsed on his feet, his eyes rolling backwards with only the white of his eyes visible. The Pilgrim had never thought he would be chosen to kill the archenemy, if that was what had happened. He had never even heard the wise elders mention such a thing. He just was, he simply existed to oppose God. Had he made an error? Was this not God's will? He listened to his thoughts and was confounded. He followed the elders' advice and remained true to his heart. He saw the archenemy before him, and killed him with one swift blow. He had not thought it possible, but God had allowed. Indeed, perhaps God had led him here to confront his nemesis. It might have been a hubris, but perhaps he was God's chosen champion. Perhaps the appointed hour had come. It had all happened so soon, merely moments had passed and it had all ended. He looked about him, a frightened expression of horror, shock and surprise on the young man's face.

Then he saw the demon of metal, which seemed to exist still despite its master's demise. His body tensed and tried to lunge at him, but the young man threw his hands at him and constrained him, shouting in his strange tongue. As he was about to push him away, their eyes met, and he could see something flashing inside them. His hands went slack and he dropped his blade. He remembered the teachings: 'At the appointed hour blood will be spilled, and tears will be shed. Weep no more, for the end will be nigh.'

The Pilgrim looked slackly at the young man. He made a motion with his hands to the Pilgrim to calm him down, make him sit. He pointed at the demon which seemed to be somehow in league with him, an unlikely ally or a renegade perhaps, he could not be sure. It looked as if it did not intend him or the man any harm. That too, must have been God's work, he thought, and left it at that for now.

Suddenly while the young man kept repeating questions the Pilgrim could not understand, everything around them started trembling. Things fell from the wooden walls and crystals shattered. He could feel the rumble of the earth deep inside him, he could hear its death throes. The world was going to end, he knew. It had been the last Pilgrimage. Tears ran down his throat and cheeks, and a loud prayer formed on his lips.

The metal demon and the young man were frantically exchanging words. Fear had taken over them, the fear of death. The Pilgrim found why or how they had been allowed inside the Gardens unfathomable, but who was he to question God's plan. They were trying to make him move, take him with them wherever they planned to escape. He shook his head rigorously, refusing such petty dishonor. They did not seem to understand there was no escape. He would finally meet God, having offered him as much of his life in service as he could. He would meet the newly found and lost brother of his, and tell him of how he had avenged him. He would meet his father, and tell him of the last Pilgrimage. He would meet every soul of his people in the heavens, and tell them of his tale about the Forge of Stones.

As the earth shook with even more violence, pieces of the room around him started to fall off their place as if an invisible being of terrible might picked them apart. In the distance he could see the demon and the man running aimlessly out the corridor, trying vainly to save their lives, perhaps their souls too, if the demon had any.

As everything went dark around him before finally crumbling on top of him, he could see the young man turn his head in his direction and shouted something. It sounded like something his brother had told him in the desert. With the last of his breathes, and nothing but a numbing feel running down his spine to remind he was barely alive, he tried to say the words himself:

“Thank.. you..”

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# Epilogue

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THE interior of the ship felt like a mansion: fine tapestries lined the wooden walls and thick handwoven carpets adorned the floors. Most of the ship was decorated in the same fashion, with the engines and the assorted support mechanisms and infrastructure taking up little space. According to Prosops it was a refurbished luxury yacht. The whole den back on the Centron was actually a shipyard, something of a hobby the Centron had taken up to spent his endless time and unlimited resources, acute intelligence and insurmountable flair.

Even though Hilderich could not have known what other ships similar to this one looked like, he felt impressed by the taste the machine had shown, and genuinely believed it to be a fine ship, even though the Prosops had insisted on him using the term 'astrogational vehicle'. Hilderich had ignored the machine profoundly on that matter and kept calling the ship, 'ship'. He had warmed up on the machine's name though, and now called it as it had preferred to refer to itself: Ron.

Hilderich had been busy resting most of the time at first, but he did spend some time with the machine, which naturally saw to the daily routine of maintaining the ship, checking and plotting their course, as well as trying to update Hilderich on the workings of the universe and

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the general state of affairs in the civilized galaxy. It had never occurred to Hilderich that there could ever be more knowledge than he could ever hope to understand in millions of life-times, but he would sadly have to do with as much as he could manage in one life-time, which was quite a lot.

Ron had filled him in with as much detail as it could concerning the game, the shellworld and what had transpired. He was shocked to find out there were literally thousands of shellworld not very much different than his own, hosting games like the one that had been using everybody on his world as unwilling, unknowing pawns. What had really challenged his sanity though, was the sight of a world being destroyed. It was not something any man was supposed to ever witness in his life, and Hilderich had seen it happen in slow, aggravating detail, before finally averting his red sore eyes. At that moment he had decided to stop that from happening ever again, to the best of his ability. He had never really returned Amonas' favor. He could think of no better way to honor the memory of him, Celia, and their child.

When he recovered from the shock, Hilderich contemplated the last moments in the Centron. After the strange man had appeared as if out of nowhere and killed Agrippa, everything had happened too fast to actually remember. Ron had filled him in, replaying a recording of the scene that had taken place. Once Agrippa died, there was nothing in the way of keeping the place running and everything happened with the speed of an avalanche, gathering incredible momentum with every passing moment.

Hilderich had tried to save the man from certain death, as Ron had indicated they had little more than a few minutes before the whole world would break up in a catastrophic event that could not be reversed. The strange man would not come and Ron was forced to push Hilderich aside and keep shoving him almost all the way to the nearest ship.

The machine took great pride in the fact that without his hobby they would be 'dead meat', as it said in its usually flamboyant manner. It had also agreed to help Hilderich on the quest he had vowed to undertake, since as it had said itself: "You wouldn't survive five seconds out there I'm telling you it's a cruel, cruel universe. Plus, I'm out of a real job now, and though I don't want to imply anything, it's my goddamn ship in the end of the day."

And so they were ploughing on the vastness of space, speeding away from the Binary 888. Ron was looking intently at a star chart, its black band of glass colored cyan, in a desperate attempt at trying to be, in his own words, 'rad', a colloquialism that Hilderich never inquired further about. What he did inquire about though upon seeing the machine intently studying the holographic projection in front of him, was their destination, to which the machine had said without turning to face Hilderich:

“Oh? Hmm. I had always thought that visiting such a dump would make me kill myself, but I’ve decided I need some quiet, easy place to rest a bit. Like a vacation.”

“But you’ve been doing almost nothing for fourteen thousand years.”

“Shut up. I’ve plotted a course to Sol. Ooh, is that coffee? Are you sure you’re gonna drink that? I think the galley module’s busted.”